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## European Left Catholicism in the Long Sixties: Fact or Fiction?

Gerd-Rainer Horn

The Second Wave of Western European Left Catholicism, c. 1965 – c. 1975, introduced manifold innovations in comparison to the First Wave, c. 1944 – c. 1954, in addition to reinforcing older traditions, such as the phenomenon of worker priests, which had served as the most visible and symbolic marker of progressive Catholicism in the immediate postwar era. Of the organizational novelties leaving their mark on the post-Vatican II era, it is probably fair to say that the emergence and powerful presence of radical priest associations, above all the Christian Solidarity International Congress, and the rise of spontaneous ecclesial communities, eventually best known by the term 'base communities', were the principal innovations. In addition, the specifically Catholic contribution to the European (and worldwide) student movements, as well as the specifically Catholic impetus behind radical working class practices in the Long Sixties were likewise unprecedented phenomena. There had been Catholic agitators in workers' movements in the immediate postwar era, but such actions took a different form compared to Catholic working class activism in the Long Sixties, the latter period witnessing radical activity organized by Catholic trade unions, a feature with no parallel twenty years earlier. The rise of progressive, system-challenging radical student movements as such, not just the specifically Catholic battalions within those currents, was of course also a phenomenon entirely without precedent in European history.

To what extent were these radical Catholic challenges to traditional conceptions of church and society truly transnational phenomena? Were there meaningful international connections established by Catholic workers, Catholic students, base communities and radical parish (and other) priests? Or did activists essentially concentrate on their respective national terrain, thus suggesting that the transnational appearances of similar phenomena were perhaps merely circumstantial and accidental, rather than truly international communities of like-minded radical reformers –and sometimes revolutionaries?<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I focus above all on what can be rightfully regarded, in part no doubt for heuristic purposes, *political*

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<sup>1</sup> It would go too far to define the term 'transnational', in particular vis-à-vis its frequently employed corollary, 'international', in the context of this brief conclusion. This author is keenly aware of the various and frequently contested meanings of the –in recent years– quite fashionable term 'transnational', which I began to employ quite consciously already back in the early 1990s, long before its current vogue. Where the choice of terminology affects the meaning of what I aim to say, I opt for one or the other of these two terms. In this brief comment, however, as in my other writings on related topics, I have frequent recourse to the more traditional adjective 'international' for stylistic reasons where either term might be appropriate. An inflationary usage of the term 'transnational' does not aid the comprehension of relevant stakes any more than it improves readability. For some more detailed and elaborate comments on this terminological and methodological question, I refer the interested reader to my relevant publications listed in footnote 15 below.

manifestations of Catholic dissent. As Yvon Tranvouez and I have pointed out in our joint "Introduction", in our respective publications my Breton colleague places primary emphasis on religious manifestations of the spirit of Vatican II, whereas I have tended to give pride of place to more openly political contestations. Both of us are keenly aware of the importance of both elements –the religious *and* the political dimensions– in this dynamic conceptual pair of historical factors at play in the Long Sixties.<sup>2</sup>

## Radical Priests

One of the four aforementioned pillars of Second Wave Left Catholicism, the association of radical parish priests, perhaps went the furthest in the attempt to forge links between their respective national component parts. Animated and stimulated by its organizational hard core, the Dutch contingent, and ably assisted by hands-on material support offered by their German counterparts, with Belgian activists in Leuven serving as the administrative center of these efforts, in early-to-mid-July 1969 an initial gathering of roughly one hundred iconoclastic priests took place in the unlikely setting of the oldest city of Switzerland, Chur. The occasion was a preparatory conference of European bishops in Chur in advance of the extraordinary world synod of European bishops in Rome in October 1969. The European episcopacy had placed the topic "The Priest in the World and the Church of Today" on their agenda. Astoundingly, so the radical priests argued, the episcopal preparatory conference had not even bothered to invite any priests, a clear warning that the innovative spirit of Vatican II was beginning to wane. And so the fearless activist priests arrived in Chur in relatively small but symbolically important numbers to exert pressure on the episcopacy so that the priests' own voices and opinions could be aired at such an important event.<sup>3</sup>

