

LAS FALSAS DERECHAS: *Conflict and Convergence in Mexico's Post-Cristero Right after the Second Vatican Council*

ABSTRACT: In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Mexican traditionalist Catholics mobilized in apparent unity against Catholic “progressivism” and the Left. Yet, they succumbed to their own internecine fights. This article examines the conflicts within Mexico’s post-Cristero Right during the 1960s and 70s by tackling the ruptures and realignments surrounding the excommunication of Fr. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, a traditionalist Jesuit famed for attacking conciliar reforms and the legitimacy of Paul VI’s papacy. I argue that the ensuing debates put into question the apparent coherence of conservatives in the face of social unrest after 1968, highlighting the long-standing entropy of right-wing Catholicism, as traditionalists clashed over matters of orthodoxy, Catholics’ historical relationship with the postrevolutionary state, and the contested memory of the Cristero War, which they used to legitimize their positions and define the terms of their traditionalism. Using anticommunism and anti-Semitism to wage their battles, these traditionalists occupied important spaces in the public sphere, contributed to Mexico’s Cold War polarizations, and shaped the Mexican Right’s international outlook. Their conflicts attest to the contentious plurality of the Mexican Right during this period, which invites further study to better understand how these actors situated themselves in a rapidly changing world.

KEYWORDS: anticommunism, Catholicism, anti-Semitism, Mexico, Cold War

In the 1960s, as the Cold War was heating up, Mexicans of all walks of life experienced the tensions and conflicts of the time in a variety of ways. Prompted by social protest, the rekindling of old battles in Church-state relations (especially in the realm of education), and the growing tensions between progressive and traditionalist sectors of the lay and clerical Church, Catholics grappled with a shifting political, social, and cultural environment and partook in the broader landscape of mobilization and polarization during that stage of the Cold War in Mexico.

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Amid renewed and rising anxieties about the threat of communism, the decline of public morality, and the loss of the Catholic Church's cultural primacy, the Jesuit priest Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga warned Catholics in Mexico and abroad of an even greater danger:

“One of the most pressing phenomena of our times is the falseness, the hypocrisy, and the deceit with which evil disguises itself, taking over even the healthiest institutions. These are silent, imperceptible infiltrations that expand, dominate, and corrupt. These are *las falsas derechas* [the fake Right] lurking everywhere to destroy from within, to deceive and paralyze the legitimate means of defense available to those of us who struggle to preserve our spiritual patrimony. These infiltrations—Jewish, Masonic, and communist—are all part of a whole and span the entire living organism of the Church.”¹

By the time he published this ominous analysis (1969), Sáenz had built a global reputation as a vocal detractor of Catholic modernism and progressivism and a dissenting voice within the Mexican clergy. Printed originally in the Spanish magazine *Cruzado Español* and disseminated through global traditionalist channels, Sáenz's denunciation of the *falsas derechas* stands as an example of how traditionalist Catholics (those who contested the *aggiornamento* proposed by John XXIII and the reforms of Vatican II) dealt with the profound divisions within their own camp. It also reveals how some sectors of the Mexican clergy perceived the Church to be under siege by the forces of secularism, liberalism, and the Left, and their Catholic collaborators. Sáenz's struggle against these forces led him to speak out against the growing presence of “progressives” inside the Church, and to accuse Pope Paul VI of acting as an agent of a Judeo-communist plot to destroy the Church from within. Sáenz was an advocate of *sedevacantism*, that is, the claim that the Holy See under John XXIII and Paul VI was a *sede vacante*, or an “empty seat,” due to their support for the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Because of his controversial views, the Jesuit priest was excommunicated in 1971, an event that shook the traditionalist Catholic camp in Mexico and beyond, and sparked ardent public debates about the role of Catholics in public life and how they should act in the face of growing Cold War polarization.

While conspiratorial and extreme, Sáenz's diatribes signaled a distinctive moment for the postconciliar Church. On the home front, conservative Catholics mobilized to disavow communism and the influence that counterculture and the Cuban-inspired “New Left” were exerting on Mexican society, especially the youth. This critical juncture was an opportunity to reignite a sense of Catholic

1. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *Las falsas derechas* (Mar del Plata: Editorial Montonera, 1969), 1.

national identity, galvanize support, and activate old and new social bases around a platform shaped by decades-long grievances with the postrevolutionary state. However, as I argue in this article, this sense of urgency and the broader context in which the debates over sedevacantism took place also exacerbated existing tensions within right-wing Catholicism and produced a clash among opponents to conciliar reformism. These Catholics quarreled over matters of tradition and orthodoxy, the meanings of Catholic dissidence in Mexican history, and their positions vis-à-vis the political and cultural shifts of the time.

As illustrated by the conflict and convergence between the sedevacantist Sáenz Arriaga and Catholic activist-intellectuals René Capistrán and Salvador Abascal, the post-Vatican II clash between traditionalists and progressives and the reaction of conservative sectors of Mexican society to the 1968 student movement failed to provide the ideological cohesion sought by traditionalists.² These *derechas* (right-wing forces) shared a post-Cristero identity of resistance in the face of revolutionary nationalism and a view of “progressivism” as another expression of the Judeo-communist threat to the Church. However, they had no uniform approach to these perceived challenges and engaged in bitter disputes that were ideologically and politically impactful beyond the spheres of lay and clerical Catholicism.³

Sáenz’s notion of *falsas derechas* was a symptom of the entropy within the Catholic Right. Their conflicts were made apparent in the writings of these activist-intellectuals, in the Catholic publications they wrote for, and in the wider national and local press. Their collective attack on “progressivism,” coupled with their internal disputes reflected unsolved contentions over the political role of Catholics and the historical memory of Catholic dissidence, and their manifold interpretations in light of the changes in global Catholicism, the unfolding of the Cold War, and the conflicts between Catholics and the postrevolutionary state.

Recent scholarship has stressed the centrality of the Cuban Revolution and the student movements of the 1960s in the emergence of the “New Left” in Mexico. Historians have associated these processes with the crisis and exhaustion of revolutionary nationalism, the country’s insertion into the political and cultural Global Sixties, and the projection of Cold War polarizations onto Mexican

2. I am using “traditionalist” and “progressive” as two camps, defined respectively by their opposition or support for the reforms of Vatican II, with the “progressive” camp encompassing also liberationist interpretations of Christianity.

3. Throughout the article, I use the term “post-Cristero” and “post-Cristero Right” to point out the continuing influence and presence of Cristero identity in the distrust of the postrevolutionary state and the communitarian defense of Catholicism as the popular foundation of Mexican national identity.

society.⁴ These were catalysts for new forms of activism and rebellion, linking the contested meanings of the Mexican Revolution with the rise of a new generation of activists, artists, and intellectuals who, as Jaime Pensado has noted, merged their dissenting views with their desire for aesthetic exploration and liberation.⁵ Yet, the right-wing equivalent of those collective experiences remains comparatively understudied, with many fewer inquiries about similar shifts among the Mexican *derechas* during this period.⁶

While Mexicanists are increasingly attentive to progressive Catholicism—including, but not limited to, liberation theology—the historiography of right-wing Catholicism has remained, for the most part, focused on the years preceding the Cold War. This literature revolves around Catholic resistance to early revolutionary transformations, including the Cristero War (1926–29), the opposition to the reformist presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), and the *modus vivendi* reached by Church and state under president Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46).⁷ Owing to Jean Meyer’s landmark study of the Cristeros, a renewed literature on Catholic mobilization during and after the Cristero War has revisited the strategies, motivations, trajectories, and aspirations of Catholics, both urban and rural.⁸ Robert Curley, for instance, highlights the modern character of religious practice, especially in the interweaving of religion and citizenship, and the plight of Catholics as they placed themselves front and center in broader processes of contestation of revolutionary nationalism and state-making. For Curley, the Cristero War left a strong legacy of challenges to secularism, even if “paradoxically, religious rebellion destroyed political Catholicism as a movement with national aspirations.”⁹ A noteworthy body of

4. Eric Zolov, *The Last Good Neighbor: Mexico in the Global Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Renata Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

5. Eric Zolov, “Expanding Our Conceptual Horizons: The Shift from an Old to a New Left in Latin America,” *A Contracorriente* 5:2 (Winter 2008): 47–73; Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*.

6. Xóchitl Campos López and Diego Martín Velázquez, coords., *La derecha mexicana en el siglo XX: agonía, transformación y supervivencia* (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla [hereafter BUAP], 2017); Carmen Collado, coord., *Las derechas en el México contemporáneo* (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2015); Tania Hernández, *Tras las huellas de la derecha: el Partido Acción Nacional, 1939–2000* (Mexico City: Itaca, 2009); Soledad Loaeza, *El Partido Acción Nacional: la larga marcha, 1939–1994* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000).

7. José Miguel Romero de Solís, *El aguijón del espíritu: historia contemporánea de la Iglesia en México (1892–1992)* (Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Doctrina Social Cristiana, 2006); Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México, 1929–1982* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993).

8. Jean Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State, 1926–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Also see Robert Weis, *For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927–29* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Fernando M. González, *Matar y morir por Cristo Rey: aspectos de la Cristiada* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 2001).

9. Robert Curley, *Citizens and Believers: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Jalisco, 1900–1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

scholarship has focused on the political ramifications of this post-Cristero aftermath, placing the National Synarchist Union (UNS, founded in 1937) and the National Action Party (PAN, founded in 1939) as the two most significant representatives of the political Right, and as visible, albeit constrained interlocutors to the postrevolutionary state.¹⁰

Yet, as Ben Fallaw has shown, other Catholic actors contributed palpably to shaping the policies and politics of the postrevolutionary state through civic action, without abandoning their fight against government anticlericalism.¹¹ Historians have also tackled Catholic Action initiatives going back to the revolutionary period, such as the Catholic Association of the Mexican Youth (ACJM, founded in 1913), stressing the tensions between lay and clerical Church. Lay groups gave continuity to the Church's concern with "the social question," promoting interactions between clergy and laity based on notions of Catholic discipline, militancy, and even heroism and martyrdom. This brought to the fore questions over the muted autonomy of lay organizations and their apprehensions about reconciling with an anticlerical state.¹²

Mostly downplayed in the English-language scholarship, the itineraries of the Catholic Right in the postwar era have been analyzed in greater detail by Mexico-based historians. Following the regional focus of scholarship on the Cristeros, these scholars have pointed to the durability of Catholic resistance and the preservation of spaces of Catholic socialization in places like Puebla and the Bajío region, particularly within Catholic Action organizations and the *sinarquista* movement. This literature has pushed the chronological boundaries of post-Cristero Catholic dissidence far beyond the 1940s, noting the

10. As most of the scholarship notes, *sinarquismo* was a heterogeneous movement that reflected the localized politics of the Cristero War and wherein former fighters embraced civic activism. On the UNS, see Héctor Hernández de León, *Historia política del sinarquismo, 1934–1944* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2004); Daniel Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity: Urban State Formation in 1940s León, Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Rubén Aguilar and Guillermo Zermeño, *Hacia una reinterpretación del sinarquismo actual* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1998); Pablo Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla de espíritu: el movimiento sinarquista en el Bajío, 1932–1952* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1992); and Hugh Campbell, *La derecha radical en México, 1929–1949* (Mexico City: SEP, 1976).

11. Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Fallaw convincingly argues that Catholics were successful and effective in resisting the policies of Lázaro Cárdenas, by favoring civic action rather than armed rebellion and by gaining spaces, especially regional ones, within the postrevolutionary political system.

12. The Mexican Social Secretariat (SSM), the Union of Mexican Catholics (UCM), Catholic Action of Mexican Youth (ACJM), and the Union of Mexican Catholic Ladies (UDCM) are examples of lay organizations linking Catholic mobilization during the Revolution and the Cristero War with the post-Cristero period. María Luisa Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008), 211–220; Stephen Andes, "A Catholic Alternative to Revolution: The Survival of Social Catholicism in Postrevolutionary Mexico," *The Americas* 68:4 (April 2012): 529–562. Also see David Espinosa, *Jesuit Student Groups, The Universidad Iberoamericana, and Political Resistance in Mexico, 1913–1979* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014); Patience Schell, "An Honorable Avocation for the Ladies: The Work of the Mexico City Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas, 1912–1926," *Journal of Women's History* 10:4 (1999): 78–103.

continuities with past experiences of Catholic mobilization and examining civic Catholicism, the role of Catholics on university campuses, and the mobilization of anticommunist sentiment into and past the 1960s.¹³

Actors operating on the “fringes” of the Catholic Right, such as Fr. Sáenz, occupy a much more modest place in this historiography, appearing often as reactive agents of “moral panic,” or as accomplices in state efforts to delegitimize and repress the Left.¹⁴ More recently, Mexican historians such as María Martha Pacheco, María del Carmen Ibarrola, Fernando M. González, and Austreberto Martínez, among many others, have located expressions such as Sáenz’s sedevacantism in a broader constellation of lay and clerical actors with a significant impact on Mexico’s Cold War experience. Martínez’s work, in particular, richly explores a wide range of right-wing doctrinal positions and political expressions, distinguishing, for instance, between conservative and traditionalist Catholicisms, their various methods for exerting influence on public opinion, and their tendencies toward internal conflict.¹⁵

In light of these contributions, what follows is an examination of the conflictive plurality of the Catholic *derechas*, tackling them as a heterogeneous field of ideas and strategies. Among these groups, notions of “tradition” and “orthodoxy” held conflictive meanings linked to the historical memory of Catholic dissidence and running discussions about the Church’s mission in the face of social, political, and cultural change. My aim is to partially reconstruct this field of contention by examining the debates surrounding Sáenz’s sedevacantism as a catalyst for division among traditionalists, and the impact his position had on the broader

13. A notable compilation can be found in María Martha Pacheco, *Religión y sociedad en México durante el siglo XX* (Mexico City: INEHRM, 2007). Also see Fernando M. González, *Secretos fracturados: estampas del catolicismo conspirativo en México* (Mexico City: Herder, 2019); Edgar González Ruiz, *MURO: memorias y testimonios* (Puebla: Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2004); Nicolás Dávila Peralta, *Las santas batallas: la derecha anticomunista en Puebla* (Puebla: BUAP, 2003); and Rubén Aguilar and Guillermo Zermeño, coords., *Religión, política y sociedad. El sinarquismo y la Iglesia en México (Nueve Ensayos)* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992).

14. In his well-known study of the Catholic Church in Mexico, Roberto Blancarte mentions Sáenz’s sedevacantism in passing and acknowledges the dearth of in-depth studies on Catholic integrism. Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia*, 283–284. On conservative reactions (including Catholic ones) to leftist politics and countercultural movements, see Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*; Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War*; and Zolov, *Refried Elvis*. A more systematic examination is Jaime Pensado, “To Assault with the Truth”: The Revitalization of Conservative Militancy in Mexico During the Global Sixties,” *The Americas*, 70:3 (January 2014): 489–521.

15. María M. Pacheco, “Tradicionalismo católico posconciliar. El caso Sáenz y Arriaga,” *Religión y sociedad en México durante el siglo XX* (Mexico City: INEHRM, 2007), 337–368; María del Carmen Ibarrola Martínez, “Rupturas en el integrismo católico mexicano posconciliar. Una mirada desde el caso de Antonio Rius Facius,” in *Intelectuales católicos conservadores y tradicionalistas en México y Latinoamérica (1910–2015)*, Laura Alarcón Menchaca, Austreberto Martínez Villegas, and Jesús Iván Mora Muro, coords. (Zapopan: El Colegio de Jalisco, 2019), 165–179; Austreberto Martínez Villegas, “Tradicionalismo y conservadurismo integrista en el catolicismo en México después del Concilio Vaticano II: continuidades y transformaciones en Guadalajara, Jalisco y Atlatlalhuacan, Morelos (1965–2012)” (PhD diss.: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Mora, 2016); Austreberto Martínez Villegas, “La conformación de corrientes identitarias en el tradicionalismo católico en México en los años posteriores al Concilio Vaticano II,” *Calceidoscopio* 32 (January–April 2015): 19–42; González, *Secretos fracturados*.

public sphere as concerns about social unrest grew. The analysis centers on Fr. Sáenz's sedevacantist quarrels with progressivism and the falsas derechas, while also tackling the positions held by former Cristero René Capistrán Garza and former sinarquista Salvador Abascal regarding the infighting among traditionalists. All three had an activist past and played a role as public intellectuals of the Catholic Right into the 1960s. They weaponized both anticommunism and anti-Semitism to castigate their perceived enemies, including those within the Right, while holding the Cristero conflict as a common point of reference—even though they differed, sometimes profoundly, on the meanings of that past and its actualization for their ongoing struggles.

First, I address the process that led to the excommunication of Sáenz and his denunciation of enemies within his own camp, as well as the extension of debates about the threats of progressivism into the sphere of public opinion. Then, I examine the endorsement of Sáenz's sedevacantism by former Cristero René Capistrán, whose views on the compatibility between Catholicism and the Mexican Revolution, coupled with his prominent militant past, placed him in an unusual middle ground among post-Cristero traditionalists. Last, I analyze the confrontation between Salvador Abascal and the sedevacantists over the question of Paul VI's legitimacy, which included the deployment of mutual anti-Semitic attacks intended to disparage opponents as accomplices to a global anti-Catholic conspiracy. These conflicts prompted Abascal and his collaborators to read the national and international Cold War in a Catholic cypher, and to attempt a revival of "true" militant traditionalism via the founding of a new civic movement.

A RUPTURE IN THE CATHOLIC RIGHT

In the turbulent context of the 1960s, Sáenz's confrontation with the Mexican hierarchy and his condemnation of the falsas derechas were symptomatic of a larger conflict within Catholic traditionalism. This conflict was informed by an accumulation of doctrinal positions regarding the social doctrine of the Church and the Vatican's condemnation of liberalism and communism, most notably, the encyclicals *Syllabus Errorum*, *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, and *Divini Redemptoris*. Also highly significant were the reactions to conciliar reformism and, later, the conservative uproar against the embrace of a "preferential option for the poor" by the 1968 conference of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in Medellín. Traditionalists defined themselves in opposition to Vatican II's endorsement of ecumenism (which included a dialogue with Judaism), its liturgical reforms (such as abandoning the Latin mass), and the use of mass media, among other changes. The council

also debated the long-standing doctrine of papal infallibility and consented to plurality among the global clergy—two aspects that, ironically, aligned with Sáenz's own position as a dissident to the new modernist consensus.¹⁶

Traditionalists feared that the attempts to modernize or “update” Catholicism threatened the continuity of the Church's sacred mission. Their responses to Vatican II were remarkably varied, even if they were, at least nominally, united by their outright rejection of the reforms. Acknowledging this plurality of responses, María M. Pacheco has referred to Sáenz as representative of the “fundamentalist” take on postconciliar traditionalism: one that, rather than incorporate change, clings to an immanent concept of “tradition” as a defense against the disorder of modernity and sees the incorporation of “the new” as the path for the destruction of the Church.¹⁷ On the other hand, Austreberto Martínez identifies Sáenz's sedevacantism as a specific subdivision within traditionalism, separate from and often at odds with others (such as Lefebvrism and what he calls “radical anti-progressive traditionalism”), given sedevacantism's direct attacks against the papal authority of John XXIII and Paul VI.¹⁸

Typological distinctions aside, Sáenz's life trajectory was marked by his integrism (the belief in the exclusive prevalence of Catholic principles in structuring society, in contraposition to secular modernity), his intransigence, and an early familiarity, through his Catholic Action work, with the idea of “resistance” as a trait of postrevolutionary Catholicism. Born in 1899 in Morelia, Michoacán, Sáenz studied theology in Spain (1916–24 and 1926–27), from where he followed the events of the Cristero War and became involved in disseminating information about the conflict.¹⁹ Sáenz returned to Mexico in the aftermath of the war and partook in various initiatives of Catholic activism, from the Catholic Association of Mexican Youth (ACJM) to the emergence of Mexican Catholic Action (ACM) in 1930. Among the main aims of the ACM were combatting the ills of modernity, the defense of Mexico as a Catholic nation, and the promotion of the key role of the laity in “restoring all things in Christ”.

