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American Fury: Catholic Responses to Spanish Anticlericalism (1936-1939)

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American Fury: Catholic Responses to Spanish Anticlericalism (1936-1939)
By

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of the Requirements for
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Abstract: This thesis examines the roles, ideologies, attitudes, and arguments of American Catholics in debates over the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939. Although the war only lasted between these years, these debates carried over into WWII as Spain's neutrality came into question. Specifically, the focus is on how American Catholics grappled with historically unprecedented Spanish anticlericalism, the direct murder of roughly 7000 Catholic clergy and persecution of many more by Spanish Republicans, and why this anticlericalism drove most Catholics into a form of unapologetic pro-Francoism. This research is conducted by careful analysis of both mainstream and Catholic newspapers/journals. Mainstream pro-Republican press is incredibly important as it provides an intensely stark contrast to Catholic arguments. This analysis argues that America's long and bitter history of anti-Catholicism gave substantial and significant momentum to Catholic pro-Nationalist rhetoric and argumentation. Finally, the conclusions reflect how anti-Catholicism drove Catholic discussions of Spain well into WWII.

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Figure 1- Republican Leftists ritually “execute” statue of Sacred Heart of Jesus outside of Madrid, August 7, 1936 (left) while bodies of nuns or monks are disinterred and put out on public display in Barcelona, 1936 (right).

Introduction

The Spanish Civil War, fought from 1936-1939, in many ways foreshadowed the Second World War as Spanish fascists and conservatives (the Nationalists) fought against Spanish liberals, communists, socialists, and anarchists (the Republicans). The Nationalists received international aid from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, while the Republicans received aid from international liberals of various origins and the Soviet Union. Most are aware of this overarching international ideological struggle, but fewer realize the fundamentally religious aspects of the Spanish Civil War distorted by the bigger picture. The chief Catholic argument about the war was that this was religious warfare while non-Catholics simply saw the war as a struggle against fascism. In an article about the conflict from 1937, American Catholic writer Peter Arrupe described this general ignorance succinctly: “The true meaning of this civil strife can be summed up in one short phrase: the war is the outward expression of a profound crisis inside [Spain’s] Catholic soul.”¹ After the military uprising in July 1936 following the assassination of the prominent monarchist politician José Calvo Sotelo, Spanish leftists were consumed by

¹ “Spanish War Psychology,” *Commonweal*, (January 29, 1937), 377-379.

revolutionary fury and poured out their vengeance against what they perceived to be a longstanding and monumental institutional barrier to their sociopolitical goals, the Catholic Church.²

As José Sánchez argues in his monograph on civil war anticlericalism, “Religion became the most clearly divisive issue of the war, the single aspect that distinguished one faction from another.”³ As a result of the systematic and unprecedented liquidation of nearly 7000 Catholic clergy over the course of the war by Republican leftists (with most being murdered within the first six months of the start of the uprising), Spanish Catholics felt hard pressed not to throw their weight behind Francisco Franco’s Nationalist cause whose political agenda not only promised to protect the institutional Church from physical annihilation but also promised to restore the Church to its position before the secular agenda of the Second Republic.⁴ However, by aligning with the Nationalists, Spanish Catholics placed themselves in an almost impossible moral dilemma when it became clear that Nationalist atrocities and post-war reprisals far exceeded those of the Republicans, but in a manner different from the specific manifestations of Republican anticlericalism.⁵ The Basque situation only further complicated these issues.⁶

If Catholicism, as the original Greek meaning suggests, represents a universal church whose body of believers spread all throughout the world are all joined together through their

² What better way to dispose of an institution such as the Church than to physically eliminate its priests and churches? See Cueva, Julio de la. “Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 3 (1998) 355–369

³ Sánchez, José M. *The Spanish Civil War as a Religious Tragedy* Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987, pp. xviii.

⁴ Payne, Stanley G. *The Spanish Civil War*. Cambridge [England] : Cambridge University Press, 2012, 111-118.

⁵ Thomas, Maria. “Martyrs, Memory and Misrepresentation: The Spanish Catholic Church, Religious Persecution and the Spanish Civil War.” *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 31, no. 3 (2018): 143–162.

⁶ Essentially, while the Basques had perhaps the strongest religiosity out of any geographical region in Spain, they were adamantly committed to the Republic. This seeming contradiction puzzled not only Catholics around the world but simultaneously created issues for Catholic pro-Nationalist arguments when Franco enabled atrocities and reprisals against the Basque people, including some Basque clergy. For more about the Basques, see Sánchez, Ch. 6.

common faith in Jesus Christ, what then were the reactions of foreign Catholics to Spain? The British and French offered the more nuanced views of the war and saw the war through the lens of republican/democratic traditions that sought to balance the precarious moral positions of Spanish Catholics against the authoritarian excesses of the Nationalist regime.⁷ The reaction of American Catholics to Republican excesses, however, was almost exclusively visceral and reactionary. Catholic press almost universally held this sentiment in their editorializing on the overseas conflict, with *Catholic Worker* being an obvious exception to this rule with their neutral position.

The visceral reaction of American Catholics was in large part a reaction to the hostility and stubbornness of anti-Catholic Protestants and secular intellectuals who viewed Catholics with distrust as a consequence of xenophobia and hundreds of years of Protestant propaganda and agitation. This propaganda consistently exaggerated the institutional influence of Rome and its implications for American democracy/religious freedom. George Shuster, a prominent Catholic and editor of *Commonweal*, referred to this phenomenon of reaction as “minorityitis” – an automatic, emotional lashing out of Catholics against a hostile anti-Catholic majority.⁸ Essentially, the argument follows that Catholics assumed that these political or civil disagreements were rooted in anti-Catholic prejudice.⁹ On the other hand, American Catholics

⁷ Sánchez rightly identifies the Spanish Civil War as provoking one of the most heated religious debates across the wider Christian world, with the French having the most nuanced views based on the country’s history of anticlericalism and Republicanism, See Sánchez, *Ibid.*, 157-183.

⁸ As it will be explored later, Shuster actually managed to be quite introspective into the feelings of Catholics even as an editor himself, Sánchez, *Ibid.*, 185.

⁹ Shuster stated in another of his writings on the position of Catholicism of American society that minority status was a real fear that dominated American Catholic thought in the 19th and early 20th centuries: “Twenty or thirty years ago ambition would have dictated silence about one’s mere connection with what is termed the Roman Church. Today prudence still seems to suggest keeping the matter under cover as fully as possible.” *The Catholic Spirit in America*. New York: The Dial Press, 1927, vii.

often exacerbated tensions by consistently agitating at the behest of the Vatican for issues like the Roman Question which inevitably tied them precariously to Mussolini and Fascism.¹⁰

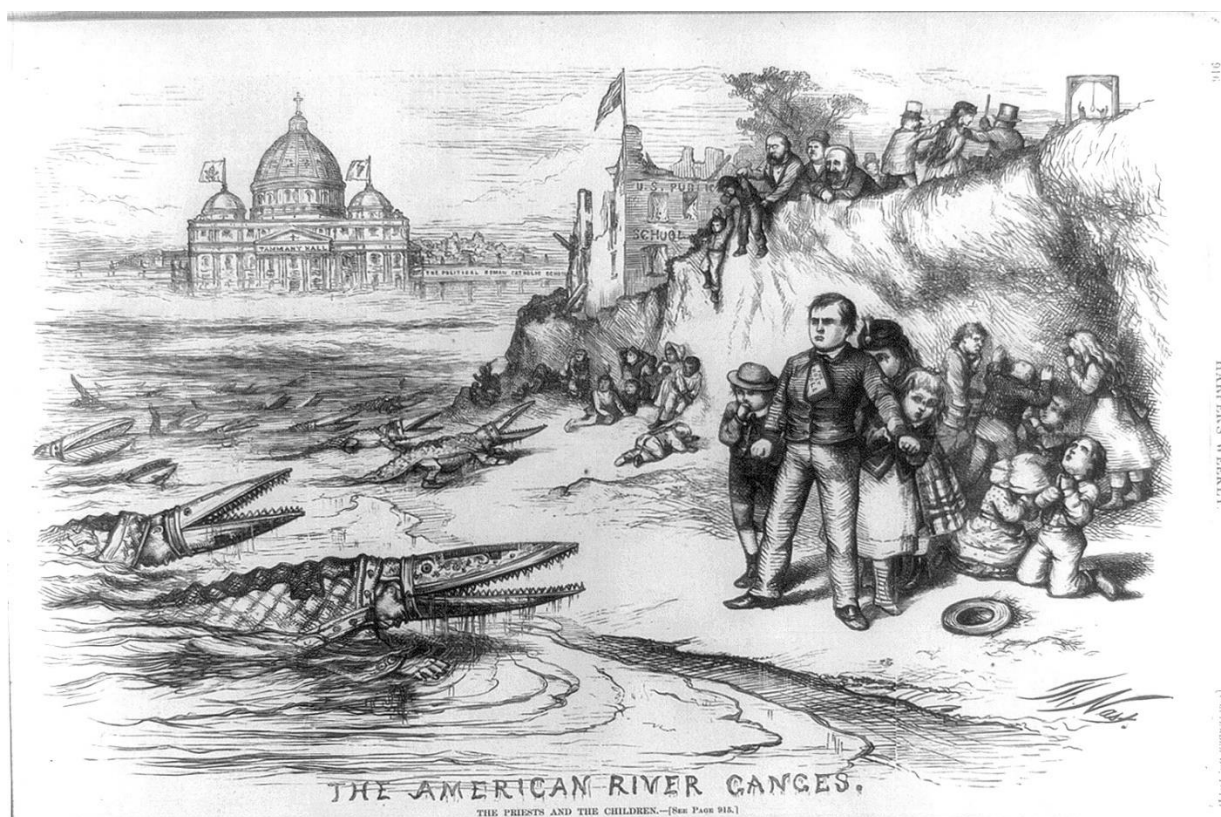


Figure 2- An example of the sort of propaganda used to agitate against the growing political influence of Catholic immigrants, in this case regarding supposed papist infiltration of the public school system, Nast, Thomas, "The American River Ganges." Wood Engraving. *Harper's Weekly*, September 30, 1871, 916.

