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“I'm going to do battle... I'm going to do some good”. Biographical trajectories, moral politics, and public engagement among highly religious young Catholics in Spain and Mexico

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Abstract

Public debates and controversies on moral issues have gained visibility in recent decades in both Spain and Mexico. Conservative Catholic groups and networks are increasingly playing a crucial role in raising and framing highly morally charged themes in the public arena, especially on intimacy-related policies, including sexual and reproductive freedoms. A new generation of young Catholic leaders becoming key political agents has emerged in this scenario. They are fostering new mobilisation repertoires in the public sphere (e.g., digital activism and public performances) and promoting new political narratives merging moral, cultural, and religious elements. These highly religious and conservative young Catholics consider themselves part of a cultural/cognitive minority and feel entitled to become what Howard Becker termed “moral entrepreneurs.” Most have been educated in Catholic schools and belong to Catholic movements. Still, they can also navigate secular politics and strategically use different regimes of justification and action. Within this context, the article aims to examine and compare the intersection of historical trends and the relevance of individual biographies to understand the role of these young Catholics in the public space in both countries.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Secularisation has been considered one of the most important trends explaining the transformation of religious landscapes in many countries worldwide (Pérez-Agote, 2014). Secularisation has significantly impacted youth religiosity (Pew Research Center, 2018), and the proportion of religious youth has dropped sharply in the last few decades. However, while secularisation seems to have had a notable impact in shaping the religious life of young cohorts, it is more debatable to state that it has also brought with it a process involving the privatisation of religion (Casanova, 1994).

Public controversies involving religious actors have gained popularity in recent decades (Möser, Ramme & Takács, 2021). Béraud (2017) describes the situation as paradoxical and explains that, in the case of France, despite the massive drop in quantitative indicators of individual religiosity, religion has been resurgent in the public sphere. A similar phenomenon is also occurring in Spain (García Martín, 2022; Griera et al., 2021) and Mexico (Zedillo Ortega, 2019), closely related to the development of public debates on moral politics (Dobbelaere & Pérez-Agote, 2015), which has involved the public mobilisation of Catholic Church actors in the public space. In this scenario, we are increasingly witnessing a significant number of highly religious Catholics acting as “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker, 1963) to advance conservative agendas against public policies on sexual, reproductive, and family rights. Among them, several young (lay) Catholic leaders have attained visibility as “moral crusaders” (Miskolci, 2018), and new Catholic youth networks have been created and mobilised around moral politics controversies. However, despite several authors pointing to the increasing relevance of youth Catholic leaders acting in the public and political arena (Munson, 2008), the research in this field is still minimal (Conway, 2021). Most existing projects dealing with highly religious young Catholics adopt a micro-sociological or anthropological perspective to analyse how Catholic congregations work (Dugan, 2019) and/or how individuals experience their religiosity (Munhoz Sofiati, 2014). However, much less attention has been paid to exploring and explaining the emergence and the characteristics of highly religious young Catholics who act as “moral entrepreneurs” in the public sphere. This article aims to fill this gap.

Through an analysis and comparison of the cases of Mexico and Spain, the paper examines the emergence of a young cohort of Catholic leaders who are politically committed and challenge the new development of intimacy-related policies, including sexual and reproductive freedoms. The article's main argument is that most of the young Catholic actors who act as moral entrepreneurs in the public sphere are those who couple their religious identity with political conservatism and ground their subjectivity on belonging to a cognitive minority. They feel entitled and called to bring their moral projects into the public sphere and can navigate secular politics and global-local divides using different regimes of justification and action (Vaggione, 2020).

More specifically, the article argues that the emergence of a new generation of highly active young Catholic leaders in the public sphere, as well as its characteristics, might be explained as the result of an intersection among the following three factors: first, it has its roots in the Vatican policy on evangelisation and the youth which began in the 80s (Sala, 2020). Second, it is also related to the fact that this is the first generation of Catholics who have been raised as a “cognitive minority” in countries where the Catholic experience has become diversified (De la Torre et al., 2022) or banalised (Griera et al., 2021), but where the Catholic Church had a political, social, and cultural hegemonic role in the past. Third, the emergence and public visibility of this new generation of young highly religious Catholics are closely related to the construction of a global moral narrative around the idea of the “culture of life” as a unifying cultural framework (Wood, 2019).