This action instantly bestowed upon the Christian Solidarity International Congress, as it soon began to be called, international media attention, but few concrete inroads into the deliberations of the leadership of the European Catholic Church were achieved. Spurred on by this initial action, the radical priests immediately began to organize for the second internationally coordinated action, the extraordinary synod in October 1969. This time delegates –127 in total– arrived from Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. A further thirty-eight unofficial representatives from eight South and North American countries joined the group, with an even larger number of sympathizers –priests and laypersons from Rome, Italy and elsewhere– flocking to assist in the formal and informal deliberations of the Christian Solidarity International Congress. Needless to say, whereas this gathering was regarded as a success in terms of the strengthening of coordinated action by this radical group, their impact on the World Synod was minimal.

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<sup>2</sup> For anyone interested in my own assessment of the role of classical "religious" factors in the genesis of the spirit of Vatican II, note the opening chapter, "Vatican II and Post-conciliar European Theology", in my *Spirit of Vatican II*, pp. 5-59.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the Christian Solidarity International Congress and its avatars, see the second part of Chapter Three, "Red Priests in Working Class Blue", in Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II. Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 86-109.

The third assembly of the Christian Solidarity International Congress took place in Amsterdam, the nerve center of this loose association of rebel priests. From 28 September to 3 October 1970, 372 delegates (not all of them priests) from Europe, the Americas and elsewhere gathered in deliberations which, for the first time, were not orchestrated as a response to –or a lobbying effort directed at– a parallel event organized by the Roman curia. It was the first truly *world* assembly of radical priests, and it was certainly a memorable moment in the eyes of virtually all participants, in part because of the sudden prominence of Latin American activists and Latin American affairs in this gathering which had still remained to a significant extent a European brainchild. It appeared for a moment as if Second Wave Left Catholicism was not only forging a Europe-wide coordination center, but that it was now importantly reaching out across the Atlantic to forge bonds with co-thinkers in Central and South America.

However, the Amsterdam Convention, sometimes also referred to as the First World Conference of the Christian Solidarity International association, turned out to be the very first but also the very last such truly international gathering. When the Second World Synod of the Catholic Church took place from 30 September to 6 November 1971 in Rome, the 'solidarity priests' no longer mobilized *en masse* to organize an alternative gathering on location. Instead, a series of decentralized actions, coordinated by the International Documentation and Communication Center (IDOC), about which more below, occurred across a range of countries in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. The last gathering associated with the former Christian Solidarity International Congress, the 17-18 November 1973 International Assembly of Christians in Lyon, assembled about one thousand participants, and it thus became the quantitatively most successful event of its kind, though significant sections of Europe's radical priests no longer bothered to show up. In fact, the Lyon Assembly, largely coordinated by French activists, was no longer a truly international congress. As the key administrator in the earlier stages of the development of the Christian Solidarity International Congress, the Leuven-based Robert Detry, pointed out in a no-holds-barred criticism of the event:

"At Amsterdam three-quarters [of the participants] were non-Dutch, at Lyon less than a third were non-French (even in absolute numbers, there were fewer foreigners here than in Amsterdam!). Moreover, how can one pretend to be international and to send out invitations solely in French to our English, American and other friends? Why should we be surprised that they did not come? The invitations for Amsterdam were drafted in four languages. How can one call oneself international by handing all the texts to participants exclusively in French? At Rome texts were in German and French, and at Amsterdam in English and French."<sup>4</sup>

Predictably, the Lyon Assembly generated no further congresses of this sort. The Christian Solidarity International Congress, after a brief comet-like appearance on the horizon of the Catholic Church, suffered a quiet death.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter by Robert Detry to the 'executive committee responsible for Lyon 73', 31 December 1973, p. 2. This important document is extant in Katholieke Documentatie Center, Nijmegen (Netherlands), *Septuagint*, fo. 183, and in the Archivio Storico della Camera dei Diputati, Rome (Italy), Sette Novembre, B 24 F 4.