Mutual suspicion of each other's motives is a constant theme that plays out in this period and in these debates. Even after the rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan and other nativist organizations had been largely relegated to the sidelines of mainstream political thought by the 30s in light of the ongoing depression, there was still a persistent distrust of Catholicism and its adherents in the

¹⁰ In summary, the Roman Question concerned the position of the Vatican under a new liberal Italian regime which did not recognize the traditional sovereignty and autonomy of the Holy See. This was a situation that satisfied most liberals, who either simply did not care or wanted the church in a lower position while it outraged Catholics across the world on the other hand. For an entire monograph on the subject of American Catholics, the Roman Question, and Mussolini see D'Agostino, Peter R. *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

secular/Protestant aligned American press.¹¹ This thesis will seek to examine the specific ways in which American Catholics engaged in debates over the Spanish civil war through a discourse of unapologetic Catholicism in the face of hostile and uniquely American anti-Catholicism. Finally, this thesis will argue that it was the specific position of American Catholics as a minority with newfound political efficacy in an intellectually hostile environment that provoked their mostly unapologetic defense of the Nationalist cause in opposition to Republican anticlericalism.¹²

Sources: Across an Ideological Spectrum

The work of this thesis will be primarily based on the qualitative analysis of articles from both the mainstream Catholic press and more mainstream secular liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The mainstream press was as important as the Catholic press for this issue as these papers often served as a rhetorical forum in which Catholics could present their arguments, defenses, and ideas to the rest of the country. A perfect example of mainstream press serving as a rhetorical forum presents itself in a letter to the editor defending the historical role of the Church in Spain in light of the then recent publication of the 1937 Spanish Bishops' Letter. The author of the letter was simply titled "a practicing Catholic."¹³ I will also be looking at the Jesuit run *America*, the lay Catholic *Commonweal*, the Paulist *Catholic World*, and *The Catholic Worker*, which had recently been founded in 1933 by the labor activist and former communist Dorothy Day.

¹¹ An example of unrefined pro-Republicanism/Anti-Catholicism reveals itself as a reiteration of an old trope that implicated the clergy as the initial conspirators and actual combatants in the initial phase of the Civil War. See Montero Moreno, Antonio, *Historia de La Persecución Religiosa En España, 1936-1939*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1961, 65-69 for a description of this trope in its original Spanish Republican context and Sánchez, *Ibid.*, 192 for a description of a specifically American manifestation.

¹² For an example of viewing the American Catholic issue in a specific local context, see Crosby, Donald F. "Boston's Catholics and the Spanish Civil War: 1936-1939." *The New England Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1971): 82-100

¹³ "A Spanish War Symposium," *The Washington Post*, (October 29, 1937), 8.

America, founded in 1909 and headquartered in midtown Manhattan, was and continues to be a weekly journal dedicated to discussing Catholic issues and culture. In line with the intellectual mission of the Jesuit order, it was a means for the organization, along with other writers, to engage with American politics and cultural life. Although it is now considered one of the more liberal American Catholic publications based on the now liberal position of the Jesuit order within the Church, it was not so liberal under the direction of Francis X. Talbot S J., editor in chief of the magazine from 1936 to 1944. In a dissertation on Talbot's support for the Nationalists and Franco, Michael McGowan writes:

Indeed, the Nationalist insurgents had no better friend in the United States than Father Talbot, whose editorials, speeches, coordination of the American hierarchy, and relief work constituted a bulwark of support for Franco's government that was unrivaled among other American pro-Nationalist groups.¹⁴

Thus, under Talbot, *America* was decidedly pro-Nationalist and pro-Franco in its writings on the subject of the war and anticlericalism.

Commonweal, founded in 1924 by Michael Williams as a weekly issue journal, was and is the oldest independent lay-edited Catholic journal. Another New York City publication, *Commonweal* sought to establish itself as another 'liberal' intellectual Catholic journal that could compete with other contemporary American liberal publications such as *The New Republic*. Williams conceived of the magazine as a means for Catholic intellectual thought to "be conveyed to the minds of the American people."¹⁵ However, the 'liberal' connotation in this instance does not refer to the same type of 'liberal' ideas that the modern magazines (both *America* and *Commonweal*) now present sometimes in contradiction to official Church teaching on issues such as clerical celibacy, divorce, and homosexuality.

¹⁴ McGowan, Michael K. 2002. "Franco's Priest: Father Francis X. Talbot and the Spanish Civil War." Order No. 1411397, American University.

¹⁵ "A Brief History Of Commonweal". 2022. *Commonwealmagazine.org*.

Catholic World, a monthly issued periodical founded in 1865 by Paulist Father Issac Thomas Hecker, is the oldest media outlet covered in this research. Regarding his inspiration for establishing the magazine, Paulist Press (publisher for all Paulist related works) states that because Hecker could not contact everyone in public lectures about American Catholicism, he turned to the printed word, wanting “to create an intellectual journal for a growing Catholic population, and insisted that it be a first-class publication in format, quality, and style, equal if not superior to any secular magazine in the country.”¹⁶ Similar to the ambitions of *America* and *Commonweal*, *Catholic World* wanted to compete in the American intellectual landscape with the existing secular and Protestant publications. However, what separates the Paulist order from the more widely known Jesuit order is that the Paulists were a missionary society made *by* and *for* Americans. Consequently, it follows that they would use the tools of modern communication to advance their Catholic message to the rest of America. Unlike the other three Catholic sources that continue publishing, *Catholic World* ceased publication in 1996.¹⁷

These Catholic newspapers provide the best source of information on this subject because were widely disseminated throughout the country and, through heavy editorialization, showed the real sentiments of the writers on these subjects. With little exception, every writing on the Spanish war from these publications were in an editorial manner rather than simply relaying information as a more mainstream publication might do, such as the *New York Times*. This editorialization presents benefits to this analysis since authors arrive straight to their point without hiding their motivations in subtleties and understatements, something that mainstream publications were often accused of doing in what would have been called pro-Republican propaganda by Catholic press.

¹⁶ "About: Paulist Press— Our History". 2022. *Paulistpress.com*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

Although it can be argued that the feelings of a select group of Catholic writers and editors do not represent the feelings of the rest of the Catholic body politic, these articles in many

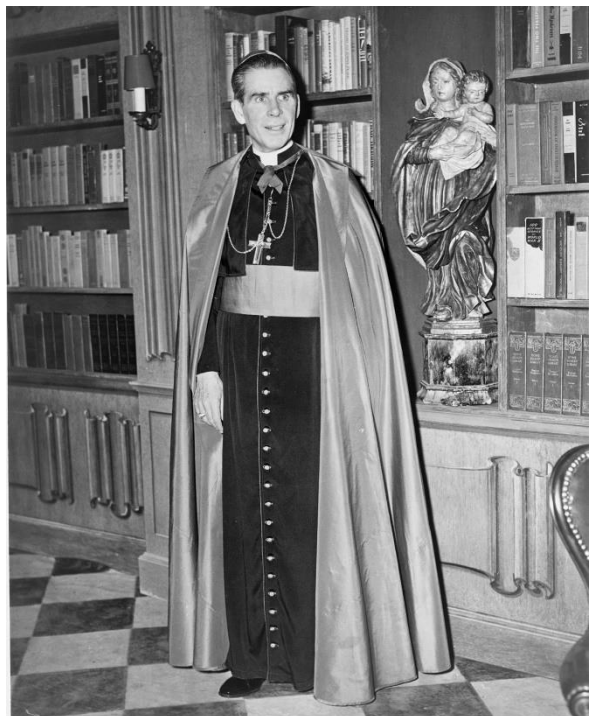


Figure 3- The Ven. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, renowned author, theologian, and Catholic celebrity, then only a Monsignor, was an immensely influential Catholic figure in radio during the 30s well before his tv career in the 50s.

position in this time period. The role of Catholic media was not only to disseminate news on the anticlerical violence in Spain, but also to explicitly reinforce the existential, spiritual nature of the conflict.

Simultaneously, we can interpret the role of Catholic newspapers and editorials as being American Catholicism's main contribution to the national public forum. In the era where the newspaper was king, the image of the contrarian Catholic press provided a concrete, easily recognizable example of the political and cultural stance of Catholics throughout the country, so

ways were simply a rehearsal of the same messages being delivered at the pulpit in every church throughout the country.¹⁸ Trying to determine whether the media/clergy created this sort of opinion and spreading it or if Catholics would have already held these views is not something this thesis seeks to determine.

Discussions of media influence in this context seems too much like a chicken or egg problem.¹⁹

Looking at this press is therefore important as the messages provide clear indicators of the Catholic

¹⁸ Even the Times often found it convenient to simply quote from the pulpit to get the Catholic side of the story, "Sees French Revolution: Mgr. Sheen Says Priests and Nuns Prepare to Flee Communists," *The New York Times*, (August 24, 1937), 19.

¹⁹ This references the age-old question as to if media productions represent a genuine cultural outflowing of the populace or if media merely manufactures opinions to disseminate to the public at the behest of various, disparate elite groups.

that their protesting voices were known to the rest of WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) and liberal America. Even if Catholic publications were usually only disseminated to Catholics, other publications like the *Times* could disseminate their viewpoints by proxy when reporting on large gatherings or notable events; especially when the rhetoric naturally provided for a catchy headline.²⁰ The role of mainstream papers like the *Times* will become even more apparent when we reach the topic of the 1937 Spanish Bishops' Letter. There, liberals challenged Catholics directly for their position on the Civil War for the first time in an intellectually meaningful way.