On a theoretical level, the article engages with the sociology of both religion and social movements. On the one hand, the paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of religion in secularised societies. Against linear and ethnocentric readings of secularisation, the analysis aims to show that, as Casanova (1994) pointed out,

the privatisation of religion and the evolution of individual religiosity are autonomous dimensions that do not always evolve in the same direction. The study of strongly religious young people in Mexico and Spain highlights that it is precisely a context of growing secularisation that favours the rise of moral controversies in the public sphere, as well as the emergence of young people who feel called to act as moral entrepreneurs and crusaders of Catholic values in a context that they perceive as threatening to the survival of religion. On the other hand, the article contributes to the previous analysis of the emergence of youth (Luhr, 2009) and conservative social movements (Klatch, 1999) that, by making use of classical (e.g., demonstrations) and contemporary (e.g., digital activism) mobilisation repertoires, play an increasingly central role in the public sphere, at both the local and global levels. In this sense, the global logic of diffusion appears as evident in the analysis of the evolution of local dynamics. Although, due to a lack of space, this work does not develop an analysis of the global links between these movements, it is essential to note that we identify processes involving the alignment of ideological frameworks and the diffusion of similar mobilisation strategies in the two contexts.

2 | MEXICO AND SPAIN IN COMPARISON: THE ROLE OF HIGHLY RELIGIOUS YOUNG CATHOLICS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

The article draws on data from two empirical research projects focussed on Catholicism and conducted as case studies (Stake, 1995) with a qualitative approach. The cases selected are paradigmatic for studying processes of deprivatisation of Catholicism in Europe and Latin America for the following reasons: (1) the Catholic youth organisations operating in both Spain (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) and Mexico (Bárcenas Barajas & Delgado-Molina, 2021) are at the forefront of public mobilisations against sexual and reproductive rights in both geographical contexts; (2) each neoconservative field is among the oldest, most belligerent, and mobilised in their respective continents (Torres Santana, 2020). Likewise, the analysis of the two cases has shown the pertinence of the comparison since it has revealed the similarities between the two “multi-organisational” fields (Klandermans, 1992), both in terms of the use of public narratives (i.e., use of strategic secularisms, adherence to the “culture of life” and “culture of death” frameworks, the discourse of “moral panic”) and the tactics (i.e. mobilisations, performances, sit-ins, distribution of leaflets, information stands) that make up their protest repertoires (Tilly, 2012). Moreover, beyond the specific cases, there are indications about the global circulation of strategies and tactics of expressing discontent in which young highly religious moral entrepreneurs play a crucial role. However, further research would be necessary to address global similarities adequately and unpack geographical differences.

In Spain, the research was conducted between 2016 and 2022. The fieldwork included three non-participant observations of mass events protesting against same-sex marriage, abortion or assisted dying bills organised by conservative Catholic-inspired organisations and 20 in-depth interviews with highly religious young people who have been socialised in Opus Dei schools. All of them belong to or have been members of one of the following Catholic-inspired organisations: the Spanish Family Forum (Foro Español de la Familia, hereafter FEF), Citizen Go-Make Yourself Heard (Citizen Go-Hazte Oír, hereafter CG-HO), and the Yes to Life Platform (Plataforma Sí a la Vida, hereafter PSV). These secular organisations are shaping a multi-organisational field against the process of religious, cultural, and political change. The Spanish research project also included a digital ethnography to identify and characterise the mobilised Catholic associative networks.

In the Mexican case, the research was performed between 2014 and 2018. It was specifically focussed on analysing the new entanglements between religion and politics in the context of increasing violence in Morelos, one of the most violent states in Mexico. The fieldwork included an in-depth ethnography (August 2014 to July 2017), with 27 participant observations of events, meetings, and masses with diverse Catholic movements and non-participant observations of 30 religious events (masses, pilgrimages, fairs, and demonstrations). Likewise, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted during this period. Since Mexico is a Federal republic, and legislation depends on local laws, a digital ethnography was conducted from 2014 to 2017¹ to situate Morelos' processes within the broader context of the

Mexican Catholic church's official positions and Catholic movements' initiatives. The publications and interactions of official social media accounts of the Catholic Church and ecclesial movements have been reviewed, as well as hashtags and "Twitter Dates" in the context of national demonstrations against reproductive and LGBTI + rights and Pope Francis's visit in 2016. Digital ethnography permits the identification of existing alliances between local and national action organisations, delving into the profiles and discourses of the mobilised activists, and locates the relevance of youth in the expansion of protest repertoires.

Data obtained in each case have been triangulated to develop validity and reliability for each context and have been further compared to look for similarities and differences. Data collected from interviews have permitted us to identify the key biographical components of the young religious leaders in both countries, an explanation of their motivations, and the form of their reasoning on moral, cultural, and political issues. In parallel, data from digital ethnographies have allowed us to track and trace the development of public campaigns and events and explore how they frame and sell their messages in the media. Finally, the observations conducted at events have offered the possibility of exploring the public repertoires used and the forms of expression employed in public and establishing contacts for further interviews.