## Base Communities

I spent some time elaborating the all-too-brief history of the Christian Solidarity International Congress because this ephemeral organization was, in fact, the most significant attempt to forge an international organizing center for the radical spirit of Vatican II in the post-conciliar period. The second truly innovative organizational product of Second Wave Left Catholicism, base communities, never even attempted to forge an international coordinating body in the period under consideration. Apart from the vast wave of base communities concurrently springing up in Latin America, Western Europe witnessed a similar phenomenal –but direly neglected in the literature!– growth of such novel grassroots institutions. In particular, Italy and Spain witnessed hundreds, then thousands of such spontaneous ecclesial groups from the mid-1960s onwards, with France, Belgium, Germany and other countries following suite in the wake of the momentous events of the French May 1968.<sup>5</sup> And while, initially, many such groupings were exclusively oriented towards church affairs, with quite a number of them in effect functioning as bible study circles rather than as organizational centers for radical societal change, within a few years many of the burgeoning base communities, if they prospered and survived, underwent a process of radicalization –similar to the way that many of the earliest shoots of what later constituted the Christian Solidarity International Congress had initially “merely” focused on the question of celibacy as their main concern but then rapidly extended their remit.

Yet, for all their organizational dynamism, base communities for a long time were at best able to forge *national* coordination, never an international association. Only when the period of dynamic expansion had long ceased to animate the movement did European activists within base communities begin to establish firm international links. From 1983 onwards, a series of international conferences of Christian base communities have met in Amsterdam (1983), Turin (1985), Bilbao (1987), Paris (1991), Innsbruck (1993), Geneva (1995), Edinburgh (2003) Vienna (2009) and Brussels (2014).<sup>6</sup> As long as the movement had significant impact in their respective national operating terrains, such international networking was left to chance encounters and no Europe-wide, let alone worldwide, organizing center emerged prior to the 1980s.

## Catholic Students in the Long Sixties

Catholic students played a crucial role in European Left Catholicism *and* in the wider student movement of the Long Sixties. Due to the radicalization of sections of Catholic public opinion in the wake of Vatican II, a process often *preceding* the

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<sup>5</sup> For a close examination of the crucial Italian experience of base communities in the experimental upswing phase of 1965 – 1971, see Chapter Three, “Spontaneous Ecclesial Communities”, in Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, pp. 111-163.

<sup>6</sup> See the relevant list in Mario Campi and Marcello Vigli, *Coltivare speranza. Una Chiesa altra per un altro mondo possibile* (Pescara: Tracce, 2009), p. 201. This volume is the most comprehensive recent overview of the development of Italian base communities *after* the gestation period covered in the study referred to in note 2 above. A fascinating very recent monograph on the de facto coordinating center of French base communities (and much more) in the Long Sixties, the Abbey of Boquen in the Bretagne, is now available: Béatrice Lebel, *Boquen. Entre utopie et révolution 1965-1976* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015).

radicalization of secular students who began to move in large numbers around the calendar year of 1968, Catholic student leaders played an inordinately important role in general student struggles of the late sixties, out of all proportion to their numerical weight.<sup>7</sup>

The most prominent national leaders of student movements in an amazing series of countries were Catholic students, beginning with Mario Savio, the indisputable figurehead of the quintessential student movement in the United States, the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement, which inspired the subsequent national US student revolt. The charismatic leader of the Leuven student revolt in 1966 and spokesperson for Flemish radical students in subsequent years was a member of the Catholic Action organization for university students in Flanders, the ex-seminarian Paul Goossens. The Rudi Dutschke of the Netherlands –and Rudi Dutschke himself provides another excellent example of religious motivation for radical action, though of the Protestant kind– was another ex-seminarian, Ton Regtien. The leader of the October 1967 campus occupation –the first of its kind in all of Italy in the late 1960s– at the largest Italian Catholic University, La Cattolica, the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, Mario Capanna, became one of the most charismatic student leaders in all of Italy for a number of years – and a prominent radical leftwing opposition figure ever since!