There are two main poles of thought regarding the Spanish Civil War, between which Catholics fell on an ideological spectrum. The majority position of Catholic writers and intellectuals was a form of unapologetic pro-Francoism that praised Franco as a savior of Catholicism and Western Civilization against an existential threat posed by atheistic Communism. Not surprisingly, this position was markedly anti-communist and best reflects the sort of "minorityitis" that Shuster referred to in his writings since these opinions fall on the direct opposite side of the thought spectrum from the rest of mainstream WASP America. Where Catholics saw the military rebellion as the necessary and



Figure 4- Father Charles Coughlin was another prominent Catholic clerical celebrity who did not hesitate to "Jew bait" or "red bait" in his declarations on the Spanish question over the air or in his paper *Social Justice* until he was raided by the FBI and forced to cease public discourse in 1942 because of continued isolationist extremism following Pearl Harbor.

²⁰ For example, the *Times* quoted a priest declaring Spanish rebels dying for the cause as saints, something likely provocative enough that it would easily raise eyebrows in a mainstream audience, "Martyrdom Seen in Spanish Strife: Father Kellenberg Says Rebels Dying for Catholic Faith Have Earned Sainthood," *Ibid.*, (November 2, 1936), 16.

natural consequence of years of Communist infiltration, agitation, and then outright revolution, liberals and Protestants saw the rebellion as a coup against a legitimate democracy. The Jesuit *America* and the Paulist *Catholic World* gravitated closest to the former Francoist pole rather than the latter Republican pole.

The other focus of Catholic thought on the subject was unmistakably more neutral on the subject and toed a cautious line as to not support Franco's cause but also to not implicitly endorse the anticlericalism from the left. The lay edited and run *Commonweal*, along with Dorothy Day's *Catholic Worker*, gravitated closer to this neutralist, pacifist pole. In fact, George Shuster, once an editor of *Commonweal*, would remain one of the most neutral and introspective voices until the end of the war. *The Washington Post* broadcasted *Commonweal*'s new official neutralist position in a 1938 article titled "A Catholic View: 'Commonweal' Editors Urge 'Positive Impartiality' Among Americans Viewing Spanish War; Partisanship Deprecated."²¹ This less reactionary pole was almost entirely drowned out within Catholic circles by a cry for crusade and holy vengeance. Nonetheless, as David Valaik argues in his article on American Catholic dissenters, is the significance of neutral pacifist publications like *Catholic Worker* giving "[...] serious attention to the implications of Franco's alliance with the fascist powers," especially if no one else in the Catholic community was doing it.²²

Anti-Catholicism in America: Background and Recent Memory

The recent history of the United States in the years leading up to the 1930s left much room for improvement for mainstream American relations with Roman Catholicism and its adherents. The reality was that an overwhelming majority of the original Americans inherited a

²¹ This declaration of neutrality followed *Commonweal*'s leadership crisis in 1937 that had pushed the magazine towards the pro-Franco pole, June 23, 1938.

²² Valaik, David J. "American Catholic Dissenters and the Spanish Civil War." *The Catholic Historical Review* 53, no. 4 (1968): 543.

long Protestant Anti-Catholic tradition as a consequence of the European wars of religion of the 16th and 17th centuries. Although American Protestants had always been suspicious of Catholics since the dawn of the Thirteen Colonies amidst the international conflict between France, Spain,

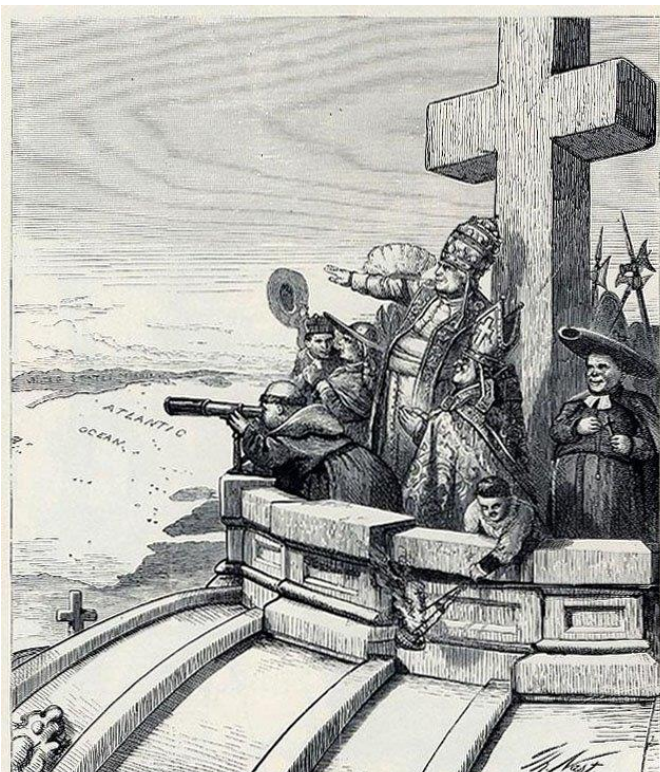


Figure 5-Another example of Nativist propaganda highlighting exaggerated fears of papal control of the United States through Catholic immigration, Nast, Thomas, "The Promised Land." Wood Engraving. *Harper's Weekly*, October 1, 1870, 626.

and Britain, Catholics themselves would remain, to the public eye, a relatively insignificant minority until the mid-19th century and the surge of Irish immigration as a consequence of the Great Potato Blight. With this new wave of Catholic immigration, Americans reacted violently first with the Nativist movement and the Know-Nothing Party and then later with paramilitary organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.²³ In fact, one of the main motivations in the 1880s to form the

Knights of Columbus (KoC), the largest Catholic men's fraternal organization in America to this day, was to provide a direct counterweight to the racist Nativist rhetoric of the Klan.²⁴ The presence and active work of the KoC was key in developing a defensive infrastructure in America for Catholics and immigrants.

Even into the 20th century, the legacy of Protestant fears of papal domination continued to fuel a lingering suspicion, surviving as far as the presidential campaign of America's first

²³ The chief understanding of course being that groups like the Klan were merely the logical conclusion of Nativist rhetoric and agitations.

²⁴ A recent article from the Knights of Columbus succinctly summarizes the vital role the KoC played in the fight against the Klan, Coyne, Kevin, "The Knights vs. the Klan." Knights of Columbus, (November 11, 2017).

Catholic president, John F. Kennedy.²⁵ Despite this hostility, Irish Americans quickly adapted to the situation at hand and quickly integrated themselves into the American body politic. This is best realized perhaps in the huge participation of Irish immigrants in the Union army during the Civil War. After the Irish, Italians who immigrated over the ocean at the end of the 19th century became the second largest bloc of Catholic immigrants. With both the Irish and Italian ethnic blocs united by both religion and political association with their urban, immigrant status, Catholicism had not only survived Nativist attempts to squash it, but it now found itself on a potentially formidable political base.

After the end of the First World War, conservative/isolationist backlash to the Progressive Era and the experience of the first world war led to a 1924 immigration reform statute based on the now infamous national origins quota system.²⁶ While the statute seriously curtailed immigration across the board, it particularly affected immigration from Southern and Eastern European countries like Italy and Poland, which provided a huge percentage of the American Catholic population. Hennesey notes that pressure for this new immigration legislation was not without religious overtones; with an implicit understanding that ““moderates throughout the nation were no less disturbed than Klansmen about the threat that America would go Catholic by immigration.””²⁷ Already emboldened by the non-action of Wilson and the aloofness of the Harding then Coolidge administrations, racist Nativist groups like the Ku Klux Klan once again found themselves on the soapbox of anti-Catholicism and had a field day with their hostile rhetoric throughout the country.

²⁵ Roos, Dave, “How John F. Kennedy Overcame Anti-Catholic Bias to Win the Presidency.” History.com. A&E Television Networks, (November 20, 2019).

²⁶ I would be remiss not to also mention the potential role of anti-Catholicism in Progressive Era reform movements such as the Temperance movement with regards to working class ethnic blocs like the Irish or Italians, see Hennesey, James J. *American Catholics A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States* Oxford University Press [New York], 1981, 231-232.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

While much of their frustration was directly poured onto Blacks in the form of lynching, arson, intimidation, and other forms of targeted mob violence, Klansmen did not hesitate to use both rhetoric and violence against Catholics and immigrants.²⁸ The two failed presidential bids of Alfred E. Smith perhaps best demonstrated the anti-Catholic sentiment of Americans. With his Catholicism, "...Tammany background, 'wet' proclivities, or views on finance," anti-Catholics had no issues in venting their prejudices through mainstream media and at the ballot box.²⁹ In addition to the domestic issues facing Catholics, the handling of the Mexican situation and the ensuing anticlericalism, in many ways a prelude to anticlericalism in Spain, engendered disillusionment and left many Catholics embittered and resentful of establishment WASP figures like Woodrow Wilson.³⁰

By the end of the 1920s, American Catholics now had every reason to be frustrated with their lot in both American politics and the larger cultural sphere. Perhaps the 19th century had been different since they were fewer Catholics. By the 30s however, with so many more Catholics as a result of mass immigration, minority, second-class citizen status was not an acceptable position anymore. Frustrated for decades by Nativists, Protestants, Progressives, Masons, and Klansmen, American Catholics now had every reason to set themselves apart from the rest of the body politic. Reaction to news of anticlerical atrocities in the Spanish Civil War demonstrates Catholic opinion in the most spectacular fashion. In a way, Catholic outrage and an

²⁸ The Knights of Columbus article briefly summarizes some of the more violent episodes of anti-Catholic Klan violence which included both outright murder and arson, Coyne, *Ibid*.

²⁹ Hennesy, 246-247

³⁰ The Catholic argument followed that the diplomatic actions and/or inactions of the Wilson administration enabled anticlericalism in Mexico. In an article defending his position with regards to the Church in Spain, George Shuster wrote about Mexico: "[T]here is no possible excuse for the callousness with which American journalism and American opinion treated the spoliation of the Church by gentry whose very manifestos belied all democratic or moral intent." He would go on to cite American indifference towards the plight of the religious in post-Tsar Russia as another keystone of Catholic embitterment, "A Catholic Defends His Church," *The New Republic*, (January 4, 1939), 246-248.

enthusiastic embrace of Franco's cause perfectly encapsulates the "minorityitis" Shuster referred to.