It is essential to acknowledge that, in both countries, we refer to a minority of the young population. In this sense, Spain has undergone a profound and intense process of secularisation, possibly one of the most explosive in the West since the 80s (Davie, 2013). Currently, only 47.9% of Spanish youth declare themselves to be religious (González-Anleo & López-Ruiz, 2017, p. 243), while rates of self-identification as "atheist" (29.7%), "agnostic" (14.5%) and "indifferent/non-believer" (19.5%) are at historic highs. Nevertheless, and although numerically it is a small percentage, among the young Spanish population, there is a relatively stable group of individuals who build their identity through their adherence to the Catholic Church: "practising Catholics" between 18 and 24 represent 9.3% of the population (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2014).

In the Mexican case, Catholic religiosity is historically as intense as in Spain. However, a phenomenon of fragmentation is occurring that is contesting the hegemony of the Catholic Church. The latest studies carried out put the percentage of young people (10–24) for whom religion is important at 41.4% (Espinosa Bonilla, 2019, p. 78). According to the National Survey of Religious Beliefs and Practices in Mexico, only 17.2% of youth identify themselves as "religious by conviction" (Corpus, 2019).

As noted, being religious is no longer the rule among young people in these countries, and highly Catholic youths are even less common. They represent a minority and can no longer take their religious affiliation for granted (Berger, 1970). However, although the number of young people identifying as Catholics in both countries is in an evident decline concerning the religious panorama present decades ago, their political relevance and visibility in the public sphere has not followed the same path.² Research demonstrates the increased political participation of youth religious leaders and the growing mobilisation of religious youth networks in the public arena in the last 2 decades. This new visibility of youth in the public space implies a change in the cycle of protest of conservative social movements and a new organisation of countersecularization actors and discourses in both countries. Our fieldwork shows that these young leaders mobilise a collective identity that engages religious and secular discourses in a global moral narrative of oppositions and propositions that works as a unifying cultural framework (Snow & Benford, 1988). This process is linked to the empowerment of the laity –especially the youth– by Vatican politics aimed to recover a presence in public debates, as we will see in the next section.

3 | VATICAN POLICY AND YOUTH: RECRUITING ALLIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST (PROGRESSIVE) SOCIAL CHANGE

Vatican II (1962–1965) represented a radical change to the Catholic Church laity's role, which had a clear impact on shaping this new generation of Catholics (Wilde, 2007). First, the Vatican II council boosted the church's role as an increasingly crucial actor in "morality politics" worldwide to shape society's narratives and practices in general

(Casanova, 1994). Second, the council emphasised the need to intensify institutional efforts to build policies and actions to evangelise the youth.

This interest in the youth was born out of the concern regarding the evident signs of secularisation in the baby boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964, who distanced themselves significantly from the Catholic Church (Davie, 2013). The Vatican II considered it crucial to foster new strategies to attract young people to the church and promote actions to facilitate religious socialisation and counteract secularisation trends. Furthermore, Catholic religious movements were encouraged to devote special attention to youth religious socialisation under the slogan that young people were the “Church's hope” (Vatican II, 1965: n. 2).

One of the main axes of John Paul II's papacy was the empowerment of the youth within the church structures, as the numerous speeches, homilies, and messages dedicated to this topic during his pontificate show (Mandes & Sadłoń, 2018). The Vatican's interest in evangelising the youth crystallised in the organisation and celebration of World Youth Day (WYD), held annually in Rome since 1984 and every two years in another city worldwide. In addition, the choice of WYD venues has usually been linked to geopolitics. There has been strong interest in promoting the celebration of WYD in places where the church perceived the need to counteract progressive policies or the growth of secularisation.

The “New Evangelization” narrative represents a specific proposal for social order with the Catholic doctrine as the source of inspiration and catalyst for social, cultural, and moral reformation (Casanova, 2001). During the pontificate of John Paul II, the idea of the “New Evangelization” became a leitmotif and a concrete programme. This concept appeared for the first time in the “Message to the People of Latin America”, published in the framework of the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín (1968). Years later, John Paul II (1979) referred to the term in his first apostolic pilgrimage to Poland. The idea implied the re-launching of the church in the secular world through the role and the empowerment of the laity to withstand global situations of social and religious change.

John Paul II continued the traditional Vatican crusade against communism, the emergence of secularism and intimacy-related policies through the “New Evangelization” concept, and the focus on youth was one of the main strategies developed. It was a turning point for the action deployed by the Catholic Church in civil society, whereby secular individuals took a step forward to participate in public space as citizens animated by their Catholic faith under an “ethics of responsibility” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The “liberation theology's” “preferential option for the poor” was considered a “false theology” and was identified with Marxism and communism by conservative sectors of the Catholic Church (Alcántara Navarro, 2019). In Mexico and Latin America, the Vatican policy made efforts to dismantle progressive Catholic approaches and articulate the “preferential option for youth” (Pérez-Rayón, 2015) to facilitate youth engagement with the Catholic Church in the decade of the 80s.