The first European university town to explode in riots and radical action during the protest cycle of the Long Sixties, already in May 1966, was the aforementioned Belgian provincial town of Leuven, host to the oldest Catholic university in northwestern Europe. The first Dutch university to do so was the Catholic University of Tilburg. The first Italian universities where students pioneered campus occupations as legitimate 'lobbying' tactics were Catholic universities as well, notably the aforementioned La Cattolica in Milan. The first Swiss university to witness similar actions was the biggest Catholic University in Switzerland, the bilingual University of Fribourg/Freiburg.

Despite such prominence of Catholic students as catalysts in the wider student movements of the Long Sixties, Catholic students never forged truly international links, apart from the ongoing efforts by the traditional Catholic student movement, organized most visibly in the Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne Internationale, which, however, for the most part remained a minor player in the headline-grabbing events of *les années 68* around the world. Certainly, part of the reluctance of Catholic students to forge an international coordinating group of Catholic inspiration had to do with the fact that many of the Catholic students saw themselves as a part of a much wider movement, including Christian and secular activists all combined. Moreover, plenty of Catholic-inspired activists were slowly but surely beginning to sever their ties with the organized Catholic Church. But, for whichever reason, international ties between Catholic student activists *en tant qu'étudiant(e)s catholiques* never came about.

## Catholic Working Class Associations

Last but not least, the Catholic contribution to the radicalization of the European workers' movement was at least as prominent and visible as the efforts by their

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<sup>7</sup> For a survey of Catholic student involvement in the Long Sixties, see Chapter Four, "From Seminarians to Radical Student Activists", in Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, pp. 173-213.

student counterparts.<sup>8</sup> To limit myself to brief observations of three countries: in Belgium, the traditional Catholic trade union federation in the post-1968 period developed into the leading advocate of self-management inside the Belgian labor movement. And the Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond / Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (ACV/CSC) expressly advocated autogestion not only for labor relations at the point of production but for society at large. As such, the militant and –some might argue– utopian stance of the ACV/CSC certainly rivalled and perhaps even outpaced the similarly radical activism which then gripped the Belgian Socialist trade union federation, then propounding the promise and potential of workers' control rather than notions of potentially more far-reaching workers' self-management.

In France, of all major trade union confederations, it was the ex-Catholic Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT), in the late sixties still very much a product of Catholic sensibilities despite having abandoned its confessional identity in 1964, which stood closest to radical social movement activism during and after 1968. No other organization of the labor movement could rival such a statement as the 16 May 1968 declaration by the CFDT leadership, which culminated in this call to action: "To civil liberties and rights within universities must correspond the same liberties and rights within enterprises; in this demand the struggles of university students meet up with those which workers have fought for since the origin of the labor movement. We must replace industrial and administrative monarchy with democratic structures based on workers' self-management."<sup>9</sup>

Italy, after 1968 for almost ten years a teeming laboratory for radical action in all walks of life, showcased a Communist-dominated trade union federation, the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), far better integrated into *gauchiste* radicalism –which had captured significant portions of working class sentiment after 1968– than was the case with its French equivalent, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT). Nonetheless, certainly in the heyday of Italian working class activism, c. 1968 – c. 1972, it was the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati dei Lavoratori (CISL), nominally not part of the Catholic lifeworld but in fact an organic component part of Italian Catholicism, which stood even closer to the multiform and manifold social movement cultures affecting labor relations on the factory floor and urban social movements in general than was the case with the CGIL. Still, despite the astounding transformation of Catholic trade union federations into ebullient centers for radical activism reaching far beyond the factory floor, apart from the ongoing work by the traditional international coordinating body of the Christian trade union movement, which was of course also profoundly affected by the combined effects of the spirit of Vatican II and the spirit of '68,<sup>10</sup> no serious efforts to consciously construct an international force, which would give concrete expression to the wide-ranging emancipatory ideals emerging in the wake of 1968, and which could potentially become a leading voice of European (and worldwide) Left Catholicism,

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Five, "The Working Class Goes to Paradise", in Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, pp. 215-252.