It was not difficult for Catholics to be contrarian when some Protestants/liberals harbored such a blatant denialism for any role played by the Spanish Republic in instigating or enabling the anticlerical bloodshed. For example, the *Times* quoted Rev. Dr. John A. MacKay, then president of Princeton Theological Seminary, who placed the blame on the Spanish Archbishop of Toledo by suggesting that "there was nothing fratricidal, no spirit of class, no anti-religious feeling, no anti-clerical feeling when the Spanish people voted for democracy" until "[...] a constitutional limitation was put on democracy by certain ecclesiastical authorities."³¹ With enough of these sort of opinions published in the press as to be mainstream, contrarianism was likely an easy rhythm to fall into. The initial reactions to anticlerical violence demonstrated this phenomenon quite well.

The Outbreak of Religious War: Initial Reactions & Scapegoats

The period from June 1936 to the middle of 1937 is the most important time period for understanding anything regarding Spanish anticlericalism as it was the bloodiest period for anticlericalism throughout Republican controlled regions. Consequently, the volume of news regarding anticlerical atrocities would have been at its highest volume in this period. This section seeks to analyze initial Catholic reactions to these atrocities through their writings as their reactions set the tone for their positions regarding Spain, Franco, and contrasts to the republican stances of American liberals and Protestants.

The initial news of anticlerical atrocities to reach the United States following the civic-military uprising was, unsurprisingly, not well received by American Catholics. Such horrific

³¹ "Hate of Clergy Laid to Spanish Hierarchy: Head of Princeton Seminary Says Toledo Primate Roused People by Opposing Republic," *The New York Times*, (March 6, 1937), 6.

crimes against God's Church naturally needed an explanation. Due primarily to a lack of good verifiable information, stories of extreme martyrdom, containing mixed up facts or outright misinformation, provided further fuel to an already roaring fire, further incensing both Spanish Catholics fighting for the Nationalists and American Catholics watching from the sidelines. The most extreme example of martyrdom was a commonly (and inaccurately) reported story of crucifixions of Catholics by leftist militia. However, this was a story that even the cleric writer Montero Moreno, who wrote the chief Spanish monograph on the subject of anticlerical violence in the 60s, could not substantiate.³² Regardless, many Catholics took this news as sacrosanct proof of the barbarity of the Loyalists and their atheistic thugs. All of this, however, is not to suggest that the same issue did not also plague reporting from the pro-Republican side, only that in the Catholic case, misinformation seemed to have directly entrenched preconceptions about the spiritual and existential nature of the conflict. Both sides seemed to be plagued by misinformation, bad sources, and outright propaganda. Or more likely, it was some perverse mix of all three. Initial outrage at the facts themselves seems to only have been softened by a desire to explain why these atrocities were happening or more simply, who was responsible. The low-hanging fruit or obvious scapegoat for the ongoing catastrophe in Spain was communism broadly or specifically the Soviet Union.

The chief concern of many Catholic observers was the role of Soviet agitation and provocation in the ongoing conflict in Spain, with an ultimate fear that Republican victory would be akin to total Sovietization of Spain and the destruction of religion and the Church as a whole.³³ As the anticlerical violence spilled over the country, Catholics' fears and suspicions

³²See "Anarchy in Spain," *America*, Vol. 55 Issue 24, (September 19, 1936), 564, for the sort of article that heavily promoted this misinformed story.

³³ "Perils of a Communist Victory in Spain," *Ibid.*, Vol. 55 Issue 18, (August. 8, 1936), 421.

were largely confirmed. The end result was that most articles carefully scrutinized the leading role of communists in the instigation of the civil war, arguing mainly that what was happening was the result of a “carefully prepared and prolonged attack, spreading over many years [...]”³⁴ By analyzing the subversive activity of both unofficial and official Soviet agitators in the years leading up to the war, *Catholic World* concluded that, through the corruption and exploitation of worker/agrarian sentiments, the Soviets had effectively implemented a “Trojan Horse policy” from which they would “detach, gently and persuasively, Catholics of all countries from their loyal allegiance to the Vicar of Christ, to their bishops, and to their priests.”³⁵ While the concern for the situation in Spain itself was grave, there was also the fear that the violence would continue to spread throughout the world. Moreover, the same thing could potentially happen in America. Citing the Holy Father’s warnings against the evils of atheistic communism, *America* argued that American ignorance of these worldwide realities could spell similar Communistic disaster at home:

[M]any Americans [...] believe that the people of Spain, of Mexico, and of Russia, are fighting to establish governments for the protection of all human rights. This error is grave, especially since it creates among our people a disposition to welcome similar movements into this country, or to look upon them as nothing more alarming than a minor political revolt.³⁶

While *America* and *Catholic World* were quick to take up the banner of anticommunism and the Nationalists, *Commonweal* first offered a more nuanced line of argument before editor Michael Williams’s liaison with pro-Francoism in mid-1937.³⁷ Regarding Spanish Fascism directly, the journal remarked:

³⁴ “How Communism Attacked Spain,” *Catholic World*, Vol. 144, (January 1937), 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ “The Pontiff Prays for Spain,” *America*, Vol. 55 Issue 25, (September 19, 1936), 588-589.

³⁷ Williams would go as far as to host a pro Franco rally, after which, among other reasons, he was expelled by *Commonweal*’s editorial staff. After this, *Commonweal* was officially neutral in their editorial policy, but Shuster had resigned from his editorial position because of the controversy.

Spanish Fascism will be the antithesis to the radical social demands made by the revolutionists [...] it will not liberate creative Catholic social energies, which have struggled to emerge during hundreds of years [...] A right social order cannot be promulgated from on top [...] We cannot see any reason for stridently applauding the present rebels. The lessons of history are too plain for that.³⁸

Commonweal, under the editorial direction of neutral figures like George Shuster, definitively took a more neutralist line regarding Spain and continued to observe the impact that the Spanish conflict was having on American society. They noted in the beginning that any reporting of the actual conflict was made almost irrelevant because of the uncertain nature of facts and the intrusive + persuasive nature of propaganda. What was more important was how to take the lessons of the civil war and to apply it to the betterment of the “social order” while avoiding any totalitarian tendencies and instead moving towards a “personalist, Christian state.”³⁹

More nuance in its approach towards the Republican faction also appears briefly in the latter half of an *America* article written by Harry Chapin Plummer, in which he showed sympathy for those “hundreds of thousands of men and youths who have been impressed into service in the ‘Anti-Fascist Militia.’”⁴⁰ While the violence against the Church and common decency were still inexcusable, there is definitely a sense here that hundreds of thousands of people were being roped into a movement that they would otherwise never have participated in. Similarly, there is a slight hint from a *Washington Post* article that the consensus of American Catholic intellectuals was not thoroughly transmitted or disseminated to the rest of the Catholic populace. Dr. Joseph Code, a faculty member of the Catholic University of America, stated to an audience that

³⁸ “Murder in Madrid,” *Commonweal*, (August 28, 1936), 1-2.

³⁹ “Civil War in Spain and the United States,” *Ibid.*, (June 24, 1938), 229-230. Shuster also wrote a reflection on the war making similar arguments in 1937. See “Some Reflections on Spain,” *Ibid.*, (April 2, 1937), 625-627.

⁴⁰ “Spain Demands Religious Freedom: Communists would destroy human rights,” *America*, Vol. 56 Issue 10, (December 12, 1936), 220-221.

It is disturbing, to say the least, to see so little active interest among American Catholics in what is going on in Spain. It is even more disturbing to find them so little informed, [...] and it is positively shocking to see some of them allowing their apathy and ignorance to carry them into absurdities of speech when the subject is being discussed.⁴¹

What does this have to say about the real nature of the rhetorical battle? Was it a field dominated by intellectuals or did the common people also have a stake in it? From only this one article it is difficult to suggest that the general mass of American Catholics were completely uninterested in the issue, only that maybe there was simply not the sort of enthusiasm that intellectuals like Code were hoping for. The body of evidence discussed so far suggests that American Catholics deeply cared about these issues enough to prompt responses from the rest of the country.

On the other side of the aisle, and much to the dismay of Catholics, the secular/liberal intelligentsia had already bound themselves to the side of the Republicans with the divisions of Loyalists and Rebels (Nationalist) given to the opposing factions in the conflict. Both liberals and Protestants almost argued universally that the sole blame for the conflict lay with the Right for their feet dragging on critical social reforms and their reactionary policies that spawned the military revolt. As the denotation of “rebel” suggests, liberals clearly saw the revolt as an illegitimate attempt to destroy Spanish democracy. Despite the difficulty of fighting against this sort of rhetoric, Catholics either completely ignored the pejorative connotation of “rebel” or utilized the term in a clever way like one Catholic preacher who likened the Nationalists to American patriots during the Revolutionary War with Franco as their George Washington.⁴² Some Catholics simply implored the mainstream press to treat the Spanish issue more honestly rather than falling for loyalist propaganda and being mouthpieces for communists, as editor

⁴¹ ...those absurdities of speech likely being some form of support for the Republicans. He then goes on to denounce the characterization of the war as Fascism against Communism, instead opting for a common characterization of the war as atheism vs. Christianity; further emphasizing the fundamental religious characteristic of the war, “Catholic Apathy on Spanish War Assailed at Mount St. Mary’s,” *The Washington Post*, (March 21, 1938), 4.

⁴² “‘Puppets’ On Bench Assailed at Mass,” *The New York Times*, (October 14, 1936), 27.