In Spain and Europe, the “New Evangelization” programme aimed to work against “a sort of secularist interpretation of Christian faith” (John Paul II, 2003), and its main goal was to foster the re-Christianization of Europe. In Spain, the dissemination and implementation of the “New Evangelization” programme were led by the so-called “new ecclesial movements” who collaborated “very effectively in the success of the neoconservative project of John Paul II in all fields: political, economic, religious, cultural and social” (Tamayo, 2006, p. 142).

The youth became a crucial agent in this programme, and both Mexico and Spain were considered strategic territories for youth evangelisation due to their importance in their continents. This translated into the celebration of large-scale youth events that foster youth religious and political commitment to the Catholic Church. The fourth WYD was held in Santiago de Compostela (Spain) in 1989 after the socialist Felipe Gonzalez's third electoral victory. Likewise, in the case of Mexico, John Paul II held mass events with many young people in attendance during his five visits.

These highly religious young Catholics represent a new generation that has mostly grown up within the context, or at least the influence, of a specific type of Catholic religiosity linked to the neoconservative ecclesial movements, but at the same time, in a society in which Catholicism is declining (Pew Research Center, 2018). Most of these neoconservative new ecclesial movements (e.g., Legionaries of Christ, Neocatechumenal Way, and Opus Dei)

received Vatican recognition during the John Paul II papacy (García Martín, 2022). To some extent, they gained recognition for being considered crucial in bringing the Catholic faith to the public sphere. All of them have an increasing presence in both countries, among other local or regional ecclesial movements for which the youth are essential, such as "Testimony and Hope" (Testimonio y Esperanza) in Mexico or "Hakuna" in Spain.

Testimony and Hope is a youth movement founded in 1984 in the Mexican province of Morelos (Delgado-Molina, 2020). According to an interview with one of its members, its primary goal is to "train future political leaders, so they do not leave their religious convictions on the path" (Female, university student, 18-years-old, Mexico). They are the Christ the King National Youth Pilgrimage organisers at the Cerro del Cubilete. Their weekly meetings include rhetoric and oratory training to "be able to oppose with arguments against those who defend the culture of death" (Female, university student, 18-years-old, Mexico). The founder, Marco Adame, became governor of the Morelos Mexican state (2006–2012) and promoted legislation to protect life "from conception to natural death", according to the Vatican motto.

In the Spanish case, the group Hakuna was founded at the Rio de Janeiro WYD (Brazil, 2013). Juridically, they are a faithful private organisation and "seek to glorify God through the public expression of their faith" (Hakuna, 2022), especially in the cultural field. Originally linked to Opus Dei, the charismatic dimension of their spirituality forced them to split from the discreet spirituality of the organisation that gave birth to the group. A meeting place for highly Catholic young people, this organisation is a relevant platform for recruiting activists committed to the struggle against cultural change and expanding rights related to sexual and reproductive freedom and the legalisation of euthanasia. Our fieldwork has allowed us to identify the strong presence of Hakuna members in the social and political mobilisations of two of the most mobilised conservative organisations in recent years in Spain: the + Life Foundation (Fundación + Vida), which fought against the legalisation of abortion, and Vividores, which protested against the euthanasia law (2021) with spectacular online and offline campaigns during the Covid-19 health crisis.

4 | BECOMING A COGNITIVE MINORITY: RELIGIOUS SOCIALISATION AND SECULARISATION IN MEXICO AND SPAIN

The school's key role in forming individual and collective religious identities has been widely studied (Aslan & Hermansen, 2021). An analysis of the trajectories of these highly religious young people shows that most of them have been socialised in private or charter schools managed by the aforementioned new neoconservative ecclesiastical movements. Despite some exceptions, most of these schools tend to hold and transmit conservative views, mainly on issues such as sexuality, family models, and the role of Christianity in contemporary societies. In the Spanish case, many of these schools are segregated by sex.

These institutions are chosen mainly for two reasons: Catholic families want schools to socialise their children harmoniously with the (Catholic) education received at home. Second, there are families that, despite not being actively catholic, take their children to religious schools to benefit from the social and cultural capital these institutions accumulate (Molina Fuentes, 2022). To a certain extent, this helps to explain the overrepresentation of the middle and upper class among young people who actively participate in public life mobilising their religiosity.