In the 1930s, Sáenz joined a group of priests and lay activists who founded the National Union of Catholic Students (UNEC), a Catholic Action entity that served as a confederation of student organizations to promote the

16. Pacheco, “Tradicionalismo católico posconciliar,” 340–342.

17. Pacheco, “Tradicionalismo católico posconciliar,” 346–347.

18. Martínez Villegas, “La conformación de corrientes identitarias,” 27–36.

19. Antonio Rius Facius, *iExcomulgado! Trayectoria y pensamiento del Pbro. Dr. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga* (Mexico City: Costa-Amic, 1980), 36.

“Christianization” of public universities.²⁰ In that same period, Sáenz collaborated with the University Student Federation of Jalisco (FEJ), which led the local resistance against the federal government’s push for socialist education. In 1934, the FEJ helped found the Universidad de Occidente (later known as the Autonomous University of Guadalajara, or UAG) with the support of local civic and business groups, including former Cristero leaders such as Agustín Navarro Flores, who became the “rebel” university’s first rector. According to Sáenz’s biographer Antonio Rius Facius (himself a traditionalist of stature in Catholic circles), Sáenz became an advisor to FEJ leader Carlos Cuesta Gallardo.²¹ Cuesta’s shadow organization, the secret society known as Los Tecos, enabled the FEJ to function independently of the vertical structures of Catholic Action and maintain influence over student affairs at UAG.²² Indeed, after its founding in 1930, the ACM struggled to regulate the functioning of lay organizations, especially pre-existing ones such as the ACJM. Sáenz’s work with the ACM, however, did not push him away from the defiant Tecos. Hence, despite what Rius Facius calls “disagreements of form, but not of substance” over the autonomy of the UAG student council, Sáenz remained close to the mission of UAG in deeming the youth as the most important target of the mission of “re-Christianization” taken up by lay groups, whether subordinated to the ACM or not.²³

In the 1940s Sáenz continued his work with Catholic youth groups, first as head of the National Confederation for Marian Congregations, which he incorporated into the ACM, and later as a key figure, along with fellow Jesuits Jorge Vértiz and Manuel Figueroa, in the recruitment and indoctrination of Catholic students from

20. On the trajectory of UNEC, see Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política*. On the Jaliscan Cristeros and their role in creating the Autonomous University of Guadalajara, see John W. Sherman, *The Mexican Right: The End of Revolutionary Reform, 1929–1940* (Westport: Praeger, 1997).

21. Born in Mexico City in 1912, Rius Facius was a youth activist for the ACJM and later became a well-known historian of that organization, chronicling its origins in the Revolution and its role in the Cristero War in two famous books, *De don Porfirio a don Plutarco: historia de la ACJM, 1910–1925* (Mexico City: Jus, 1958); and *Méjico cristero: historia de la ACJM, 1925–1931* (Mexico City: Patria, 1960). He was also a columnist for several newspapers including *El Norte* and *El Sol de México*, where he penned editorials against the conciliar reforms. For a selected compilation of these writings, see Antonio Rius Facius, *Lanza en ristre: contra los ataques del progresismo marxista* (Mexico City: Jus, 1968). On Rius Facius as a traditionalist intellectual, see Ibarrola Martínez, “Rupturas en el integrismo católico mexicano posconciliar,” 165–179.

22. Rius Facius, *iExcomulgado!*, 50–53. Navarro Flores was a leading figure of the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty, the urban-based activist organization that steered the Catholic resistance and rebellion against Plutarco E. Calles’s anticlerical laws of 1926, largely seen as a triggering cause of the Cristero War.

23. Rius Facius, *iExcomulgado!*, 52–55, 59–60. Aspe Armella notes that the subordination of UNEC (the student federation) to the mandate of the ACM was partly impeded by the former’s confederated structure and its goal of “coordinating,” rather than directing or disciplining, as the ACM would have it, “the living forces of the student youth.” This difficulty, according to Stephen Andes, was rooted in a legacy of intransigence among Catholic students due to the combative role of ACJM cadres during the Cristero War, which contravened the “pacification” goals of the ACM regarding church-state relations. Aspe Armella, *La formación social*, 292–293; Stephen Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile: The Politics of Transnational Catholicism, 1920–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147–148.

secondary and higher education institutions in Puebla and Guadalajara.²⁴ At the request of Fr. Figueroa, in 1954 Sáenz became an advisor to the University Anticommunist Front (FUA), a newly minted student organization that fought against “communist infiltration” at the University of Puebla following the anti-socialist path established by FEJ and Los Tecos in Guadalajara from the 1930s.²⁵

By the early 1960s, in an environment of perceived communist agitation created by the 1958–59 railroad workers’ strikes and later by the impact of the Cuban Revolution in Mexico, the Church-led campaign “Cristianismo sí, Comunismo no” became a catalyst of mass mobilization of religious sentiment with an anticommunist and nationalist bent. Through effective propaganda and public rallies with thousands of attendees, the campaign galvanized Catholic students, grassroots organizations, and intellectuals in what became a watershed moment for Catholic activism on the eve of Vatican II.²⁶ Nonetheless, despite traditionalists’ desire to unite forces against a perceived communist onslaught, this was also a moment of rupture within Fr. Sáenz’s closest circles. Sáenz clashed with the leadership of FUA over matters of “method”—namely, FUA’s use of street violence—and broke with FUA leader Ramón Plata Moreno, founder of the long-standing far-right Catholic organization known as El Yunque, and of another nationwide anticommunist student group, the University Movement for a Renewed Orientation (MURO).²⁷

The rupture between Sáenz and Plata Moreno happened during the early sessions of the Second Vatican Council, just as Sáenz was becoming a leading voice of global sedevacantism. Between 1962 and 1963, Sáenz traveled to South America and the Vatican to meet fellow traditionalist clerics and lobby against conciliar reforms. In Rome, he disseminated the book *The Plot Against the*

24. Rius Facius, *iExcomulgado!*, 94–95.

25. On the Jalisco-based conflicts in which Sáenz participated, see Fernando M. González, “Un conflicto universitario entre católicos: la fundación del Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO),” *Véas. Revista del Colegio de San Luis* 20–21 (May–December 2005): 9–37. On the origins of FUA in the autonomy movement in Puebla, see Alfonso Yáñez Delgado, *La manipulación de la fe: fiás contra carolinos en la universidad poblana* (Puebla: Imagen Pública y Corporativa, 2000); and Juan Louvier Calderón, Manuel Díaz Cid, and José Antonio Arrubarrena, *Autonomía universitaria: luchas de 1956 a 1991. Génesis de la UPAEP* (Puebla: UPAEP, 1991).

26. María Martha Pacheco, “¡Cristianismo sí, Comunismo no! Anticomunismo eclesástico en México,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* 24 (July–December 2002): 143–170. On the broader context of national and international agitation in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution, see Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War*.

27. Originally based in Mexico City and Puebla, MURO was one of the “seed” groups for El Yunque. It featured a militant Catholicism, stoked by initiation rituals and a semi-secret militarized structure, a strong presence in university student activism, and a flair for street violence that gave the organization considerable exposure in the press. For a journalistic account of El Yunque, see Álvaro Delgado, *El Yunque: la ultraderecha en el poder* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 2003). On MURO and its links to El Yunque, see Mario Jiménez Santiago, “Anticomunismo católico. Origen y desarrollo del Movimiento Universitario de Renovadora Orientación (MURO), 1962–1975,” in *Las derechas en el México contemporáneo*, Carmen Collado, coord. (Mexico City: Instituto Mora, 2015), 187–254. On MURO, see Jaime Pensado, “To Assault with the Truth”; and González Ruiz, *MURO: memorias y testimonios*.

Church, a rabid anti-Semitic treatise allegedly written under a pseudonym by a member of Los Tecos. Reacting to the council's initiatives to tackle Catholic anti-Semitism and improve Catholic-Jewish relations, the book accused the council of being manipulated by Freemasonry and Judaism ("the secret driving force of communism") and of giving in to a "Jewish revolution" within the Church. Sáenz also penned a leaflet warning the bishops of Iberia and Latin America against an ecumenical rapprochement with "the Jewry."²⁸

In these travels, and at the behest of Plinio Corrêa, leader of the Brazilian ultramontane organization Tradição, Família e Propriedade, or TFP, Sáenz was accompanied by members of MURO, including Ramón Plata Moreno. A decade later, Sáenz accused Plata Moreno of sabotaging his mission by widely distributing the inflammatory materials that Sáenz had planned to share with a small circle of traditionalist clerics. For Sáenz, Plata Moreno's indiscretion was a "dark maneuver" to advance communist subversion and benefit the enemies of the Church, though he still acknowledged the shared mission of Los Tecos and MURO to fight the "worldwide Jewish secret society" behind communism.²⁹

Sáenz's writings against Vatican II also created tensions with Cardinal Darío Miranda, the archbishop of Mexico City. In 1966 Sáenz published *Con Cristo o contra Cristo*, which doubled down on his criticism of Catholic progressives for their complicity with communism, and at the same time stressed their links to a Jewish conspiracy to "demolish" the Church: "The attack comes from [the Jews]. There is no defense without an attack. Judaism's attack against the Church has been secular, permanent, sometimes underhanded, insidious, cautious, sometimes violent, incendiary, bloody, and destructive."³⁰ Sáenz claimed he had the authorization of the archbishop of Hermosillo, Juan Navarrete, to publish the book, but he nonetheless earned a verbal reprimand from Cardinal Miranda, which Sáenz snubbed by avoiding meeting with him in person to discuss the matter.³¹ Similarly, tensions between Sáenz and the young militants from MURO peaked when, on January 9, 1966, MURO leader Luis Felipe Coello made a threat on Sáenz's life at his own home in

28. Rius Facius, *iExcomulgado!*, 98–99. The book in question is Maurice Pinay, *Complotto contro la Chiesa* (Rome: n.p., 1962), which Sáenz attributed to a "syndicate" of traditionalist cardinals. According to reliable sources, "Maurice Pinay" was in fact an unnamed collaborator of Sáenz from Los Tecos. Handwritten notes by Andrée Marie González, 1974, Hoover Institution Library and Archives [hereafter HILA], Stefan T. Possony papers, box 55, folder "Tecos material." The leaflet distributed by Sáenz accused the council of attracting communist sympathies toward its progressivism and yielding to Masonic and Jewish pressures to adopt religious ecumenism.

29. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga to Dr. Ku Cheng-Kang, December 12, 1974, HILA, Kyril Drenikoff Papers, box 56, folder 1.

30. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *Con Cristo o contra Cristo* (Hermosillo: n.d., 1966), 5.

31. Rius Facius, *Excomulgado!*, 102–104.

Mexico City (ostensibly because of the priest's attacks on the papacy), an incident that was reported by the national press.³²

Despite these confrontations, Sáenz did not abandon the sedevacantist campaign nor his attacks against Catholic progressives and their alleged accomplices. Published in 1971, Sáenz's *The New Montinian Church* argued that the modernist consensus that emerged from Vatican II—the acceptance of religious freedom and plurality, and the “modernization” of liturgy, for instance—was, in reality, a mortal blow by Judeo-Masonic-Communist conspirators led by Giovanni Montini (Paul VI) to hand the Church over to its enemies. Notably, and despite Sáenz's Catholic Action background, *The New Montinian Church* did not significantly reference or engage with Catholic social doctrine as laid out in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891).³³ Instead, Sáenz focused on the anticommunist aspects of Pius XI's encyclicals—mainly, his condemnation of “atheistic communism” as intrinsically perverse in *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which revisited “the social question” posed in *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and reiterated the incompatibility of Catholicism with communism's class warfare and the destruction of private property.³⁴ Also, as he had done since the 1960s, Sáenz insisted on denouncing crimes of the Jews against the Church, including the betrayal and killing of Jesus, and invoked the specter of Judaism as the main force behind Vatican II. In turn, Sáenz accused Paul VI of being a “crypto-Jew” charged with destroying Catholicism and imposing a world government with “a single homocentric religion of universal brotherhood” inspired by the occult mysticism of the Talmud and the Kabbalah.³⁵

The New Montinian Church also offered critical commentary on the political impact of modernism and progressivism. It tackled, for instance, Paul VI's participation in the 1968 CELAM meeting in Medellín, where Latin American clerics embraced the “preferential option for the poor.” Sáenz used this as “evidence” to link the revolutionary agenda of the attendees (“those paid communist agents who cautiously militate within the Church”) with the belief that Paul VI was an illegitimate pope and an enemy acting from within.³⁶ Further antagonizing the hierarchy, he advanced the accusation that the

32. González Ruiz, *MURO*, 337–338.

33. The meager engagement with *Rerum Novarum* in Sáenz's and other traditionalists' writings could possibly be related to the steady decline of Catholic Action groups during the period in question, and the association of the “social question” with the progressive interpretations of the church's social doctrine that traditionalists were combatting. I thank the anonymous reviewer who pointed out this oddity.

34. Sáenz Arriaga, *The New Montinian Church*, 135–140.

35. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *The New Montinian Church* (La Habra, CA: Edgar Lucidi, 1985), 480, 510–511. For Sáenz's earlier anti-Semitic charges, see Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *El antisemitismo y el Concilio Ecueménico* (Buenos Aires: Nuevo Orden, 1964).

36. Sáenz Arriaga, *The New Montinian Church*, 86.

Judeo-Masonic-Communist plot set in motion by Vatican II was reminiscent of the Holy See's ambivalent responses toward past assaults against Catholicism, namely those experienced in Republican Spain (1931–39) and in Mexico during the Cristero War.³⁷

Sáenz's last book, titled *Sede Vacante* (1973), appeared at a particularly agitated national and regional juncture: the radicalization of urban and rural Leftists in Mexico; the fall of Salvador Allende in Chile; and the increasing visibility of liberation theologians throughout the continent. In *Sede Vacante*, Sáenz reiterated the sedevacantist theses, and attributed the reigning international disorder to Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), a "subversive document" that, he claimed, prefigured what transpired in Medellín: the endorsement of anticolonialism, religious pluralism and materialism, and the transformation of the Vatican into a center of communist activity.³⁸

For over a decade, Sáenz used these arguments to attack Catholic progressivism through newspaper editorials and TV appearances. His main target was Sergio Méndez Arceo, the so-called "Red Bishop" of Cuernavaca, who became an adherent of liberation theology and was a founder, along with Gregorio Lemercier and Iván Illich, of the Centro Intercultural de Documentación (CIDOC).³⁹ Sáenz also denounced the "restless, revolutionary spirit" of Fr. Enrique Maza, a progressive Jesuit and journalist, and later a founder of the renowned magazine *Proceso*. Sáenz's ire rose when Maza sided with Iván Illich, who publicly criticized the Church's dependence on foreign charity and called for the creation of an independent "Ibero-American church."⁴⁰ Sáenz took his rebuttal to the newspapers, deeming Illich's proposal and Maza's endorsement as the work of "Marxist dialectics." He also rebuked Maza for his lack of "Ignatian spirituality" in promoting the "imperialism of progressivism" and in embracing a materialistic outlook of the Church's spiritual mission.⁴¹

Sáenz was not alone in waging this public battle against the purported enemies of the Church. He had the support of Los Tecos, who still controlled the Autonomous University of Guadalajara. According to state intelligence reports, Los Tecos worked as an extreme-right secret society with a vertical structure dedicated to the recruitment of youth and "the placement of professionals as

37. Sáenz Arriaga, *The New Montinian Church*, 387.

38. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *Sede vacante: Paulo VI no es legítimo Papa* (Mexico City: Editores Asociados, 1973), 106, 309–333.

39. On CIDOC as a point of encounter for progressive thought, including liberation theology, see Todd Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

40. See Iván Illich, "The Seamy Side of Charity," *America: The Jesuit Review*, January 21, 1967, 88–91.

41. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, "No una iglesia ibero-americana, sino una iglesia católica y romana," *La Prensa*, January 3, 1967.

infiltrators in the press, the PRI, and *sinarquismo* as a means to exert control over government.⁴² Through *Réplica*, a magazine published in Guadalajara under the Tecos-controlled Mexican Anticomunist Federation (FEMACO), Sáenz and his *teco* allies denounced Bishop Méndez Arceo's CIDOC as a center of Marxist and Freudian indoctrination to bring about "violent change" within the Church.⁴³ They insisted that Mexican Catholics faced a radical choice between traditionalism and progressivism, even if, as Roderic Ai Camp and others have suggested, the significance of that divide in everyday forms of popular religiosity remained limited, as did the overall impact of liberation theology in Mexico (in comparison to the rest of Latin America) throughout the Cold War period.⁴⁴

EXCOMULGADO: THE DEBATE OVER SÁENZ'S EXCOMMUNICATION

On December 18, 1971, Cardinal Miranda issued a decree against Fr. Sáenz for the "insults and heretical judgments hurled at the Pontiff and the Fathers of the Vatican II Council" and "for inciting disobedience toward the Holy Father, and aversion and hatred toward his acts, decrees and decisions," among other charges. The document placed Sáenz in "suspension *a divinis*," that is, it forbade him to exercise his priestly functions and declared him to be "automatically outside of the Church."⁴⁵ A byzantine debate about the meaning of the decree ensued. The episcopate denied that Sáenz had been excommunicated (that is, expelled from the Church), and instead argued that he had "placed himself outside the Church through his attacks against the Supreme Pontiff and his rebel attitude."⁴⁶ As Fr. Antonio Brambila claimed in a column for *El Sol de México*, Sáenz had "excommunicated himself" by rejecting the "Montinian Church" (which, wrote Brambila, "casually happens

42. Memorandum, "Aspectos políticos, económicos y sociales del estado de Jalisco," July 13, 1970. Archivo General de la Nación, México (AGN). Tecos Asociación Fraternal de Jalisco (Versión Pública), f. 18, 100-12-18 L2. ; Memorandum, "Asunto: Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara – Tecos," August 10, 1970. AGN. Tecos Asociación Fraternal de Jalisco (Versión Pública), f. 21-25.

43. Diego Marcos, "Información sobre el progresismo," *Réplica* (Guadalajara) 14 (June 1969): 5–10; Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *Cuernavaca y el progresismo religioso en México* (Mexico City: n.p., 1967). On the link between Los Tecos and FEMACO, see Mónica Naymich López Macedonio, "Los Tecos en el México de la primera mitad de los años setenta y su proyección internacional anticomunista" (MA thesis, Instituto Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2007).

44. Roderic Ai Camp, *Crossing Swords: Politics and Religion in Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85–94. Some rural communities resisted conciliar "corrections" to popular religiosity, such as the devotion to local saints, leading them to reject the progressives' Christian Base Communities and side with traditionalism. See Jennifer Schepher Hughes, "Traditionalist Catholicism and Liturgical Renewal in the Diocese of Cuernavaca, Mexico," in *Catholicism in the Vatican II Era: Local Histories of a Global Event*, Kathleen S. Cummings, Timothy Matovina and Robert Orsi, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 64–85.

45. Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga, *Cisma o fe. ¿Por qué me excomulgaron?* (Mexico City: n.p., 1972), 263–265.

46. "El Cardenal Darío Miranda no excomulgó al Sacerdote Sáenz," *El Informador*, January 25, 1972.

to also be the church of Christ”). Hence, for both Brambila and the episcopate, the decree was not a punitive measure but a recognition of Sáenz’s willful act to abandon the Church.⁴⁷ The spokesman for the Metropolitan Curia, Fr. José de Martín Rivera, went so far as to state that by attacking Miranda and other Mexican prelates Sáenz had turned himself into “a banner for a subversive minority.”⁴⁸ Conversely, Sáenz and his supporters seized the opportunity to portray the decree as the suppression of a dissident traditionalist voice, with much of the debate in ecclesiastical circles and the press treating the decree as the excommunication of a rebel priest.

Sáenz’s allies took action. In immediate retaliation for the excommunication, an unidentified pro-Sáenz group (presumably members of Los Tecos) vandalized the home of Cardinal Miranda in Mexico City with graffiti reading “Miranda traitor,” “Sáenz sí, Miranda no,” and a swastika. According to press reports, similar incidents took place at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and the Pontificio Colegio Mexicano in Rome.⁴⁹ In 1972, Sáenz and a group of sympathetic clerics founded the magazine *Trento*, and later, the Unión Católica Trento, which, according to Austreberto Martínez, became the epicenter of dissident sedevacantist activity in the country, in contest with other traditionalists.⁵⁰ The excommunication thus revived a long-standing fault line between ecclesiastical authority and the lay Catholic base, and exacerbated tensions around questions of tradition and change.