Michael Williams did so in a long winded article for *Commonweal*.⁴³ Similarly, another long editorial and meditation from *Catholic World* questioned the motives of American liberals in ignoring the moral faults of the Loyalists while condemning the Nationalists for atrocities and the bombing of Guernica.⁴⁴

An interesting voice that stands out from the rest of the crowd among the mainstream Catholic press comes in the form of a *Commonweal* article written by E. Harold Smith. Smith scrutinized the role of conservative/reactionary Catholics in standing against necessary social reform and argued that this behavior was ultimately self-defeating and contrary to the explicit goals of the Church in spreading the Gospel. Smith compared the Church's role with regards to the labor question issue in the United States to countries like Spain in which he argued that the Church lost its legitimacy in the eyes of workers. He warned that, without a serious re-evaluation of the origins of anticlerical violence in episodes like the French Revolution or the Spanish Civil War, the Church would continue to lose the working class to the agitations of Communists.

Smith concluded that

[...] we must act speedily, The Holy Father warned us in 1931 of a revolution that was brewing. Spain did not heed the warning. Shall we never learn from the history of the Church in other countries? It is not the Church or the Church's teaching in any country that has failed the workingman. It is we Catholics here and elsewhere who have failed the Church⁴⁵.

This concern of losing the working class most noticeably appears again with *Catholic Worker*.

The Spanish Bishops' Letter: *The New York Times* and Rhetorical Warfare

⁴³ Williams, Michael, "Open Leaders to Leaders of The American Press, On Spain," *Commonweal*, (May 7, 1937), 33-37.

⁴⁴ "The Real Problem in Spain," *Catholic World*, Vol. 145, (June 1937), 257-265. Also, see Thorning, Joseph F., "Why the Press Failed on Spain," *Ibid.*, (December 1937), 289-291 and "Loyalist Propaganda Machine," *Ibid.*, Vol. 146, (January 1938), 479-481 for more examples from *Catholic World* denouncing the pro-Republican bias and disingenuous reporting by the mainstream press. It is important to keep the name Thorning in mind as he will appear later in this analysis.

⁴⁵ Smith, Harold E., "An Alarmist Speaks," *Commonweal*, (January 1, 1937), 263.

In the course of American press coverage of the Spanish Civil War, no single event polarized Americans along political and religious lines as completely as the publication of the Spanish Bishops' Collective Letter in the September 3rd, 1937, edition of the *New York Times*. This letter was a joint declaration of Spain's Catholic hierarchy in support of Franco's uprising and a plea to the rest of the world, not just Catholics, to support the Nationalist cause in light of an existential communist threat posed by the Republicans. While the mostly partisan Catholic press had been fully committed to the Nationalist cause since the outbreak of the war and their articles had been circulating among Catholic readers well before the publication of this Letter, the American Catholic viewpoint had not so publicly manifested itself to the rest of America until liberal/Protestant criticism of the Letter called for defensive maneuvers.

The Letter itself is particularly useful in understanding American opinions of the war as it appeared at the midpoint of the war when American coalitions had demonstrably crystalized around the two Spanish factions and political pressure began to directly build on Congress and the Roosevelt administration.⁴⁶ Additionally, because of its publication in such a mainstream platform as the *New York Times*, American Catholics now had the unique opportunity to make their case to the rest of America just as the Spanish Bishops did to the rest of the world. Reactions to the Letter provide valuable insight into not only the general juxtaposition of the pro-Nationalist Catholic position and the pro-Republican liberal/Protestant position but also an encapsulation of the debate over the war at large.

What exactly from the letter was so polarizing as to provoke such a negative reaction from American liberals/Protestants? Like the initial reactions of American Catholics, the bishops

⁴⁶ For a detailed analysis of the diplomatic issues regarding the Spanish Civil War, see Valaik, J. David. "Catholics, Neutrality, and the Spanish Embargo, 1937-1939." *The Journal of American History* 54, no. 1 (1967): 73-85

underscored the role of Soviet communists in clandestine operations before the outbreak of the war. Explaining the impetus for the military uprising, the bishops stated

[...] Spain had no other alternative but this; either to perish in the definite assault of destructive communism, already prepared and decreed, [...] or to attempt a titanic effort of resistance, in order to escape from the terrible enemy and to save the fundamental principles of her social life and of her national characteristics.⁴⁷

This justification stood in complete contrast to what most Americans believed about the nature of the conflict and thus likely provoked their response. The title from the *Times* itself demonstrates the crux of the issue for the average American: “Justifying *Franco Rebellion* (emphasis mine).”⁴⁸ How could anyone support a fascist coup against a legitimate, democratic government? It is not surprising to see how this sort of viewpoint could be easily entrenched when Catholics were blocking out any alternative viewpoints, along with being caught up in a venomous mix of propaganda, agitation, prejudice, and misinformation. The bishops also explicitly denied any subservience or dependence to the Franco movement. What is also worthy of note for the purposes of this thesis is the publication in *The Washington Post* of the American episcopal hierarchy’s (American Bishops)’ glowing response to the Spanish Bishops’ Letter, which rubberstamped the position of American Catholics from the top.⁴⁹

The rhetorical battle in the NYT dramatically escalated in only a month, culminating in mutual accusations of fascist or communist sympathies. Four days after the publication of the Letter in the *Times*, historian and contributor to U.S. diplomatic affairs James T. Shotwell’s editorial made a scathing critique of the bishops’ arguments, questioning the legitimacy of the use of arms “to secure political aims,” a perceived silence on Nationalist atrocities, and the

⁴⁷ “Text of Pastoral Letter Signed by Spanish Prelates Justifying Franco Rebellion,” *The New York Times*, (September 3, 1937), 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Letter from Hierarchy to Spanish Bishops,” *The Washington Post*, (November 21, 1937), 6.

sincerity of the bishops in characterizing the conflict as a “national plebiscite”.⁵⁰ Shotwell’s letter and rhetoric effectively represented the position of most pro-Loyalist Americans with respect to both the Nationalist side and, as it naturally follows, the Catholic Church’s role in the war. The rhetoric accused the bishops of harboring Fascist/Nazi authoritarian tendencies and, consequently, placed pro-Nationalist Catholics at large under suspicion. Naturally, an accusation of being an American fascist/Nazi sympathizer during that time period demanded correction.⁵¹

Four days later, in the September 11th edition, Jesuit editor of the Catholic journal *America* John La Farge rebutted, offering an alternative view that simultaneously denied any associations with Fascists/Nazis and depicted the pre-civil war Spanish republic as being in complete disorder; coopted by anarchist elements, unable to maintain law and order, and only moments away from a Soviet-backed communist.⁵² The specter of communism as a threat not only to the Spanish nation but to Western/Christian civilization as a whole is a common theme that was integral to many of these arguments.⁵³ Rather than clarifying the association with Fascists and Nazis, La Farge denied any association or sympathies and pointed at the role of the Soviet Union in creating/enabling the conflict, thus justifying the intervention of other powers. Specifically, he argued, “If a man may defend himself with his own gun, why may he not call in his neighbor to aid with the neighbor’s gun?”⁵⁴ Rather than a revolt against a legitimate authority, La Farge argued that the military uprising was merely a defense against an already

⁵⁰ “Weighed in Critical Balance Document Is Found Wanting,” *Ibid.*, (September 7, 1937), 20.

⁵¹ This defensive behavior ties back well into the history of American Catholics who, because of their political beliefs that seemed alienating to the rest of America, were scrutinized for not toeing a strictly democratic line.

⁵² As evidence for planned revolution, La Farge cites a February. 27, 1936 Comintern decree and a resolution from the same month by Spanish delegates to the Third International; “Catholic Editor Takes Issue With the Views of Professor Shotwell,” *Ibid.*, (September 11, 1937), 16.

⁵³ Furthermore, there was the fear that this sort of apocalyptic violence would spread across the world and to the United States.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

belligerent, existential communist threat. Thus, La Farge's rebuttal presented the standard view of the pro-Nationalist Catholic to the American public.

However, rather than let the issue of the Letter rest with this brief exchange, the pro-Loyalists took the offensive up again in the form of a letter signed by 150 Protestant intellectuals and clergymen again condemning the arguments of the bishops' letter and further entrenching opposing positions. The authors of this new letter attacked the Church as an agent directly opposed to republican democracy and interestingly, claimed that the Popular Front government had nothing to do with anticlerical violence while simultaneously characterizing Nationalist atrocities as directed from above in a mechanical manner. Thus, their rhetoric played into a cliché of attributing Republican violence to "uncontrollables" and the mob while attributing Nationalist violence to commands "from above."⁵⁵ What this cliché shows is that Protestant/liberal intellectuals were unwilling to associate the Republican government with any anticlerical violence and pro-Franco Catholics were willing to overlook authoritarian/fascist tendencies in the cause they supported either directly or merely by association. This analysis is important as it helps to reveal the argumentative shortcomings that prevented any kind of reasonable consensus to be made between these two groups in American society. When two interpretations of an event are not only far from reality but also far from the sources themselves, the result is embitterment and mutual polarization. Mutual hostility and misunderstanding become entrenched, creating an ideological status quo.