Nowadays, in both countries, Catholic schools function as the main venue for young people's religious (and class) socialisation and their recruitment and integration within Catholic movements. Students are usually invited to join some conservative Catholic movements or to participate in specific campaigns or public events (e.g., anti-abortion demonstrations). As an Opus Dei numerary and candidate of the Spanish extreme right-wing party Vox stated in an interview:

All [Opus Dei] schools were expressly asked to support the FEF demonstrations... That seems very good to me, yes! You say: "I am trying to stop a barbaric legislation, I am sounding the alarm in all my schools, and I am going to Madrid to stop the country..." (Male, lawyer, 56-years-old, Spain).

The emergence and increased visibility of these highly religious Catholics are closely linked with their role as opponents of advancing progressive legislation on sexual and reproductive rights (Casanova, 2021). In Spain, young Catholic moral entrepreneurs started to become very prominent in the public sphere in the debates around the same-sex marriage act in 2005, while in Mexico, it was the controversy regarding the approval of the abortion act in 2007 that fostered the visibility of young religious leaders in public. These highly religious Catholics confronted the groups defending this legislation (e.g., feminist groups or leftist unions) while organising mass-attended demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, and other events.

The Catholic-inspired neoconservative field is led by three organisations in Spain: the FEF, CG-HO, and PSV. In legal terms, they are non-denominational and do not hold formal ties with the Catholic Church. However, they promote a discourse aligned with the globally circulating pro-life one (Munson, 2008) through protest events, such as rallies, demonstrations, or performances. Youths have prominent roles as animators and advocates of highly visible campaigns on social networks and media, but especially as the visible face of a movement traditionally associated with the elderly.

In the case of Mexico, although the Frente Nacional por la Familia (National Front for the Family, hereafter FNF) emerged in 2016 as a response to the proposal for new national legislation on same-sex marriage (Garma, Ramírez & Corpus, 2018), Catholic conservative movements opposing moral politics have mainly organised at a more local level. In Mexico, the decriminalisation of abortion and same-sex marriage is not regulated at the federal level, which gives more relevance to the local sphere. Whenever state-level legislators discuss voting on these new laws, young people in favour of and against changes congregate to protest in front of Congress. These highly religious young Catholics call for demonstrations and attract people to their cause through religious schools and social media. The media often widely criticised their participation, as the secular regime in Mexico prohibits religious participation in politics (Delgado-Molina, 2020).

These highly religious young Catholics are being socialised as Catholics in increasingly secularised countries, where identification as a Catholic is progressively becoming an exception. Even within Catholic schools, religious belonging and practice are not taken for granted (Molina Fuentes, 2022). As most of the interviews showed, the participants have had to face multiple situations in which they felt they were a “cognitive minority”, which might be defined as “a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society” (Berger, 1970, p. 6).

I am now in a public university. I think I am the only Catholic in that classroom. When the demonstrations for the family occurred, I gave my opinion. It was horrible. [...] My conclusion was that that's really what life is; that's what it's all about now. [...] Standing up for your ideals is not going to be easy; that was my conclusion. It was like a sample of what my whole life is going to be like because, in the future, I plan to work in pro-life associations. So, it was like “get used to it and be prepared enough” (Female, university student, 21-years-old, Mexico).

These individuals seek to preserve consistency with religious discourses and religious social representations whose “plausibility structures” (Berger, 1967) have been strongly eroded due to the processes of secularisation and religious change. Thus, they become a “group formed around a body of deviant *knowledge*” (Berger, 1970, p. 6).

While identifying as a minority and acting for the preservation of the increasingly minoritised religious values in society, they also express feelings of loneliness and isolation. In the interviews, it became clear that they interpret these feelings through a frame that can “help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organise experience and guide action” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198) while enhancing the idea that they are silenced and persecuted due to their religious beliefs.

As Fricker (2009) notes, at a certain point, subjects who belong to a “cognitive minority” may feel victimised. They consider themselves the object of an “epistemic injustice” because they perceive that their identity and their moral principles are being devalued (or threatened).

I believe that there is a kind of witch-hunt in which if one manifests oneself as a Catholic in the street, one is already being hit with a sledgehammer... That is how it is. [...] In other words, being Catholic is understood as something negative in the public sphere (Male, university student, 26-years-old, Spain).

As is widely known, collective identity is linked to a specific definition of reality (Melucci, 1989). However, the weaker the plausibility structure of the group, the more difficult it is to maintain the definition of the reality they construct. Two alternatives arise from this scenario: (1) they protect themselves as a cognitive minority that intensifies their attributes in the face of the accurate or imagined perception of threat (which in the case of religious groups can give rise to fundamentalist dynamics), or (2) in the face of the external erosion of the reality represented by the group, they eventually give into certain characteristic features and enter into an attitude of adaptation and social change.