<sup>9</sup> Citation taken from Albert Detraz, "Le Mouvement Ouvrier, la CFDT, et l'idée d'autogestion", in Edmond Maire, Alfred Krumnow and Albert Detraz, *La CFDT et l'autogestion* (Paris: Cerf, 1973), pp. 76-77.

<sup>10</sup> On the changes brought about within the lifeworld of the Confédération internationale des syndicats chrétiens (CISC) which, characteristically, in October 1968 underwent a name change and became the Confédération mondiale du travail (CMT), see Patrick Pasture, *Histoire du syndicalisme chrétien international. La difficile recherche d'une troisième voie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), pp. 404-412.

arose out of the milieu exemplified by the Belgian, French and Italian union federations briefly highlighted above.

Another location where a significant radicalization of the strategic outlook of Catholic workers' associations could be detected at ease was the domain of Catholic Action organizations geared towards the adult working class constituency. The *Mouvement Mondial des Travailleurs Chrétiens* constituted the umbrella organization of the Italian *Associazioni cristiane dei lavoratori italiani* (ACLI), the Spanish *Hermandad Obrera de Acción Católica* (HOAC) and many more such traditional Catholic Action organizations. In Italy, the ACLI had severed its umbilical cord to Christian Democracy and, by the late 1960s, it had begun to execute what it referred to as its 'turn towards socialism'. The HOAC must effectively be regarded as the cradle of the anti-Franco underground labor movement in the 1950s, and the HOAC (and other radical Catholic Action groupings) played a crucial role in the setting up of the Workers' Commissions (CCOO), which effectively helped to pound the final nails into the coffin of Franco's dictatorial regime. But the *Mouvement Mondial des Travailleurs Chrétiens* remained the international coordinating center 'merely' for the aforementioned Catholic Action groupings for the adult working class milieu. Catholic trade unions operated largely independently from the MMTC.

Thus, of the four pillars of Second Wave Left Catholicism only one briefly developed an international coordination center geared to stir up church and society ; and this networking agency only really functioned for, at best, two years. It could, of course, be argued, that these four strongholds of Left Catholicism had different degrees of interest in forging such international ties. Catholic working class associations, by virtue of their organization into international organizations, would be logical vectors of networking beyond individual national frontiers. Catholic students, an intensely cosmopolitan lot in the Long Sixties, would likewise be logically expected to fashion concrete links across linguistic, political and cultural frontiers. Surprisingly, few such concrete links, outside of pre-existing organizational connections across borders, such as the MMTC or the CISC/CMT, saw the light of day in the years under consideration.

Radical grassroots priests, by contrast, at the lowest level of the food chain constituting the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church above the level of the laity, had no official links with other parish priests in the far-flung network of parishes, which constitute the basis of the organizational pyramid of Catholicism, neither on a regional, national, let alone international level. Nonetheless, spurred into action by the perceived inaction of the episcopacy and the Vatican curia on certain crucial issues of their day (celibacy, etc.), secular and regular clergy seized the day for a brief moment in the aftermath of the turbulent events of the calendar year of 1968, and they aimed to forge at least some semblance of international ties. Base communities, thriving on informality and decentralization as organizing principles par excellence, surprisingly did develop rather quickly intense national contacts, leading to a succession of vibrant and sometimes contentious national conferences in virtually all European states, with international observers as frequent and welcome guests. But here, as mentioned earlier, a truly international network of base communities did not develop until long after the tide of the seemingly unstoppable forward march of such grassroots associations had subsided and the movement had entered a period of long-term decline.