Finally, it appears that Catholics got the last word in on this debate in the *Times* as the single reply of Mgr. Michael Ready and then a massive show of force of 175 Catholic

⁵⁵ This sort of clichéd argument appears frequently in the historiography regarding the Spanish Civil War and the anticlerical violence, especially from a mainstream journalism perspective. For a more complete description of this cliché in its historiographical context, see Ruiz, Julius. "Seventy Years on: Historians and Repression during and after the Spanish Civil War." *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 3 (2009): 449–72.

intellectuals followed the signed Protestant letter. These intellectuals came from a broad stock of professions: deans, university presidents, editors, professors, and Catholic organization presidents from all over the country, with most being members of the clergy. The role of clergy and the intelligentsia with respect to both Catholic and liberal/Protestant groups in this debate reveals that the American intelligentsia believed themselves to have a stake in such a foreign conflict in a period of isolationism and diplomatic retreat. Furthermore, the elevated role of the clergy specifically reinforces the notion that clergy had been and continued to be the leading figures in the Catholic intelligentsia. These replies are in the Oct. 6 and 14 issues respectively. Ready immediately characterized the Protestant representations of the bishops' arguments as "...a strawman, hideous and offensive" and also questioned the motivations of the Protestant signers, emphasizing their distance from the conflict.⁵⁶ Catholic clergy and intellectuals certainly had a vested interest in international Church affairs but what about Protestants? Based on a history of anti-Catholicism, it seems that there was mutual misunderstanding of each other's motives. Again, the replies targeted the opposing side's seemingly inadequate portrayal of the Popular Front government, once again emphasizing a theme of communist corruption that destabilized and delegitimized the Republic:

Does American Protestantism endorse a regime that is composed predominantly of radical Socialists, Communists, Syndicalists and Anarchists? Does American Protestantism champion a regime that has consistently violated in theory and in practice the fundamental principles of liberty and democracy guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States?⁵⁷

⁵⁶ "Catholic in Reply Hits Letter of 150," *The New York Times*, (October 6, 1937), 6. Ready also appears again the following year, this time in a *Washington Post* article in which he denounced the inconsistent policies of Secretary of State Hull on Spain, "Hull's Policies in Spanish War Called Inconsistent by Cleric," *The Washington Post*, (March 23, 1938), 4.

⁵⁷ "The Reply of 175 Catholic Clergy and Laymen to Protestant Letter on Spain," *Ibid.*, (October 14, 1937), 20. The same quote is also seen in "Franco Fights for Humanity, Catholics State," *Ibid.*, (October 14, 1937), 7.

American Protestants saw Spain as an existential battle against fascism, an ideology incompatible with democratic values while American Catholics simply flipped fascism for communism. With both being completely entrenched in their own perspectives against alternative facts or viewpoints, there thus existed an ideological no man's land in which a middle ground was impossible to survive in. Seeing how each side tied their rhetoric to American fundamentals as a means of viewpoint justification reflects the larger debate about American identity that both sides took part in, whether they realized it then or not.

Like other Catholic publications, *Catholic Worker* (CW) published a statement in October blasting the hawkishness of American liberals and questioned not only their sincerity in responding to the letter but also the sincerity of the *Times* for publishing the letter around the same time as Roosevelt's "quarantine" speech and a Congressional appropriations bill for military spending to the tune of "over half a billion dollars."⁵⁸ To the editors of CW, the rhetoric of "defending Democracy" or "fighting Fascism" served as a pretext for justifying American intervention in a conflict it had no business in. Essentially, the whole episode reeked of deliberate conspiracy to justify worldwide intervention and war profiteering. CW argued that the response of American Protestants and liberals to the Spanish Bishops was not so much a debunking of the bishops' argument as it was rather a directed attack towards the American Catholic intelligentsia, a message that their rhetoric was not going to be welcome in the mainstream forum. This episode of defending the common Catholic position was unique for *Catholic Worker* at this time because of their usually neutralist stance on the issue. In the case of the Bishops' Letter, it seems there was enough insincerity and outright dangerous rhetoric coming from American liberals to prompt a reaction from this otherwise neutralist publication.

⁵⁸ "Liberals Blow War Bugles in Spanish Key: Blast at Bishops' Letter Looks for U.S. In War Against Fascism," *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. V. No. 6, (October 1937), 1-3.

Catholic Worker: In the Eye of The Storm

While there was a near constant back and forth of rhetorical warfare between American liberals/Protestants and Catholics, one group of Catholics felt like they belonged to neither opposing pole of this rhetorical spectrum. More specifically, there was a group relegated to the sidelines of the discussion who saw all war as an evil product of our flawed human condition and who believed neither side of the civil war could be directly supported or encouraged by Americans in good conscience. They vehemently dissented from the notion that any good Catholic had to support Franco's cause in the war or else be a godless communist who would let Western Civilization crumble. This group was the Catholic Worker movement, led by former communist Dorothy Day. Their paper, *The Catholic Worker*, served as a on-going manifesto for their pacifist, pro-labor, anti-capitalist, and dual anticommunist/antifascist program. Unlike the other papers looked at so far, *Catholic Worker* was very new, having been established in 1933, only three years prior to the breakout of the civil war. The other papers, while not themselves being the oldest continual presses in America, still had deeper roots at the time of this analysis.

Because of the heavily skewed ideological landscape of Catholic publications during this time period, *Catholic Worker* provides a unique contrast to the rest of the American Catholic scene with regards to the Spanish Civil War and Franco's Nationalist movement. Because of this, *Catholic Worker* was of enough interest as to be one of the primary focuses of Valaik's article regarding American Catholic dissent from the majority pro-Franco opinion.⁵⁹ This is not to suggest that *Catholic Worker* was the only significant American Catholic voice dissenting from the majority pro-Franco opinion; only that as a regularly published newspaper it provides the best example of collective dissent for the purposes of this thesis. Without a concrete example of

⁵⁹ "American Catholic Dissenters and the Spanish Civil War." *The Catholic Historical Review* 53, no. 4 (1968): 537-55

evidence such as this, the ideological landscape of American Catholics appears very unilateral in documentary evidence. A lack of alternative opinions such as those from CW leaves an incomplete picture of the ideological landscape of Catholic America.

From its first publication addressing the civil war in December of 1936, *Catholic Worker* makes its position noticeably clear with the title “Spanish Catholic Flays Both Sides!” and subtitle “Claims Double-Refusal of Communism and Fascism Is Duty of Christians; Rebels Did Not Exhaust Peaceful Means; Both Sides Have Fought Like Savages.”⁶⁰ With just the first words of the paper, the editors of *Catholic Worker* made it clear to their audience that their position on Spain was going to be different from the American Catholic norm. Crucially, the editors of *Catholic Worker* chose to let a Spaniard speak on the subject. In their note prefacing the letter, they stated:

[The Spaniard’s letter] expresses the stand of The Catholic Worker and for that reason we are re-printing it entirely. We are using the front page for this purpose because the civil war in Spain and the stand the Catholics and Communists in other countries are taking is a vital issue today.⁶¹

This statement importantly demonstrates a degree of humility— an unwillingness to morally grandstand and an unwillingness to play into a toxic cycle of anger and editorial reaction. The original author goes on to lambast the hypocrisies of both the left and right while simultaneously denouncing the total nature of the conflict, specifically emphasizing the eternally corrupting nature of warfare:

What are we to think of so-called Catholics who believe themselves free from its observance [Catholic doctrine on war] because their own particular conception of patriotism is at stake? [...] The holiest end will never suffice to justify a criminal action for all politics must serve Morals. Now war, and from the strongest reason, civil war is

⁶⁰ *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. IV. No. 8, (December 1936), 1.

⁶¹ It is important to note that this letter was originally received by the editor of the French monthly *Esprit* from which it was sent and translated for *Catholic Worker*, *Ibid*.

avowed to be the most wholly immoral of all means. It is the sum of all the vices and all the passions.⁶²

Continuing further, the author emphasized the effects of civil warfare on otherwise peaceful citizenry of Spain itself: “But the militarism of civilians is more formidable still than that of the military [...] The citizen degenerated into a soldier becomes proud of his trade because he feels the sense of power and is above the law.”⁶³ Essentially, total war had blinded Catholics to the underlying moral realities of the situation and given them a false sense of righteousness in a perceived crusade. However, what really sells this letter as a shining example of *Catholic Worker’s* position on Spain is the following quote originally bolded in the paper towards the end of the Spaniard’s remarks:

But justice compels us to a severity in judgment, all the greater if we perceive a like hatred among those who claim for themselves the name of Catholics. For we owe to the Truth of Christ, to the Love that Christ had for all men, the homage of the conquest of souls, not the insult of the massacre or bodies in a hatred which prevents the conversion of souls.⁶⁴

Thus, to *Catholic Worker*, a true Catholic position demanded non-alliance with either faction. It demanded a sacrifice akin to the Christian principle of love thy enemy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this staunchly dissident attitude towards the conflict did not pass without receiving attention from those who deemed it unfit. In the February 1937 edition of *Catholic Worker*, a letter from Chicago attorney Paul Cocot criticized the paper’s position, equating the letter’s pacifism with letting a mad man run through the streets waving a gun or letting a rabies infected dog run about a crowd. Curiously, Cocot also equated denying the Nationalists’ right to revolt against “tyranny” to denying the legitimacy of America’s revolutionary patriots. Regarding the hypothetical rabies-infected dog, he asked bluntly “[D]o we

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

pet him or do we shoot him down as quickly as possible?”⁶⁵ He then asked the editors of CW if they would hold the same position if it were their own “mother, daughter, sister, or brother” that were being killed by the government’s “rabble army.”⁶⁶ The editorial staff of CW chose Stephen Johnson, the original translator of the Spanish letter to respond to this protest.

Rather than explicitly defending the arguments of the letter paragraph by paragraph, Johnson focused on questioning the motivations of Catholic intellectuals like Cocot who implicitly or explicitly accused *Catholic Worker* of being communist-inclined and thus non-Catholic.⁶⁷ He turned the accusations around and lambasted the role of privileged and moneyed American Catholics in standing against necessary social reform and change. He implored the privileged Catholics to heed the warnings of Pius XI to respect the inherent dignity of the working person and to respect the work of *Catholic Worker* lest the Communists have their way with them.⁶⁸ Communists were winning because they were filling a vacuum that no one else was willing to fill. Catholics who failed to understand this were only doing more damage to their cause by enabling the success of Communism among the working class.