As reflected in the press, the polemic around Sáenz’s sedevacantism shows the intensity and public salience of debates about the political role of Catholicism in Cold War Mexico. This occurred in the aftermath of the 1968 student movement and in the context of accusations about the subversive nature of progressive Catholicism, which together stoked conservative fears of communist agitation and revived government concerns about Catholicism as a latent source of political unrest. A press release of January 1969, signed by former Cristero and ACJM leader René Capistrán Garza and other anticommunist activists, is illustrative of these apprehensions. The release accused Bishop Méndez Arceo, Jesuit and Dominican priests at the Universidad Iberoamericana and the University Parish, respectively, and even the leadership of the PAN of condoning “youth terrorism” and “conspiring against Mexico, inciting violence, and applauding communism.”⁵¹ A battle in

47. Antonio Brambila, “Sobre una excomunión,” *El Sol de México*, January 22, 1972.

48. “Sáenz Arriaga se ha convertido en bandera de minorías subversivas,” *El Heraldo de México*, January 21, 1972.

49. “Miranda traidor”, pintan en la residencia del cardenal,” *Universal Gráfico*, January 10, 1972; “Opinan sobre la destrucción de un escudo del Cardenal Darío Miranda,” *El Informador*, December 30, 1971.

50. Martínez Villegas, “Tradicionalismo y conservadurismo,” 272–273, 283–301.

51. “No son intocables los católicos que apoyaron al comunismo en la fracasada rebelión estudiantil,” *La Prensa*, January 6, 1969.

the newspapers followed, with Méndez Arceo rebutting the accusations, just as Anacleto González-Flores Guerrero (son of a famed Cristero martyr, member of Los Tecos, and head of the Union of Mexican Anticommunist Catholics) took to the press to double down on the attacks, which he also aimed at lay activist José Álvarez Icaza, the director of the Catholic-progressive National Center for Social Communication (CENCOS).⁵²

In 1972, after Sáenz's excommunication, a group of anticommunist professionals, mostly lawyers, called the Frente Constitucionalista Mexicano also expressed concerns about progressivism's subversion, but from a different standpoint. Using the Cristero War as an example, they argued that the activities of progressive *catolicomunismo* were part of a long trajectory of victimization, treason, and subversion by the clergy, in their attempt to undermine the secular state. To them, Sáenz was simply a victim of the power wielded by subversive clerics, in contrast to honest and loyal Catholics like René Capistrán who advocated for an apolitical church.⁵³ These public interventions continued as newspaper editorials and columnists discussed the dangers of progressivism and its links to rural and urban guerrillas in the aftermath of 1968.⁵⁴

Traditionalists capitalized on this public attention to present Sáenz as a persecuted rebel. On August 1, 1971, just a few months before Sáenz's excommunication, the TV talk show *Anatomías* hosted a conversation between Fr. Porfirio Miranda, a progressive priest and author of the newly published book *Marx y la Biblia*, and a group of traditionalists, in which they were to debate Miranda's positions.⁵⁵ Among the latter were Sáenz and his collaborator Antonio Rius Facius, together with Prof. Celerino Salmerón, a conservative historian and former sinarquista, and Rafael Rodríguez, a prominent member of FEMACO and Los Tecos. During the show, and in reference to his sedevacantismo, Sáenz claimed: "I am not a rebel, or an obstinate person; I am a convinced Catholic!" Expectedly, he condemned Miranda's progressivism and closed his intervention by saluting those who "in Mexico as in other parts of the world are waging this painful battle . . . because we who trust the eternal truth of Christ have now become the marginalized ones, the 'enemies.'"⁵⁶

52. "Bishop Defends Himself Against Charge He Incited Violence," *Catholic News Service – Newsfeeds*, December 31, 1968; "Histórico 1968: dan marcha atrás al diálogo público," *Excelsior*, September 15, 2018.

53. "El clero provoca al estado para presentarse como víctima de persecución y justificar su traición a México," *El Universal*, February 18, 1972.

54. "Falso cristianismo crea agitación en la sociedad," *El Heraldo de México*, October 20, 1971; "Clérigos revolucionarios desvirtúan el mensaje de Cristo," *El Heraldo de México*, October 16, 1972.

55. The book in question is José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx y la Biblia: crítica a la filosofía de la opresión* (Mexico City: n.p., 1971).

56. Rius Facius, *Excomulgado!*, 124–125.

Sáenz attached these tropes of resistance and persecution to his cause, prompting other traditionalists to criticize ecclesiastical authorities over Sáenz's legitimate right to dissent and the tolerance shown toward progressives. For instance, in a statement published in national dailies, the Pro-Orthodoxy Committee of the Diocese of Colima called out the lack of reprimand against progressives for their "insidious practice of Marxism and guerrilla violence." They rebuked Cardinal Miranda for issuing an *excomunión papólatra* (an excommunication blindly aligned with the pope).⁵⁷ An article by layman Arturo Pedroza, published in the popular *Impacto* magazine and the daily *El Universal*, inquired: "Can one criticize Paul VI without running the risk of excommunication? Are progressives the only ones allowed to express freely within the Church [and] declare themselves Marxists, endorse violence, and glorify the guerrillas without reprimand?" Pedroza also criticized Paul VI's rapprochement with the communist world, arguing that the pope lacked "the right to negotiate the freedom of the peoples oppressed by the communists" and asserting the obligation of all Catholics "to fight for [their] liberation from merciless totalitarian dictatorships." Framing the conflict in such geopolitical terms, Pedroza warned that the excommunication was a clear sign that both the pope and Cardinal Miranda had taken "a very dangerous step . . . dealing the first blow to break the unity of Mexican Catholics."⁵⁸

In a press release after his excommunication, Sáenz himself doubled down on the meaning of this broken unity, and instead of regretting it, he embraced the resulting polarization; that is, the existence of "two opposed, antagonistic camps, called traditionalism and progressivism." He characterized the former as "the monolithic position of faith" dating back to "the sources of Truth Revealed, through all the Popes and all the Councils, the *depositum fidei* . . . that the Church holds in custody, immutable, until the end of times." For him, progressivism was "the new economy of the Gospel, the religion of dialogue, aggiornamento and ecumenism," and between the two camps he saw no middle ground: "We are with either truth or deceit; with Christ or against him."⁵⁹

Sáenz's sedevacantism cemented this stark division, but also shook the conservative camp, creating a dispute for the meaning of "true" traditionalism. The aftermath of the excommunication prompted Sáenz to mobilize his notion of *falsas derechas*, especially, and as I discuss below, against radical

57. "Católicos mexicanos patriotas, sí; excomuniones papólatras, no," *El Heraldo de México*, January 6, 1972.

58. Arturo Pedroza, "División del catolicismo en la República. La excomunión del Padre Sáenz Arriaga," *El Universal*, December 30, 1971.

59. "Declaraciones del Presbítero Doctor Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga respecto a su supuesta excomunión," *El Universal*, December 28, 1971; "Condena un sacerdote la postura socio-política del llamado clero progresista," *El Día*, December 22, 1971.

anti-progressive traditionalists Ramón Plata Moreno and Salvador Abascal, who he deemed to be *papólatras*—blind followers of the pope.

LAS FALSAS DERECHAS

For Sáenz, the presence of the falsas derechas was not a marginal issue. Besides constituting an element of the Judeo-Masonic-communist conspiracy, they were dangerous because they exposed the fissures and entropy of the traditionalist camp that he sought to unify and uphold as the guardian of truth and faith. Because they disguised themselves under the mantle of Catholicism, Sáenz regarded the falsas derechas as “perhaps more dangerous than the open, unmasked enemy. . . [They are] evidently, a Jewish tactic.”⁶⁰ As discussed above in relation to Sáenz’s writings, the construction of the Jew as a deceiving, conspiratorial, and treacherous anti-Catholic foe closely associated with Masonic or communist schemers was central to the sedevacantist reading of the postconciliar moment. It was a metaphor for enemies in disguise, a weapon to be wielded also against antagonists within traditionalism, and a means to portray the dangers of progressivism in a transhistorical and global frame.

The falsas derechas were not a new problem. Going back to the time of religious persecution, Sáenz argued, they had been making secret pacts with the enemy—an allusion to the *arreglos* (the truce between the church and the government) that ended the Cristero War. Those “bitter days,” recalled Sáenz, were ridden with “divisions and resentments,” as “the true fighters—the heroic Cristeros, the members of the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty, the glorious ACJM. . .—were displaced, betrayed, and forgotten by the opportunists.”⁶¹ For Sáenz, the two most notable products of the post-Cristero Right, the National Action Party and the sinarquistas, were also falsas derechas, insofar as he saw them as bound to the legacy of the revolution and inadvertently contributing to the expansion of socialism, with the *panistas* “playing along with democracy” and the sinarquistas performing a useless martyrdom, “resignedly suffering beatings, imprisonment, and death itself.”⁶²

Hinging his accusation on anticommunist and anti-Semitic tropes, Sáenz labeled his former allies from MURO equally as a falsa derecha. As noted above, the rupture with former pupil and MURO leader Ramón Plata Moreno began during the sedevacantist scandal at the Vatican II sessions, and grew worse in

60. Sáenz Arriaga, *Las falsas derechas*, 4.

61. Sáenz Arriaga, *Las falsas derechas*, 5–6.

62. Sáenz Arriaga, *Las falsas derechas*, 4–5.

the early 1970s when Cardinal Miranda banned MURO's activities in Catholic schools due to its "unorthodox mystique," its members' work as agents of "materialist and Marxist agitation," and their trajectory of clandestine recruitment and public violence.⁶³ Although a detractor of Miranda, Sáenz agreed with this negative view, and accused MURO of "betraying their origins," turning to "organized slander and deceit," and pushing their "noble and sincere followers" to become pawns of communism by the action of Plata Moreno's "Hebrew hand."⁶⁴

An anti-MURO pamphlet produced years later, ostensibly by one of Los Tecos' front groups, reflected this view. The pamphlet claimed that MURO served as "agents provocateurs," "puppets of Christian Democracy," and pawns of the Brazilian traditionalist organization Tradição, Família, Propriedade (TFP). The document also stressed the "lack of transcendence" of MURO's public actions (graffiti, picket lines, street fights), and the "dark interests" that supported them, which allegedly included businessmen from Monterrey, the Jesuits, the Lasallists, the National Action Party, and the sinarquistas—all falsas derechas as denounced by Sáenz.⁶⁵ MURO was thus a concrete expression of the fake *papólatra* traditionalism whose advocates Sáenz and his intransigent allies saw as collaborators of the Judeo-Communist conspiracy.