## Radical Catholic Press

Were there at least some international efforts at forging a radical internationally coordinated Left Catholic press? In a day and age when the most influential media (short of television) were newspapers and journals, in short: the written press, did Catholic activism at least attempt to forge a journalistic product that could powerfully reinforce their radical stance? Given the inherently international orientation and reach of the Catholic Church, such a project surely would not have been a far-fetched idea.

In fact, however, once again such an international press organ never truly came about. Other than the launch of the theological journal *Concilium*, already discussed by Yvon Tranvouez, the sole initiative to that effect was an initiative headed by the Dutch activist Leo Alting von Geusau, who went to Rome in 1962 as theological advisor to the Dutch Catholic Radio (KRO), which was aiming to cover in depth the proceedings at Vatican II. While in Rome, together with other Dutch reform-minded individuals, amongst them the theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, von Geusau organized a press office and documentation center, geared to inform Dutch-language public opinion around the world of the events and discussions surrounding the deliberations at Vatican II. The impromptu press center soon became a major success. In the words of von Geusau: "Within a few months we were asked to translate our stenciled texts into six languages."<sup>11</sup> Soon other Dutch sponsors assisted the rapidly expanding operations of what soon became known as the International Documentation and Communication Center (IDOC) with financial support, amongst them the Conference of Dutch Bishops as well as several leading Dutch corporations. From the late sixties to the early-to-mid-1970s, the IDOC signed responsible for a series of publications (e.g. *IDOC international bulletin* and *IDOC international*, the latter published in several languages) which, in effect, served as international press organs for Left Catholic currents and sentiments before turning their attention to Third World solidarity work from the early 1970s onwards.<sup>12</sup>

Still, as important as the role of the IDOC as journalistic and organizational nerve center of progressive sentiments within international Catholicism may have been especially at the very end of the 1960s and at the very beginning of the 1970s, it barely began to fulfil the need for a true international press center for the Catholic Left. In general, Left Catholic activism in all countries continued to rely to a far greater extent on *national* publications, which often covered newsworthy items from around the world, but which remained, after all and above all else, oriented towards a national audience.

## Concluding Comments

Thus, no long-lasting serious international effort at coordination linked the various national detachments of European (and world) Left Catholicism. The Christian

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<sup>11</sup>Sjon Hauser, "Alting von Geusau en de Akha van Noord-Thailand": <http://www.sjonhauser.nl/alting-von-geusau.html> (accessed on 9 November 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Astoundingly enough, there exists thus far no history of this important international networking association. For a January 1972 self-statement, see Jan Grootaers, Albert van den Heuvel and Leo Alting von Geusau, "History and Description of IDOC", a mimeographed typewritten document which Lodewijk Winkeler kindly communicated to me.

Solidarity International Congress and the IDOC played briefly a potentially important role, but they ultimately remained embryonic and ephemeral attempts to forge firm international links. Does this, then, mean that Second Wave European Left Catholicism remained essentially split up into national (or even merely a succession of local) entities? Was there no transnational community of spirit in the turbulent decade after 1965? Is it to take one's desires for reality to speak of European Left Catholicism? Would it be more humble –but also more accurate– to recognize above all else the simultaneous co-existence of national, regional and local experiences rather than to postulate a transnational milieu of kindred spirits?

I beg to differ. For, what precisely constitutes a transnational movement or current? Is it absolutely necessary and essential to be able to point to international organizational structures, vibrant transnational publications and an array of regular international conferences and actions in order to call a movement truly transnational? Is it not, instead, more convincing to recognize the close links and interconnections between activists in two or more states – in the case of Western European Second Wave Left Catholicism approximately a dozen states! – in spite of the absence of regular personal exchanges and the common ties of connecting publications? How do individuals form their opinions of the world surrounding them? And what propels them into action?