In the June issue later that year, *Catholic Worker* further elucidated its philosophy on warfare by quoting from one of their talks to an audience from St. Louis group:

⁶⁵ “A Protest and An Answer on Spain,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. IV. No. 10, (February 1937), 6.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Of note within the body of his defense of the original letter is a line of argument regarding a doctrine of force against the hypothetical madman with a gun: “[...] why, in the name of Christianity would you use ‘the more force the better’ on him. Don’t you see the extremes to which this doctrine of force is able to lead even a Catholic lawyer?,” *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Essentially, Johnson’s argument was that it was hypocritical to throw the communist (godless) card at genuine worker movements and frustrations when it was the very same Catholic lawyers, judges, politicians, corporations, and oligarchs that were engaging in an exploitive, non-Catholic capitalist system against the direct beliefs of the Church and papal encyclicals like *Rerum Novarum*, *Ibid.*

War, in theory, can be justified but modern war as an actuality can hardly be defended on any grounds. [...] Unfortunately many Catholics are seduced into this [Rightist] camp and conceive of the struggle against the errors of Communism as a war of extermination against those who appear to be followers of Marx. Needless to say, this is not the Christian conception of the eternal struggle between truth and error.⁶⁹

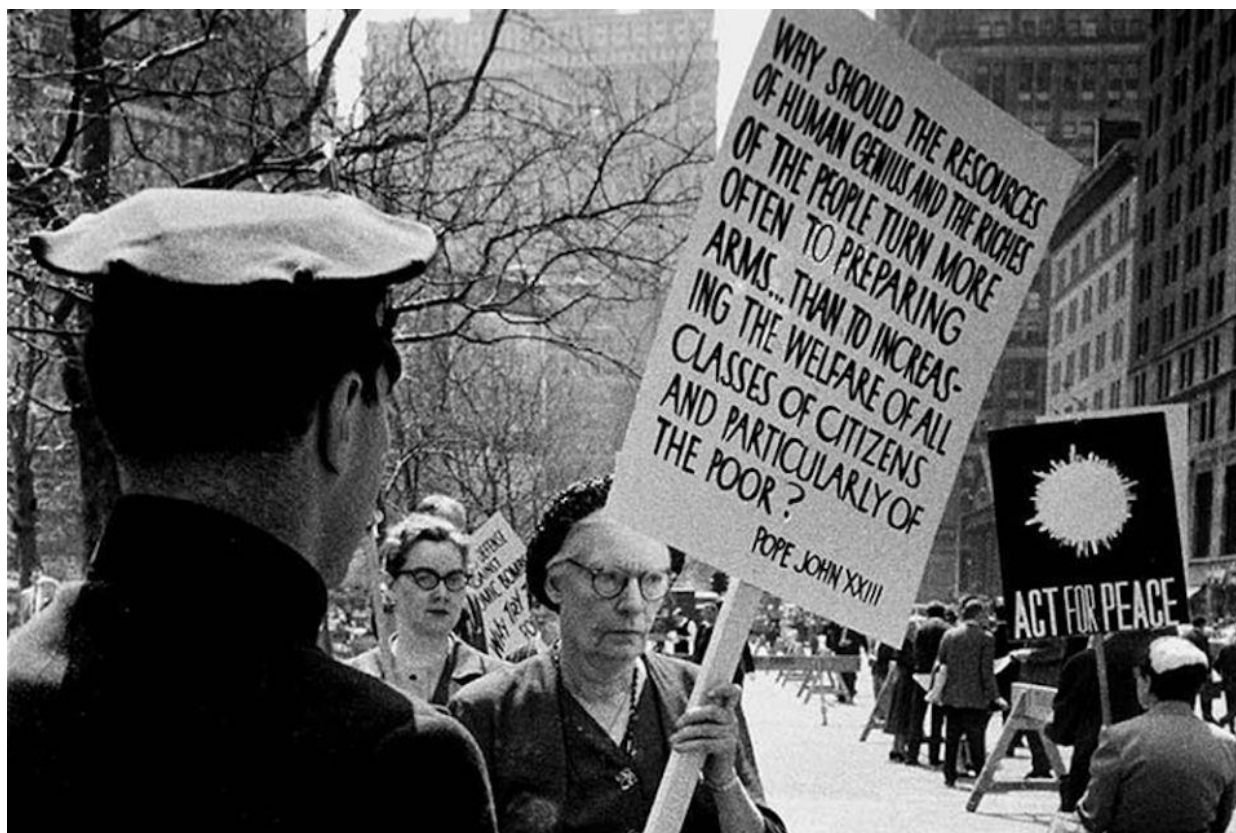


Figure 6- Still shot from "Revolution of the Heart: A Dorothy Day Story," putting Catholic Worker's and Day's pacifist stance on full display, from Anglada, Eric, "New biography chronicles Dorothy Day's astonishing life in detail," *National Catholic Reporter*, (June 17, 2020).

While in many ways the position of *Catholic Worker* was distinct enough from the mainstream Catholic opinion as to make it unique for its pacifist and neutralist stance, in other ways it was not so different. As seen in the response to the rhetorical conflict regarding the Bishops' Letter, *Catholic Worker* made their position clear that, despite endorsing neither the Franco movement nor the unapologetic pro-Franco rhetoric from other Catholics, they would not

⁶⁹ "Ethics of War," *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. V. No. 2, (June 1937), 7. CW also reiterates the Catholic position on warfare in their March issue of 1939: Atwater, Donald, "Can There Be a Just War in Our Time?," *Ibid.*, Vol. VI. No. 9, (March 1939), 3. Furthermore, CW's position on pacifism does not change even with the outbreak of WW2 on American soil: "Our Country Passes From Undeclared to Declared War, We Continue Our Christian Pacifist Stand," *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. IX. No. 3, (January 1942).

accept the utterly dishonest and disingenuous treatment of the Spanish issue by the mainstream American press. However, as the Spanish conflict drew closer to a close, it came time to reflect on the experiences of the war. As the Second World War loomed closer and closer to the United States, attitudes towards Spain shifted accordingly. This next section will seek to address this shift.

1939 and Beyond: Reflection and Looking Forward

By the end of 1938, the situation in Spain decidedly favored Franco's Nationalist forces. A fierce Catalonia campaign started late December, and Barcelona, one of the last holdouts of Republican forces and the then seat of the Republican government, fell to Nationalist forces on January 23rd. Madrid soon followed and by the start of April, a communique from Franco stated simply "The war is over."⁷⁰ The existential communist threat to Western Civilization and the Church had been quashed with the final flight of Republican forces and officials, but the cost had been great. Payne writes:

The civil war was the most destructive experience in modern Spanish history, rivaled only by the French invasion of 1808. It resulted in great loss of life, much human suffering, disruption of the society and the economy, distortion and repression in cultural affairs, and truncation of the country's political development.⁷¹

In light of the conclusion to this devastating conflict, how did Americans, who had been up until this point seriously invested in the conflict, react to the imminent reality of Franco's triumph? Even into January, when the war was close to being decided, some sectors of the liberal intelligentsia were still questioning and debating the issue of the United States' neutrality. Catholic intellectuals responded ferociously, appearing to take this discussion as a continued insult considering the skewed nature of the conflict at the time and more importantly, because

⁷⁰ Payne, xi.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

breaking neutrality would be a violation of what appeared to be a genuinely American consensus. Not only was it never the business of Americans to involve themselves in any overseas conflict, as *Catholic Worker* argued explicitly, but also because intervention would always be the worst option to as it would prolong an already devastating war. As an example of this rhetoric, Joseph Thorning argued before a crowd of 2000 Catholics for neutrality that communist groups were responsible for agitating against the Spanish embargo in favor of the remaining Loyalist forces. Furthermore, regarding American liberal calls to support the Loyalists at this time, he emphatically stated



Figure 7- American isolationism is a unique phenomenon to study in this time period because of the intersection of various, distinctly different political groups and ideologies, although each usually had their own reasons. From Bryan, Dan, "The Power of the Isolationists Before World War II," *American History USA*, February 9, 2015.

These murderers are now put forth by certain groups in this country as worthy of some special favor for treatment under our national neutrality legislation. Never a greater hoax or fraud was attempted than to call upon Catholics to protest against the persecution of Christians in Central Europe, and in the same breath to urge them to help put arms and planes in the hands of those who have been murdering the priests and laity of the church.⁷²

This argument is yet another reflection of the common Catholic critique of the liberal position. Two days later, in an editorial directed to the *Times*, Thorning again lambasted the hypocrisy of American liberals in their attempt to rouse support for the Loyalist cause. He stated, "The sad fact is revealed that the majority of those who were most vociferous in condemning religious

⁷² "Fight on Arms Ban Laid to Red Groups," *The New York Times*, (January 10, 1939), 14.

persecution in Central Europe are eager to convince themselves and others that Catholic suffering is either fictitious, 'exaggerated,' or a 'transitory phase.'"⁷³

Another argument lambasting American hypocrisy appears in *America*. In her article, Brooke Stewart argued that the same Americans crying out in support of Republicans and Spanish Democracy were the same Americans who previously called Spain an uncivilized, backwater nation incapable of enlightened thought: "Can those who called Spain an unprogressive country of dim-witted peasantry believe that those ignorant, amoral, Church-bound serfs became, of a sudden, types of courage and intelligence? Probably not."⁷⁴ She concluded by arguing that American liberal disdain for Franco, an extension of prejudice against conservative Spanish institutions, was also a direct extension of existing anti-Catholic bias within America. Anti-Francoism was then essentially a form of contrarianism. Whatever Catholics supported or believed, liberals and Protestants should then support or believe the opposite.

The Catholic position now was not so much as to justify the Franco regime directly but rather indirectly justify the anti-intervention position to American liberals through the rhetoric of maintaining American neutrality, a position that a large swath of the populace still supported under the larger umbrella of isolationism. Catholic thought at this stage of the conflict was not so much a reflection on what had occurred during the war but rather a pragmatic looking forward in light of the chaos that the whole world was about to be caught up in. This thought process seemed to be a counter to the sort of liberal rhetoric that Franco's success meant another deathblow to western democracy. While many Catholics were still rightly concerned with the

⁷³ "The Vatican and Spain," *Ibid.*, (January 12, 1939), 13.

⁷⁴ Stewart, Brooke H., "Post-Mortem Notes on Spain's Late War," *America*, Vol. 61, Issue 15, (July 22, 1939), 347.

rise of fascism in Europe as it pertained to world peace, the higher concern was still devoted to the potential threat of communism.