These accusations held a broader significance: the bitter struggle for the control of Mexican representation in the World Anticommunist League (WACL), a global conglomerate of governmental and private organizations that, since its founding in 1967, had rejected Cold War détente and sought a violent escalation of the global anticommunist struggle.⁶⁶ The conflict between the sedevacantist Tecos and MURO reached the highest levels of the Taiwan-based WACL leadership, as attested by correspondence remitted by both sides. According to Los Tecos (who controlled the Mexican Anticommunist Federation, or FEMACO, inarguably the main Mexican organization in the WACL), MURO's subordinate alliance to the Brazilian TFP was "antinationalist." FEMACO considered MURO and TFP as accomplices to Zionism and functional allies of international communism, due to their

63. Juventudes Nacionalistas de México, *Deslices de la TFP y contubernio FUA-MURO-GULA* (Mexico City: n.p., 1975), 24–26.

64. Sáenz Arriaga, *Las falsas derechas*, 6; Rius Facius, *Excomulgado!*, 95–96.

65. Juventudes Nacionalistas de México, *Deslices*, 1–5.

66. On the role of Mexican anticommunists in the WACL, see Mónica Naymich López Macedonio, "Historia de una colaboración anticomunista transnacional: los Tecos de la Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara y el gobierno de Chiang Kai-Shek a principios de los años setenta," *Contemporánea* 1:1 (2010): 133–158. Also see Pierre Abramovici, "The World Anticommunist League: Origins, Structures, and Activities," in *Transnational Anti-Communism and The Cold War: Agents, Activities, Networks*, Luc Van Dongen, Stéphanie Roulin, and Gilles Scott-Smith, eds. (London: Routledge, 2014), 113–129; and Scott Anderson and John L. Anderson, *Inside the League: The Shocking Exposé of How Terrorists, Nazis, and Latin American Death Squads Have Infiltrated the World Anti-Communist League* (New York: Dodd, Meade, 1986).

rejection of sedevacantism and their attempts to undermine FEMACO's own reputation.⁶⁷ Conversely, TFP accused FEMACO of sidelining them from the 1974 WACL Conference in Washington, DC, and of harboring “a Nazi movement with the characteristics of a secret society, which usually lies, smears, and provokes dissension everywhere.”⁶⁸ The clash over sedevacantism became intimately linked to the geopolitical aspirations of these belligerent groups and their presence in these larger circuits of anticommunist activism.

In this context, Sáenz's notion of *falsas derechas* played a crucial ideological function: it allowed the sedevacantists to portray themselves as the keepers of Catholic and anticommunist orthodoxy, and enabled them to call out certain forces, both transhistorical (such as Judaism) and concrete and contextual (such as MURO), that allegedly contributed, consciously or unconsciously, to the actions of anti-Christianity. Sedevacantists overlooked what they shared with their fellow traditionalists—the anticommunist struggle, and the rejection of “modernism” and the conciliar church, for instance—and actively distrusted and attacked them as yet another arm of an anti-Catholic conspiracy, with virulent anti-Semitism as a potent weapon to deride their enemies, at home and abroad.

VOICES OF THE POST-CRISTERO RIGHT: REDEEMING THE REVOLUTION

These conflicts brought to the fore other Catholic voices, some of which took seemingly unorthodox paths to defend their views of the Catholic nation and of Catholics' relation with the postrevolutionary state. One of these voices was René Capistrán Garza (1898–1974), a founding member of the ACJM and a key figure of Catholic resistance during the Cristero War. After returning from exile in the United States in 1937, Capistrán worked for *La Prensa Gráfica*, became editor of the daily *Novedades*, and later founded his own newspaper, *Atisbos*, in which he gathered a notable group of collaborators, such as José Vasconcelos, the tireless anticommunist activist Jorge Prieto Laurens, and other right-wing nationalists, under the slogan “*Primero México, después México, siempre México*” (Mexico first, then Mexico, always Mexico).

While linked to it by a shared Cristero genealogy, Capistrán did not join the emerging sinarquista movement, and instead developed a critical position

67. Documento 3, Una larga cadena de mentiras contra FEMACO caracterizan la más incomprensible e intensa actividad ‘anticomunista’ de la relevante obra de la TFP de Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira,” January 13, 1975, HILA, Kyril Drenikoff Papers, box 58, folder 5.

68. José Lucio de Araujo Corrêa to Gral. Thomas Lane, May 24, 1974, HILA, Kyril Drenikoff Papers, box 57, folder 7.

toward its political and social project. “Those who still breathe the air of 1926 . . . are nothing but anarchists in religious attire,” Capistrán wrote in 1951. “They want to destroy everything, raze everything, until there is nothing left. They want to build, for themselves and through their own means, their own mystical Catholic City.”⁶⁹ Like Sáenz, Capistrán also criticized the sinarquista obsession with heroism and martyrdom, and their “silent nostalgia” for the regime of Plutarco E. Calles, which he saw as a longing for conspiracy and rebellion, and thus as a functional equivalent of Leftist subversion.⁷⁰

Capistrán could qualify as one of Sáenz’s falsas derechas, as he had “converted” to embrace the post 1940 *modus vivendi* between Church and state, and abandoned the hard intransigence of his earlier years in the ACJM. In fact, in his newspaper *Atisbos*, he promoted an anticommunism that aligned with the doctrine of *mexicanidad* of the Miguel Alemán administration (1946–52), while still questioning secularism, especially in public education, and appealing to national unity and Catholic civic engagement.⁷¹ In Capistrán’s view, Catholic social justice was compatible with, and in fact the source of, the socioeconomic goals and anticommunist orientation of the PRI regime. This realization was common among Catholics who rebuked the radical legacies of the revolution but, by virtue of their resistance, accommodated to and participated in the making of the postrevolutionary order.⁷²

Without abandoning a position of dissidence, Capistrán made amends with the revolutionary past in terms that he deemed consistent with his Catholic beliefs. For him, Catholicism was both “the religion of resignation and conformity with divine will,” and “a doctrine of virile and heroic resistance, even rebellion, against human will.”⁷³ This duality of obedience and resistance informed his view of the revolution, which he saw as a necessary stage of violence and destruction, a revolt of popular Catholicism that “cut down the tree” of a liberal dictatorship (the Porfiriato) and prevented the coming of communism. The revolution was thus the “first prophetic precedent against communism,” and a moment of redemption with “the highest Christian purpose.”⁷⁴ Catholicism and the revolution were “two historical realities inexorably

69. René Capistrán Garza, “Destruirlo todo para crearlo todo,” *Atisbos*, March 12, 1951, 7.

70. René Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario de ideas: la Iglesia católica y la Revolución Mexicana* (Mexico City: Atisbos, 1964), 120.

71. René Capistrán Garza, “La tormenta pasará,” *Atisbos*, December 12, 1950, 1.

72. Capistrán applauded the Revolution’s appropriation of the banners of Catholic social doctrine with respect to labor, anticommunism, and patriotism, which, he wrote, “were taken directly from Christ,” and not, as the sinarquistas argued, “robbed” from Catholics. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 130. On the broader pattern of Catholic resistance to, and accommodation with, the postrevolutionary state after the Cristero War, see Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation*, 2–9.

73. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 41.

74. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 32–33, 52, 62.

embedded in the soul of our people. . . . They are co-constitutive of national life.”⁷⁵ Hence, the revolution was of divine design, and Catholics should “embrace it, forgive it, and be forgiven by her.”⁷⁶ In turn, the Cristero War furthered the Revolution’s “divine content.”⁷⁷ The war was “a thesis, not just an event”; that is, it was an ideal and a lens through which Capistrán and other post-Cristero political Catholics understood their role in the global fight against communism, now in a Cold War context: “It is impossible to plan any struggle without the magnificent precedent of that crusade.”⁷⁸ Mexico was, in his view, a nation founded in and sustained by the struggles of the Catholic people against liberalism, atheism, and international communism.

Like other traditionalists, Capistrán rejected the conciliar reforms, progressivism, and any dialogue with the Left, which he equated to “drinking poison to show one is in perfect health.”⁷⁹ He also aligned with other conservatives in denouncing the student movement of 1968 as “pure demagoguery” and “not a conflict, but pure subversion,” and in supporting the government’s repression as a necessary measure against communism.⁸⁰ Standing firmly in the traditionalist camp, in 1971 Capistrán joined Sáenz’s *sedevacantist* crusade, defending the priest in a number of newspaper columns and writing the prologue for his book *Sede Vacante*. There, Capistrán noted the lack of legal-canonical and moral grounds for Sáenz’s excommunication and, like other commentators, derided the double standard of the high clergy in reprimanding the controversial cleric while tolerating the “blasphemy” and “heresy” of *catolicomunismo*.⁸¹ Moreover, according to Capistrán, Cardinal Miranda’s alleged lenience toward the Left made him a heretic without the authority to excommunicate.

Like Sáenz, Capistrán also dismissed the idea that traditionalism and progressivism were two extremes on equal standing. For him, progressivism was the destroyer of civilization, family, and morality, and the cause of public violence (“the one spawning *los Tlatelolcos* and *los diez de juniros*”).⁸² Traditionalism was simply the “redemptive reaction” against these ills: “the adherence to incontrovertible and transcendental truths” without which men

75. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 41.

76. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 72.

77. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 51.

78. Jesús Guisa y Azevedo, *Los católicos y la política: el caso de René Capistrán* (Mexico City: Editorial Polis, 1950), 69.

79. Capistrán Garza, *Prontuario*, 53.

80. René Capistrán Garza, “Solidaridad con el Presidente,” *El Sol de Puebla*, August 24, 1968.

81. Sáenz Arriaga, *Sede Vacante*, vii-xvi.

82. “Tlatelolcos” is a reference to the violent repression of a student rally in Tlatelolco square on October 2, 1968. “Diez de juniros” refers to the events of June 10, 1971, when a protest by students at the National Teachers’ School in Mexico City was met with state-sponsored paramilitary violence.

would turn into beasts. In short, traditionalism was “the only acceptable extremism: the extremism of truth, order, and justice.”⁸³

VOICES OF THE POST-CRISTERO RIGHT: COMPETING TRADITIONALISMS

Capistrán’s anti-progressivism and his negotiation of Catholic national identity through a sacralized view of the Revolution had implications for how other fellow activist-intellectuals understood a divided Catholic Right. Among them was former sinarquista leader Salvador Abascal, whose trajectory of unwavering rejection of the postrevolutionary state had made him a protagonist of the post-Cristero Right.