Faced with the perception of moral threat, many of these highly Catholic youths become “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker, 1963), that is, political agents who act to transform the world to what they believe is right. Profoundly disturbed by the rules of “the secular world”, which they identify as the cause of social decomposition, moral entrepreneurs feel compelled to change the rules to correct the evil they identify with an absolutist ethical assessment. They undertake a fervent moral crusade, entirely convinced they work for the common good. They want others to follow their rules and believe that if they follow them, “it will be good for them” (Becker, 1963, p. 148). The identification of these evils is a “call to arms” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 199) by moral entrepreneurs.

Evil is perceived as the main driver of the violence prevailing in society. What they call the “attacks on the family” are considered the root cause of this violence (Delgado-Molina, 2020). These moral entrepreneurs develop a knowledge framework, which they call the “culture of death”, in which sexual diversity, abortion, and same-sex marriage are identified as causing social chaos and violence. As they note in the interviews, in their view, they must confront legislative advances in the political field to protect society from evil. To some extent, they state that they are responsible for “fighting the battle” in the public sphere to protect the “Christian” character of the nation.

Likewise, these highly religious young Catholics label those classmates or friends who question this moral framework and/or detach themselves from the Catholic influence as “traitors”.

In the second year of high school [in Opus Dei], people would say: “I want to get out of the bubble. They always teach us the same thing”. [...] They get out and go to a public university and get out of the bubble... But they get out of one to get into another one! In this other one, they go out partying, have sex with whomever they want, cut ties with old friends, with family... People who consider that they have been in a bubble admit they don't have enough judgement to do things themselves (Female, university student, 20-years-old, Spain).

5 | BUILDING A GLOBAL MORAL FRAMEWORK: THE CULTURE OF LIFE VS THE CULTURE OF DEATH

The emergence and increasing visibility of a generation of highly religious Catholics that act as moral entrepreneurs in the public sphere go together with the production and dissemination of a global moral narrative around the concept of the “culture of life”. By adopting the perspective outlined by Goffman (1974), it is possible to identify a process of frame building that allows its proponents to set a clear boundary between what falls “inside” and “outside” of the frame (Snow & Benford, 1988).

The interviews, as well as the documents analysed, show that the “we” is constructed through the “culture of life” narrative (Vaggione, 2020), which is placed in contrast to what these moral entrepreneurs call the “culture of death” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). These expressions are widely used in interviews and documents but are never clearly defined. To some extent, everything perceived as being in line with the conservative Catholic culture is included within the “culture of life.” At the same time, anything that, according to their interpretation, moves away from it is

regarded as part of the so-called “culture of death.” A 26-year-old Mexican, when asked in an interview about this concept, stated: “I defend life from conception to natural death, cared for, in the bosom of a [heteronormative] family, that is the culture of life.”

The expression “culture of life” was first coined by Pope John Paul II (1991) to describe the importance of the Christian family and, later, to confront the institutionalisation of new civil, sexual, and reproductive rights (John Paul II, 1995). Since then, the idea of the “culture of life” has been used to contest the advance of rights that conservative Catholics consider to be against the Catholic doctrine. However, the concept not only works as a critique of reproductive rights but has become a more general framework that crystallises the idea of a “Catholic identity.” Along this line, a 28-year-old Spanish male observed in an interview: “This is not only about abortion. It is a package of very concrete ideas that serve as a proposal for social coexistence”.

The narrative has been gradually elaborated through documents produced by the Vatican. It is mainly articulated around the following statement: “the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end” (John Paul II, 1995: n. 2). The concept has been mobilised by the church to reconquer the politics of intimacy (Pelletier, 2012), and it is based on the discursive and behavioural model proposed by the concept of “Christian humanism,” which not only encompasses matters of intimate life (sexual, family, and marital morality) but also refers to a way of interpreting reality and being present in the world.

The “culture of life” narrative cannot be understood without its counterpart, the “culture of death”, which is defined as favouring “hedonism”, “materialism”, and “hyper-sexualisation”. These moral entrepreneurs consider the “culture of death” a displacement of Cold War ideological conflicts into a cultural and moral struggle in which the Catholic Church is the enemy to defeat (Jamin, 2018). They claim this is a historical battle, leading to a gradual, cumulative change. As a 25-year-old Spanish male stated in an interview: “[the “culture of death”] is a step-by-step process... escalating”.