One increasingly popular practice by transnational historians has become, in recent years, the tracing of direct links between various national political cultures, the search for vectors of new ideas crossing borders, so-to-speak. The personal-political itineraries of crucial figures in this transnational exchange of experiences have undergone close scrutiny, and so have efforts to reconstruct concrete links between various national projects, often editorial ones, to build up and strengthen new traditions. It is by no means my intention to belittle the values of such pioneering efforts at concrete, empirical transnational history of which, at any rate, there are still far too few in existence even today. But I would like to caution against an undue emphasis on the forensic work to reconstruct the personal and editorial links between two or more national experiences. For, in my view, it is less important to trace in precise detail the travel itineraries of individual agents of novel ideas, however much this is desirable and helpful, than to draw attention to and to reconstruct the existence of parallel, sometimes virtually identical, at any rate astoundingly similar experiences, ideologies, practices and projects across national, linguistic and cultural frontiers.

In the case of Second Wave Left Catholicism, direct cross-border contacts never played a very significant role in the shaping of a transnational consciousness of radical Catholicism in the age of Vatican II and the Long Sixties. Ideas and individuals did, of course, on occasion circulate relatively widely. Yet what made, for instance, Spanish Left Catholics intensely interested in the flagship experience of leading Italian base communities, such as the case of the Isolotto community on the outskirts of Florence,<sup>13</sup> was not so much what was happening concretely on the left side of the Arno downstream from the historic center of the birthplace of the Renaissance, but the fact that the obstacle course imposed on the *Comunità dell'Isolotto* by the Florentine hierarchy in the former's quest to fashion a living and democratically-organised parish community, corresponded in substance, if not in all

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<sup>13</sup> For this internationally most famous European base community, note Horn, *Spirit of Vatican II*, pp. 151-70.

technical details, to the *via crucis* imposed on Spanish progressive Catholics by an unholy alliance of the Spanish curia and the Francoist dictatorship. Dutch radical Catholics, to mention but one more example, closely followed the turbulent course of Spanish underground Left Catholicism not so much because they felt inspired by the desperate actions of their Iberian comrades-in-arms, but because they saw the active engagement by underground laypersons and public protests by theologians and priests across the Spanish state as ever-so-many expressions of the very same fight that Dutch radical reformers were trying to carry out in the Netherlands, if under much-less onerous overall political and ecclesial conditions.

Even without frequent cross-border interactions, ideas and action repertoires spread rapidly across frontiers. Especially in moments of transition such as 'global 1968', historical conjunctures when individuals and groups frequently, radically and in rapid succession shift their opinions on important issues of the day, casual hints and allusions in the respective national mainstream media, or televised images of unfamiliar tactics and events in far-away countries few activists would then ever visit, could leave deep traces with regard to political outlook and personal comportment of any number of open-minded individuals then embarking on journeys to comprehend and change the world. An unexpected individual encounter, the accidental discovery of an inspiring article or a fascinating novel, or a brief visit to a foreign land could quickly become concrete triggers of conversion experiences. It is not necessary for concrete, hands-on, quasi-permanent links between activists from different countries to be firmly established in order to postulate and recognize an international current of opinion and a social movement spanning several countries at a time.

The search for tangible, quantifiable and direct links, in my view, excessively relies on models of international organization, which, in effect, were all too rare in modern history. In this context, it is highly instructive to take a brief glance at another transnationally operating political current located on the left of the political spectrum, the post-1956 New Left, which operated for some time concurrently with what I have termed Second Wave Left Catholicism and with, in fact, sometimes overlapping membership lists. There were no regular international congresses of the burgeoning New Left in the heyday of its political influence and near-hegemonic reach over growing battalions of (not solely young or student) activists. Individuals sometimes met and, within the context of specific actions, some international conferences did occur which assembled important elements of this New Left, such as for instance the February 1968 International Vietnam Congress in West Berlin.<sup>14</sup> But such extraordinary assemblies remained the exception rather than becoming the rule.