Born in 1910 in Morelia, Michoacán, Abascal had condemned the Revolution from the 1930s onward as a godless movement directed from Washington that lacked real representation of the Mexican people.⁸⁴ Although his term as head of sinarquismo was brief (1940–41), Abascal later credited himself with giving the organization a militant anti-revolutionary identity through paramilitary training, resulting in “a stronger mystical force [and] a greater trust between the soldiers and their leaders.”⁸⁵ Abascal also led the utopian sinarquista experiment that was the María Auxiliadora rural colony in Baja California, which he abandoned in 1944 after breaking with the movement’s leadership for their attempted reconciliation with the state and for twisting the “anti-revolutionary struggle” of the movement.⁸⁶ After Vatican II, Abascal expectedly sided with the traditionalists, chastising Méndez Arceo’s and Iván Illich’s “Marxist indoctrination and heresy,” and the alleged infiltration of progressivism into Catholic Action organizations.⁸⁷

With over two decades of experience in publishing (he worked for the conservative Editorial Jus and later founded Editorial Tradición), in 1967 Abascal began editing the magazine *La Hoja de Combate*, which became a platform to attack progressivism and settle scores in the traditionalist camp. From *La Hoja*, Abascal reiterated his adherence to papal authority and rebuked

83. René Capistrán Garza, “Defensas fraudulentas de la excomunión a Sáenz Arriaga,” *El Universal*, January 31, 1972.

84. James Wilkie and Edna Monzón Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana. 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva, Vol. 3: Los ideólogos* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2002), 15. On Abascal’s anti-revolutionary positions, see Salvador Abascal, *La revolución antimexicana* (Mexico City: Tradición, 1978).

85. Wilkie and Monzón Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana*, 41–46.

86. Wilkie and Monzón Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana*, 87–88. On Abascal’s experience at the colony, see Salvador Abascal, *Mis recuerdos: sinarquismo y la colonia María Auxiliadora, 1935–1944* (Mexico City: Tradición, 1980).

87. Wilkie and Monzón Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana*, 82–84.

the sedevacantists as *cismáticos* (fomenters of schism), given Sáenz's "unhinged" accusations against Paul VI. Abascal defended himself from the personal attacks hurled by Sáenz, who accused him of being a *falsa derecha*, a crypto-Jew, a "false traditionalist" and a collaborator with the "disguised enemies of the Church."⁸⁸ Abascal also criticized Capistrán's seemingly contradictory positions—his professed Catholicism, his pro-PRI stance, and his defense of a "Jewish, Masonic and anti-Mexican" revolution.⁸⁹ "We have forgotten about *la Bola*, the violent Revolution," wrote Abascal; "it is good to remember it, because to lose memory is to lose judgment. The wounds of the revolution have not healed. Its mutilations are perpetual, and its destruction was never compensated."⁹⁰

Clashing over the historical memory of Catholic dissidence, the conflict between these traditionalists peaked in 1973, when Abascal became the target of a smear campaign and his home was attacked with stones and graffiti that read "Jews, mercenaries, *papólatras*." His attackers (presumably members of Los Tecos) also distributed a pamphlet signed by Anacleto González-Flores Guerrero, who, as heir to the Cristero intransigence of his father, was also one of Sáenz's most fervent defenders. The pamphlet accused TFP and MURO, as well as Abascal and his collaborator Celerino Salmerón, of being Jews, and chastised Abascal for not siding with "the Truth Revealed" and for "rabidly defending the Jew occupying the papacy."⁹¹ In a rebuttal published by *La Hoja*, Salmerón reversed the anti-Semitic charge, pointing out that "the anti-pope Joaquín I" (Fr. Sáenz) and "Anacleto II" were "perfect Jews," given their tendency for intrigue and slander.⁹² Before the incident, Abascal and González-Flores had built an amicable relationship: Abascal published some of the writings of Anacleto's father, while González-Flores helped distribute *La Hoja*. According to Abascal, they shared the view of "international Judaism" as the "Synagogue of Satan," but conflict arose when, in light of sedevacantism, Abascal sided with the pope.⁹³ Anti-progressivism (and, in this case, a shared open and virulent anti-Semitism) proved insufficient to bracket their ideological discrepancies, their conflicting readings of the postconciliar juncture, and the sharp divide over the legitimacy of the sitting pope.

Like Sáenz and Capistrán, the group behind *La Hoja* (which included two of Abascal's sons, José María and Juan Bosco) invested much energy railing against Marxism, Christian Democracy, and progressivism. Akin to Los Tecos'

88. Salvador Abascal, "Siempre con el Papa," *La Hoja de Combate* [hereafter *LHC*] (September 1972): 1–2; Salvador Abascal, "Sáenz Arriaga, fuera de quicio," *LHC* 67 (April 1973): 1–6; Sáenz Arriaga, *Sede Vacante*, 328.

89. Salvador Abascal, *Contra herejes y cismáticos* (Mexico City: Editorial Tradición, 1973), 194–206.

90. "Qué es la Revolución," *LHC* 15 (December 1968): 8.

91. Salvador Abascal, "Atenta invitación a mis enemigos," *LHC* 71 (August 12, 1973): 1–2.

92. Celerino Salmerón, "Anacleto II, reputado maestro de la intriga y la calumnia," *LHC* 73 (October 1973).

93. Wilkie and Monzón Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana*, 121.

magazine *Réplica*, *La Hoja* published abundantly on the moral decay of the nation, represented by counterculture, “sexual progressivism,” the disintegration of traditional gender roles, and the proliferation of “terrorist” guerrillas.⁹⁴ *La Hoja* collaborators also took advantage of the public exposure given to the traditionalist-progressive divide, and participated, for instance, in the TV show *Anatomías* in which, exactly a week after Fr. Sáenz’s appearance, José María and Juan Bosco Abascal, together with Salmerón, debated progressive priests Porfirio Miranda and Miguel Concha Malo.⁹⁵

Besides concerns for public morality, another point of ideological affinity between Abascal’s group and the sedevacantists was their vision of history and its projection onto the present. Together with best-selling philo-Nazi journalist Salvador Borrego, Salmerón (who was a history teacher, former sinarquista, and Abascal’s closest collaborator) embraced a revisionist take on Mexico’s past, decrying secularism as the legacy of the anti-Mexican forces of Judaism, liberalism, and Freemasonry.⁹⁶ Like Capistrán’s diagnosis regarding 1968, Salmerón saw the influence of these forces in the educational system as the cause for the “failed subversion” of the student movement. He equated student protests to a cancer or virus spreading through the social body, a trope also used recurrently by Borrego in his column in *La Hoja*.⁹⁷ These anxieties about leftist infiltration facilitated by the loss of morality remained a significant point of convergence between these two competing groups of traditionalists. In fact, as Austreberto Martínez has analyzed, prior to the rupture, sedevacantists Antonio Rius Facius (Sáenz’s biographer) and Gloria Riestra (a Catholic poet and a pupil of Sáenz) often collaborated with *La Hoja de Combate*, turning it into a space of joint traditionalist denunciation against progressivism.⁹⁸

Capistrán’s views on the revolution and Sáenz’s defiance of papal authority allowed Abascal’s group to situate themselves as bearers of traditionalist anti-revolutionary orthodoxy. A significant move in that direction took place in 1971, when Abascal and Salmerón participated in the founding of the

94. Elba González, “La moda, arma del comunismo,” *LHC* 71 (August 1973): 12–13; “Edicto del cardenal de Guadalajara sobre la desnudez de la mujer moderna,” *LHC* 7 (April 1968): 7.

95. A transcription of one of these debates, which revolved around the purported compatibility between Marxism and Christianity, can be found in “¿Fue Cristo un guerrillero o un revolucionario?” *LHC* 47 (August 1971): 1–13.

96. Both authors wrote extensively about Mexican history, with Borrego stressing the role of liberalism, Marxism, and Judaism as obstacles to the unfolding of the authentic Mexican nation. Salmerón defended the colonial past as the core of national identity and deemed conservative icons such as Agustín de Iturbide to be the true makers of the nation. See Celerino Salmerón, *En defensa de Iturbide: tres artículos periodísticos y un discurso en el Metropolitan* (Mexico City: Tradición, 1974); and Salvador Borrego, *América Peligra* (Mexico City: Aldo, 1966).

97. Celerino Salmerón, “El porvenir de Méjico,” *LHC* 20 (May 1969): 1–2.

98. Antonio Rius Facius, “Infiltración marxista en el clero de Hispanoamérica,” *LHC* 8 (May 1968): 1–4. Gloria Riestra, “Tormenta sobre la iglesia,” *LHC* 43 (March 1971): 16–20. On the earlier convergence of competing traditionalisms in *La Hoja de Combate*, see Martínez Villegas, “Tradicionalismo y conservadurismo,” 260–261.