The dichotomous representation of the “enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the culture of death and the culture of life” (John Paul II, 1995: n. 28) classifies everyone in one group or the other. Individuals are “not only “faced with” but necessarily “in the midst of” this conflict. [...] With the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life” (John Paul II, 1995: n. 28). The “culture of life” is said to be based on a divine, “natural order”, while the “culture of death” is defined as threatening this natural order.

Highly religious young Catholics are increasingly gaining a leading public role in Mexico and Spain through a “deliberate articulation of secular discourses and practices by religious actors to defend their doctrinal positions in public affairs” (Cornejo-Valle & Blázquez-Rodríguez, 2022, p. 4). This is what Vaggione (2020) calls “strategic secularism”, and it is what enables these groups to merge different elements of interpretation and move strategically from a religious discourse to the “use of secular subjects and objects as part of an overarching religious agenda” (Engelke, 2009, p. 52). This strategic secularism also permits them to blur differences with other groups and pull together various elements that, separately, may seem contradictory.

To defend life, you don't have to be Catholic or any particular ideology, nor do you have to be right-wing... there have even been, I don't know the name now, but I have read that there have even been communists who have defended life. Even now, even feminists have defended life, right? (Male, high school student, 17-year-old, Spain).

For these moral entrepreneurs, “what started as an amateur interest in a moral issue may become an almost full-time job” (Becker, 1963, p. 153). This is, for instance, the case of a young Spaniard who decided to study for a law degree at a highly secularised public university against the advice of his family. His decision to opt for a public university was motivated by his wish to confront secularised youth and fight against what he called the “culture of death.” While at the university, he started a pro-life association and organised protest events against the current abortion law in Spain. He told his mother: “I'm going to do battle... I'm going to evangelise at the university. I'm going to do some good... I think there is where you have to go to do the battle” (Male, university student, 25-years-old, Spain).

In recent years, the “culture of life” narrative has become a collective identity framework that unites different religious and non-religious groups at a global level around Christian values and traditions (Lo Mascolo, 2023), from conservative to far-right organisations (e.g., Vox in Spain, Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice in Poland, Lega Nord in Italy, or the Rassemblement National in France). The global success of this moral framework is also a consequence of the fact that it has been produced in a context where the protection of human life has become an “absolute moral imperative”, as Fassin (2011) has shown.

This ethical imperative drives these moral entrepreneurs against an enemy they must fight. For them, this is a “cultural war” (Bar-On, 2021). They believe that the political divisions are no longer based on classic structural differences (class, race, religion, and sex) but instead on the struggle over culture, values, moral codes, and lifestyles, which includes all the debates on morality politics. Acknowledging that this discourse is built and developed with a strong emotional component is also essential. As Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001) assert, passion, emotions, ideology, and interests push people to mobilise and act collectively.

Ecumenical and interdenominational partnerships in the public space are built around the notion of cultural war conveyed among Catholics and evangelicals. This was, for instance, the case for demonstrations organised simultaneously in 30 Mexican cities by the FNF after the Constitutional Court declared abortion constitutional in the case of rape (2016). This partnership among religious denominations is also recurrent in the public mobilisations that the Spanish PSV organises every 25th March in Madrid.

The narrative of the “culture of life” is usually expressed as a “moral panic”, and the ideas belonging to the so-called “culture of death” are defined as a threat to “societal values and interests” (Cohen, 2011, p. 1). Some authors like Herdt (2009) term such discourses as “sex panics,” because they appear to be closely connecting sexuality, gender, sexual and reproductive health rights under the name “gender ideology.” However, as we found in the interviews, this is a narrative that goes beyond “sex panics” and also opposes other issues, such as biomedical research or assisted dying. In this sense, an interviewee stated:

Nobody decides whether or not to kill somebody because of what it means to take care of them. But you say, “this person is not useful; he’s not living a life according to normal standards”. And that’s what happened in Nazi Germany. When I say it people get surprised, but there they say that disabled people didn’t meet the standards. [...] So, these old people with Alzheimer’s who don’t meet the standards: what do we want them for? We’ll kill them. In the end, it is a utilitarian conception of man (Male, student, 26-years-old, Spain).