Did the international New Left produce its own media outlets, which may have helped to unify the fledgling New Left? Hardly so. For a while, *Les Temps modernes* or the *New Left Review* performed important roles as opinion shapers, but they operated primarily within their own language areas. Publishing houses belonging to the nether sphere of the New Left likewise played important roles in the forging of a climate of transnational belonging, such as Wagenbach (West Germany), Maspero (France) or Feltrinelli (Italy). And these and other leftwing publishers often

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<sup>14</sup> Sibylle Plogstedt (ed.), *Internationaler Vietnam-Kongress. Februar 1968. West Berlin* (Hamburg : Libertäre Assoziation, 1987).

specialized, amongst other things, in translations of seminal texts originating in other language zones. But they all remained essentially publishing houses geared towards a national (or linguistic) terrain. There was no meaningful and purposeful international coordination between such ventures.

Yet has it ever occurred to any serious observer (whether friend or foe) to doubt that an international New Left existed in the run-up to 1968? To the contrary. It is a commonplace of the literature on the New Left to consider it an international political current of some importance. And this without an international organizational structure, without even a media outlet along the lines of the ephemeral IDOC. Thus, I wish to finally conclude my *plaidoyer* for the existence of an international, yes indeed transnational<sup>15</sup> current of European Second Wave Left Catholicism with the text of an email message I received on 22 May 2015, a few weeks after I gave a talk in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on what I then called the marriage of the spirit of Vatican II and the spirit of '68. Here it goes:

"Thank you for the talk about Catholic leaders and Catholic influence in the social and democracy movements of the Long Sixties. It is a revelation to me that so many Catholics, including our own Bernadette Devlin and Michael Farrell (also a student for the priesthood), played such a prominent role in civil rights and people's democracy movements [around the world]. I myself was inspired by Pope John 23 and the Second Vatican Council in my decision to support the civil rights movement in the north of Ireland and subsequent movements for justice in Ireland. It was interesting to look at it globally, and thank you for doing that and giving us food for thought.

Joe McVeigh  
Priest  
St Michaels  
Parish Enniskillen  
Country Fermanagh."<sup>16</sup>

### L'auteur

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### Abstract

This alternative conclusion briefly examines the principal characteristics of the four main pillars of the European Catholic left in the 1960s and 70s: Catholic workers, Catholic students, grassroots communities and radical priests. Despite their ideological diversity and the ephemeral nature of their international exchanges, these various components of

<sup>15</sup> For an attempt to define the tasks of transnational history, vis-à-vis competing approaches of cross-border studies, see Padraic Kenney and Gerd-Rainer Horn, "Introduction: Approaches to the Transnational", in Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenney (eds), *Transnational Moments of Change. Europe 1945, 1968, 1989* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. ix-xix, but now also Gerd-Rainer Horn, "The methodology and practice of transnational history –with special attention to religious studies", in David Käbisch and Johannes Wischmeyer (eds.), *Transnationalising the History of Religious Education*, forthcoming 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Email communication by Joe McVeigh to author, 22 May 2015.

the European Catholic left appear to have been a genuinely continental phenomenon. Their shared spirit did much to make up for this lack of organization.

**Key words:** Radical Workers' Movement; Radical Student Movement; Grassroots Communities; Radical Priest Groups; Transnational Organizations.

### **Résumé**

Cette conclusion alternative examine brièvement les principaux aspects des quatre piliers constitutifs de la gauche catholique européenne des années 1960 et 1970. Sont donc envisagés divers groupes influents qui se distribuent, pour l'essentiel, dans les catégories suivantes : ouvriers catholiques, étudiants catholiques, communautés de base, prêtres contestataires. Cet examen conduit à suggérer que, en dépit de leur diversité idéologique et du caractère éphémère de leurs échanges internationaux, ces différentes composantes de la gauche catholique européenne ont eu une réelle dimension continentale. La faiblesse des liens organisationnels ne saurait masquer en effet l'importance d'un esprit commun, assurément efficient.

**Mots clés:** mouvement ouvrier radical ; mouvement estudiantin radical ; communautés de base ; groupes des prêtres radicaux ; organisations transnationales.

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