To Catholics, an existential threat in the form of communism had been eradicated and, despite the human tolls that this victory demanded, it was time to look forward now that the crisis was over. Any other considerations regarding Spain at this point were mere afterthoughts. Regardless, there were still Catholics (CW being an obvious example) who were concerned at the potential fascist and Nazi trajectory of Spain. As the United States got involved in the world war, these concerns began to amplify. The simple reality however was that the violence had not ceased with the formal end of the conflict. As Franco's dictatorship matured and developed, repressions against former Republicans and political dissidents would increase and be codified/legitimized in the Law of Political Responsibilities.⁷⁵

Relating to the subject of repression, Thorning drew the ire of American liberals in the *Times* when he questioned the motivations of a signed Protestant plea to the Pope on behalf of the defeated Republicans. Liberals lambasted what seemed to be a simple excuse for totalitarianism while also calling Thorning's comments tone deaf and uncharitable. In a reply to his comments, Ed Torpe wrote to the *Times*:

Franco is an avowed Catholic whose noble Christian character has only recently been extolled in the congratulatory message addressed to him by the Pope. But is not mercy one of the cardinal tenets of the church? If Franco follows not Christ, but Stalin, in exterminating his enemies, where is the difference between the Catholic Church and the Comintern?⁷⁶

⁷⁵ "...several hundred thousand persons were tried by military tribunals during the first years after the end of the war. A total of approximately 51,000 death sentences were decreed, although nearly half were reduced by Franco. At least 28,000 executions were carried out, in some cases punishing perpetrators of the Red Terror, but in many instances simply targeting political activists," Payne, 245.

⁷⁶ "Practice of Christian Virtues," *The New York Times*, (April 11, 1939), 18.



Figure 8- Francisco Franco saluting his army of nearly a quarter million troops at a victory parade following the surrender of Madrid, May 20, 1939. From Nelsson, Richard. 2019. "The End Of The Spanish Civil War - Archive, 1939". *The Guardian*.

Of course, comparing the institution of the Church to the Comintern is disingenuous, but Ed Torpe's point elucidates some of the contradictory elements of American Catholic thought regarding the Spanish Civil War. Thorning responded the next day, arguing that the assumption that the regime would engage in a "series of one-sided trials and wholesale executions" was a "gratuitous hypothesis." Furthermore, he argued that the hypothesis was made in bad faith given that the wholesale execution of the clergy and laity during the outbreak of the war had largely been ignored by the liberal/Protestant intelligentsia and greatly outweighed Nationalist excesses.⁷⁷

This brief episode of debate in the *Times* represents another example of how American Catholics used the press to voice their beliefs to the rest of the country. Much like the case of the

⁷⁷ "Dr. Thorning Holds Position," *Ibid.*, (April 12, 1939), 22. Another Thorning editorial lambasting the liberal position also appeared earlier that year, "Religious Persecution," *The Washington Post*, (January 27, 1939), 8. For Thorning's personal musings on the potential future of Spain under Franco, see "Franco's Spain, Its Potentialities and Problems," *Catholic World*, Vol. 148, (February 1939), 568-573.

Bishops' Letter in 1937, the end of the war presented another opportunity for Protestants/liberals and Catholics to debate the fundamental issues of the war and how it related to religion, democracy, and ideology in the United States. However, after this point, the debates of the Spanish Civil War began to disappear in light of the rapid explosion of world tensions culminating in the Second World War. Instead, there was now the concern that the now victorious Nationalists would seek an alliance with the Axis powers.

While the fears of Franco moving closer to the Axis were still fresh in the minds of many Americans, there was a sense of pragmatism and optimism not exclusive to Catholic circles. In the *Times* later that year, an article from an unidentified author stated "Franco's more immediate problems are still internal. He has taken over a nation in ruins. The task of reconstruction will prove tremendous. It is a task that is likely to keep him thinking of home affairs rather than [...] foreign gestures or adventures."⁷⁸ The argument thus followed that if Franco had to rebuild a destroyed country, he had no real motivation or resources to assist the Axis powers in their schemes for world domination.

It was only during the middle of America's direct involvement in WW2 that the Spanish question became an issue as the Axis attempted to woo Franco towards them once again. In an *America* article from September 1942, nearly a year after the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, the journal argued that "liberalistic saboteurs" were attempting to wreck the peace between the U.S. and Spain because of their ideology and disdain for Franco. This article argued that, along with the internal restructuring of the Franco regime, the diplomatic work of the United States and Great Britain was successful in keeping Nazi influence out of Spain. Anybody that said

⁷⁸ "Franco's Spain," *The New York Times*, (April 3, 1939), 14.

otherwise in the United States was merely sabotaging the operation and could potentially drive Spain back into the Nazi camp.⁷⁹

The following year, another *America* article warned of a liberal plot to agitate the American people through the mainstream media against Spain even when there existed a peaceful status quo. Again, tying back into the rhetoric of liberal anti-Catholic bias, the journal stated:

The chief selling point of this propaganda is the notion that a new Axis is being created, with the Vatican, Spain and Portugal as the turning points. Hitler bids fair to become the forgotten man; and once more the Pope looms up as the real arch-enemy, just as the Ku-Klux Klan has known all along.⁸⁰

Once again, liberal rhetoric against Franco was not so much used to fight fascism but as a way to discriminate against Catholics. To further emphasize this point, *America* argued that by ignoring the plight of Basque Catholics suffering under Francoist repressions, American liberals were only further revealing their hypocrisy and anti-Catholic schemes:

In *Time* or *Life*, no photographs appear of the Catholic priests and Religious imprisoned in Carmona jail. They would not serve the purpose of using the Spanish issue as a lever with which to renew old passions of political or ideological propaganda.⁸¹

Although not taking rhetoric in the same direction as *America* regarding Franco's neutrality, Margarita de Planelles argued in *Catholic World* that the social, economic, and political circumstances of Spain made breaking neutrality akin to suicide. Franco's policy had foresight after witnessing continued "reverses sustained by the Axis powers in Russia, Egypt, and Tunisia."⁸² Therefore, liberal rhetoric stating that Franco was going to join the Axis and attack

⁷⁹ "Keep Spain From the Axis," *America*, Vol. 67 Issue 23, (September 12, 1942), 630.

⁸⁰ "The Plan for Spain," *Ibid.*, Vol. 69 Issue 4, (May 1, 1943), 99-100.

⁸¹ Using the example of the Basque clergy is especially interesting in this instance since the issue was often conveniently ignored during Catholic editorialization on the conflict. There were instances where Catholics accused American liberals and Spanish Republicans of using the Basque Catholics as a false representation of the Republic's religious toleration. The author would then argue that liberals would not do the same thing to the totalitarian Soviet Union because they were a war ally. *Ibid.*

⁸² De Planelles, Margarita S., "What Will Spain Do?," *Catholic World*, Vol. 158, (November 1943), 180-183.

the Allies along the exposed Moroccan front or at Gibraltar was unfounded. Instead, it was liberal agitation and provocation against Spain that could actually upset the peace and status quo.

Thus, although there were new practical insights among the Catholic intelligentsia regarding the excesses of Franco's regime in the post-civil war stage and there was a heightened concern about the influence of Naziism and other Axis influences in Spain, Catholic attitudes towards Spain and the liberal/Protestant position were largely unchanged by the late hours of the Second World War. Rather than reevaluate the arguments and debates from an impartial view and assess the reactionary nature of both sides in debates over Spain, most Catholics reaffirmed that Franco was the better force for peace and order in Spain and that Protestants and liberals would deliberately sabotage the United State's relationship with Franco's Spain in order to pursue their long existing communist, anti-Catholic agenda.

From these conclusions we are again brought back to the phenomena described by George Shuster, "minorityitis." Catholics, still feeling that their political, social, and cultural opinions were being opposed by the anti-Catholic majority purely because of their religious beliefs, lashed out against the rest of America to not only defend their own beliefs but also to counter what they saw as deliberate provocation. The collective experiences of the 19th century, the Klan, the treatment of Russia and Mexico, the election cycles of the 20s, and now Spain were all formative experiences that engendered a bitter and defensive attitude. Although there were still many Catholics like Shuster and the writers of *Catholic Worker* who were able to see past the glamorous crusader-like image of the Nationalists, most just accepted Franco's defense of the Catholic Church without any qualifications or reservations since it was opposite of the majority liberal/Protestant defense of the Loyalists or Republicans.

The truth of course is that both sides of the Spanish debate often failed to see their own argumentative faults. Modern war is especially troublesome to moralize and even more so with social, political, economic, and religious tensions as high as the Spanish Civil War. This thesis does not attempt to directly evaluate the arguments of American Catholics and liberals one against the other, but rather, demonstrate that both were increasingly motivated by ideology and emotions rather than rationality and pragmatism. Indeed, it was just as much a fight over Spain as it was over ideas central to all Americans: religion, culture, citizenship, and democratic ideals. However, the United States' origins as a Protestant, Enlightened nation presented a powerful barrier to Catholic religion, culture, and political ideas. What Spain shows us in this thesis is that this larger fight was still ongoing in America as Catholics fought for recognition as a serious body of intellectually fruitful and useful citizens.

As anti-Catholicism began to wane in the second half of the 20th century, Catholics were definitively integrated into the American system though their religion still may have been foreign to the original stock of the nation. However, the shape of the Church today in a more modern post-Vatican II world is quite different than the Church of the 30s and 40s. Though they were separated by region and ethnic origins, American Catholics were almost universally united in ideology and cultural practices during the period of this thesis. Today, as the cultural, racial, and religious diversity of this country continues to increase alongside irreligiousness and loosened morality, the position of Catholics now is likely not so much to fight against a unipolar anti-Catholic establishment but rather, fight to win the hearts and minds of a vastly larger pool of various ideas, cultures, and political orientations. Thus, it remains to be seen how American Catholicism will look in the future with not only so much external divisions in the country but also new internal divisions along theological, political, cultural, and racial lines.

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