Traditionalist Civic Movement (MCT). The MCT sought to reclaim the contested field of the Catholic *derechas* to combat what they saw as the growing cultural hegemony of progressivism and the Left, and to promote Catholic morality, patriotism, and obedience to the papacy.⁹⁹ With chapters across central and northern Mexico, the MCT claimed to represent a “strong current of public opinion” that rejected both progressivism and the “false traditionalism” of those who held “a satanic hatred toward the Pope.”¹⁰⁰

One of the pillars of the MCT was the magazine *Integridad*, founded in 1968 in the northern city of Monterrey. *Integridad* became a point of tense coexistence between traditionalists, showcasing anti-progressive pieces from MURO members, sedevacantists such as Sáenz and Riestra, and an array of traditionalists from Spain and Latin America (including Los Tecos’ nemesis, Plinio Corrêa of the TFP).¹⁰¹ Prior to the rupture over sedevacantism, *Integridad* represented the possibility of a united traditionalism, bound by the militant rejection of progressivism and the intransigent legacy of the Cristero War, which also held a transnational resonance. “Tolerance is claudication,” wrote Fr. Jesús Urteaga, an Opus Dei priest and TV celebrity from Spain; “tolerance toward blunder is the fornication of truth! . . . We admire the redemptive blood of our martyrs . . . but oh Lord, martyrdom is too great a reward for us . . . We, the Christians of today do not have the vocation of martyrs, but that of warriors . . . Christ lives, Christ rules, Christ prevails . . . ¡Viva Cristo Rey!”¹⁰²

As exemplified by *Integridad*’s broad traditionalist scope and international reach, the participation of Abascal and Salmerón in the MCT did not limit their outlook to the shifting terrain of Mexico’s Catholic Right. Both addressed the broader Cold War context, and as Louise Walker has noted for Mexican middle-class conservatives, they paid special attention to the rise of Salvador Allende in Chile and the lessons it provided for Mexican Catholics.¹⁰³ In 1970, for instance, Abascal wrote about a “double victory for Marxism”: “the deification” and “Masonic canonization” of former president Lázaro Cárdenas (who had passed away in October); and “the treason of the Christian Democrats against the Chilean people” (that is, the election of Allende).¹⁰⁴ As events unfolded in

99. “Proclama del Movimiento Cívico Tradicionalista,” *LHC* 35 (August 1970): 24.

100. “Movimiento Cívico Tradicionalista de México. Boletín informativo,” *LHC* 42 (March 1971): 4; Celerino Salmerón, “Avanza el Movimiento Cívico Tradicionalista,” *LHC* 5 (August 1972): 11–12.

101. Eventually this coexistence became untenable, given the embrace of another traditionalist schismatic current (Lefevbrism) by the leadership of *Integridad*, and a deep conflict with the Vatican in the 1980s. Martínez Villegas, “Tradicionalismo y conservadurismo,” 256–257, 288–289.

102. Jesús Urteaga, “Intransigencia,” *Integridad* 1 (November 1968): 3.

103. See Louise Walker, *Waking from the dream: Mexico’s Middle Classes after 1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), chapt. 2.

104. Salvador Abascal, “Dos grandes triunfos del marxismo,” *LHC* 38 (November 1970): 20.

Chile, Salmerón lamented the rising cost of living for Chileans, the exacerbation of class struggle, and the complicity of Christian Democracy and the progressive clergy with the tyranny of “a Marxist Jew.” Salmerón found parallels in Mexico: notwithstanding president Luis Echeverría’s own anticommunist views and repressive policies, he blamed the rising cost of living and the growing distrust toward the PRI on the president’s supposed “socialist orientation” and pro-Allende stance.¹⁰⁵

In the wake of the Chilean coup, Abascal and Salmerón extolled the patriotism of the Chilean military, but saw little potential for a similar anticommunist putsch in Mexico, where, they claimed, the success of the atheist state had undermined the “moral reserves” of Catholics and their willingness to engage in an armed rebellion similar to that of 1926.¹⁰⁶ Given these circumstances, wrote Abascal, only the punishment and martyrdom of living under a Marxist tyranny could shift the scale for Mexican Catholics. Their understanding of Mexican reality in light of the Chilean juncture gave them a blueprint for the battles that lay ahead.

Illustrative of this moment of right-wing radicalization, in 1974 the MCT gave birth to the Falanges Tradicionalistas Mejicanas, an organization that claimed to carry the torch of Catholic Action to infuse it with the sense of urgency created by progressivism, leftist agitation, sedevacantism, and the events in Chile. With the Virgin of Guadalupe, Agustín de Iturbide, and the Archangel Michael as their main symbols, these self-designated traditionalist and anti-revolutionary Falanges aimed to combat “international Masonic Jewry” at the grassroots and prepare for “the imminent coming of a Marxist tyranny” by instilling truth, faith, and tradition among an informed, united, and active Catholic public.¹⁰⁷ Operating under the shadow of the MCT, the Falanges were not a numerous group, but remained active as a militant and intergenerational paramilitary group at least throughout the 1980s.¹⁰⁸

The claim to an authentic anti-revolutionary traditionalism was a reflection of the struggles within the camp of *las derechas*. These struggles renewed lay Catholics’ faith in the power of civic (and, in the case of the Falanges, potentially violent) mobilization, and the recruitment of active followers (especially young people) to nurture new movements, with the expectation that the embers of Mexico’s religious conflict were on the verge of being rekindled.

105. Celerino Salmerón, “Méjico y Chile: ¿ambos de la mano hacia el desastre?” *LHC* 71 (August 1973): 14–15.

106. Salvador Abascal, “El golpe de estado militar en Chile,” *LHC* 73 (October 1973):, 1–2.

107. “Proclama de las Falanges Tradicionalistas Mejicanas,” *LHC* 71 (March 1974): 8–9.

108. “Los mejicanos con jota,” *Contenido*, June 1981, 28–37; Edgar González Ruiz, *Los otros cristeros y su presencia en Puebla* (Puebla: BUAP; Cuadernos del Archivo Histórico Universitario, 2004), 393–394.

CONCLUSIONS: CONFLICT AND CONVERGENCE AMONG *LAS MUCHAS DERECHAS*

Occurring at a moment of heightened tensions in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre and the debates over the postconcordat church, the excommunication of Fr. Sáenz was a watershed for Mexican traditionalists. It also carried great political significance for other sectors of Catholicism and the broader Mexican society. Mexico's Cold War polarizations gave traditionalists an opportunity to close ranks and wage battles against the threat of Judeo-communist progressivism, using the defense of tradition, orthodoxy, and truth as their banner. Yet, the plurality of competing views in the broader constellation of the Catholic Right stood in the way of a cohesive response to these challenges.

While divisions among Catholics were not new, these internecine struggles hold broader implications for the history of how Catholics experienced and shaped Mexico's Cold War. Since the revolution, lay and clerical conservative Catholics had developed a range of discursive and active strategies to reassert the role of Catholicism as the core of national identity and defend it from its purported enemies. With the Cristero War as a shared point of reference to legitimate their positions, the figures I have discussed here used a variety of public platforms to air their differences and identify friends and enemies across the spectrum of Catholicism. Notably, their virulent anti-Semitism was a key component in the identification of, and engagement with, such enemies. This, coupled with their anti-communism, accentuated their intransigence and conspiratorial outlook, and exacerbated their sense of besiegement by multiple global forces.¹⁰⁹

In their own right, Saézn, Capistrán, and Abascal were heirs to different strands of the post-Cristero Right, which was the shifting ground from which they confronted the perceived leftist threat, and navigated both the ambivalent relationship with the postrevolutionary state and the polarization between traditionalists and progressives. The case of Capistrán—a former Cristero who made amends with the postrevolutionary state—defied the default identification of traditionalists as anti-revolutionaries (an identification that

109. Anti-Semitism remains understudied in the Mexican context, at least in comparison to other Latin American cases. For valuable studies, mostly pertaining to the pre-Cold War period, see Laura Pérez Rosales, "Anti-Cardenism and Anti-Semitism in Mexico, 1934–1940," in *The Jewish Diaspora in Latin America*, David Sheining and Lois Baer Barr, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 183–198; Pablo Yankelevich, "Extranjería y antisemitismo en el México posrevolucionario" *Interdisciplina* 2:4 (2014): 143–159; Claudio Lomnitz, *Antisemitismo y la ideología de la revolución mexicana* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010); Judit Bokser, "El antisemitismo: recurrencias y cambios históricos," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* 44:182–3 (2001): 101–132; and Alicia Gojman de Backal, *Camisas, escudos y desfiles militares. Los Dorados y el antisemitismo en México, 1934–1940* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000).

Abascal and Sáenz fully embraced). It also illustrates the complexities of post-Cristero Catholic identity in the wake of Vatican II and in relation to the PRP's own contradictory revolutionary legacies and anticommunist policies.

Traditionalists constantly policed and redefined the boundaries of their imagined communities around issues of tradition and orthodoxy in response to their context. Notions such as Sáenz's *falsas derechas* are revealing of how unstable these boundaries could become in moments of crisis, and the degree to which enforcing them could be as important as—or in fact, integral to—combatting the Jewish-Masonic-communist enemies. While operating in relatively small circles and often in secrecy, traditionalists also partook in the public sphere, where they articulated their positions, criticized their opponents, and sought to build alliances. Besides their activist trajectory linking the contested memory of the Cristero past to their present, Sáenz, Capistrán, and Abascal had the ability to bring their anti-progressivism to broader audiences by airing their views and settling their scores in the local and national press and on television. This highlights their role as public intellectuals, a status too often denied to spokesmen (and spokeswoman) of the Right.¹¹⁰ It also brings to the fore the social forces they represented (small or large) and how they contributed to shaping ideas about the intersections of religion, politics, and the idea of the Catholic nation.

As Pensado and Walker have suggested, a more robust picture of Mexico's Cold War, especially in the aftermath of 1968, requires more thorough studies of conservative action and reaction to critical junctures, both national and international.¹¹¹ In the conflicts analyzed here, the traditionalists' reading of the battle against secularism, atheism, and anticlerical violence as a global phenomenon—not merely local or national—was rooted in enduring narratives of the Cristero War as a struggle with implications beyond borders. The Cold War outlook contributed to this blurring of distinctions between local, national, and international conflicts. The traditionalist-progressive divide and the scuffles over Sáenz's *sedevacantism* were part of broader debates about the methods and orientation of global anticommunism.

These former Cristeros, frustrated *sinarquistas*, and fervent *sedevacantists* shared a sense of Catholic purpose, made connections between national and international

110. As Ibarrola notes in her study of Rius Facius, many Catholic intellectuals did not operate in academic or state-sponsored cultural circles, limiting the broader dissemination of their ideas and views about history and society. Ibarrola Martínez, "Rupturas en el integrista," 166–167. Manuel Gómez Morín and Efraín González Luna, who were part of the core group that founded the National Action Party, are notable exceptions to this exclusion of right-wing figures from the "public intellectual" label.

111. See Pensado, *Rebel Mexico*; and Walker, *Waking from the Dream*.

arenas of conflict, and cultivated animosity and even enmity among themselves. They imagined and inhabited a shared but contentious and contradictory political world, where the urgency of Cold War polarizations struck a familiar chord with the unsettled history and memory of their past struggles to defend religion and nation.

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