The “culture of death” is the master frame (Snow & Benford, 1988) that aligns concurring multiple frames, including moral panic discourses related to intimacy (Dobbelaere & Pérez-Agote, 2015) such as the right to die with dignity, the use of embryos in biomedical research, and the sex panic identified with the so-called “gender ideology”. There are different degrees of alignment with neoconservative positions among the highly Catholic youth. Here it is important to note that while we are witnessing a growing number of highly Catholic youth taking leadership positions within conservative public movements, we cannot affirm that there is a growing number of highly religious conservative youth in Spain or Mexico in absolute terms. Studies in other contexts show that many religious youths openly oppose extreme right agendas (e.g. Coley, 2018), while there is evidence of the difficulties of progressive catholic movements to make their voices heard in the public space (Díaz-Salazar, 2008). However, the article wants to highlight the increasing visibility and political relevance of several conservative highly religious young Catholics acting as moral entrepreneurs and drawing on this master frame of the “culture of life/death” in the public sphere.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

In the last 2 decades, highly religious young Catholics have gained relevance as public and political actors in Mexico and Spain. This is a generation of Catholics that have built their religious identity as a form of resistance, or as in

opposition, to hegemonic secular youth cultures. However, at the same time, they have been the target of the church policies and doctrines related to the “New Evangelization” programme. They have been strongly empowered to act and perform as Catholics in the public sphere. A new generation of “moral entrepreneurs” has emerged. Inspired by their Catholic belonging, they are developing intense public and political activism defending what in the global conservative narrative is called the “culture of life.” Although the organisation of these countersecularising stances is only recently evident, it is a process of symbolic and cultural struggle that has been going on for decades (see Klatch, 1999). As we have seen, highly religious young Catholics are a minority in Mexico and Spain. However, they are gaining visibility in the public sphere, and their activism is increasingly anchored in the perception of being in an increasingly hostile world.

In the interviews with these “moral entrepreneurs”, it is possible to observe discourses and attitudes that evidence a self-proclaimed “moral superiority” as they reflect on their role in safeguarding the Christian religion in secularised environments. The concept of “ecclesiola in ecclesia” (Wach, 2019) characterises the non-schismatic groups that protest against laxity within the larger ecclesiastical body, seeing themselves as the only actors operating prominently and coherently in a context of increasing secularisation. The narrative around the “culture of life” (and the “culture of death”) operates as a cultural, moral framework that, while motivating and giving meaning to their public actions, serves to articulate and bring together many existing movements, associations, and actors.

This moral framework has a global dimension but is also locally articulated with reactions to specific struggles. As a result of our fieldwork and the comparison between the two geographical cases, we have shown that the narratives share multiple elements but, at the same time, are being developed in dialog with local circumstances, such as specific advances in legislation or concrete controversies. In addition to the narrative similarity among the different contexts, there is also a policy diffusion process concerning the mobilisation repertoires used by these young moral entrepreneurs in both countries. The bus campaigning tactic is very illustrative of this. The bus was conceived as a highly confrontational protest against the so-called “gender ideology” and was promoted by the Spanish CG-HO in 2017 (Cabezas, 2022). The idea first emerged in Spain and was then replicated in Mexico. The bus had printed the following message: “Boys have penises. Girls have vulvas. Don't be fooled”.

The bus began circulating in Madrid in the context of the public debate on sexual equality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) rights and then embarked on a tour throughout Spain. Following complaints from the LGBTI + community, the bus was temporarily withdrawn from circulation. In response, CG-HO arranged a demonstration in Madrid claiming citizens' right to free expression, emphasising that they are persecuted as a minority due to their opposition to what they call “gender ideology”. A bus with the same labelling started to travel around Mexico within the Organization of the American States General Assembly (Cancun, 2017). Then it started a national tour in the context of local elections. The so-called “Freedom Bus” was accompanied by press conferences that strengthened and disseminated their views against sexual and reproductive rights. In both countries, the tour was also supported by cyberactivism and a campaign on social networks with the hashtag #NoTeMetasConMisHijos (#Don'tMessWithMyChildren). The relevance of young Catholics is crucial in the diffusion of the event and the amplification of the message.

The struggle against moral politics (e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage, and the promotion of traditional family models) occupies a central place in the organisation of networks of actors from different countries and cultural contexts, aligning local heterogeneity from a common framework based on the strategic secularisation of discourses. As Casanova (2021) highlights, there is a growing transnational cross-fertilisation of discourses, ideas, non-governmental organisations, networks, legal strategies and online resources between evangelicals and conservative Catholics in meeting places such as the World Congress of Families (WCF, 2022), where spaces of cultural and political socialisation are generated. This points out the magnitude of the frameworks referred to in the text and highlights the heterogeneity of concerns, mobilisation strategies, and discourses according to territories.

In this sense, our article shows how the mobilisation of highly religious young Catholics in Spain and Mexico can be understood from the intersection of historical trends and the relevance of individual biographies. We demonstrate that, rather than top-down coordination of struggles in the face of pluralism, they present combined mobilisation

strategies in which the global coordination of the Vatican is as significant as the local dynamics of resistance to cultural change. In addition, the article explains how religious networks might become spaces for political socialisation in a context marked by secularisation and political polarisation and how religious frameworks can shape and motivate public moral discourses. Nowadays, there is a lack of empirical contributions from the social movements and the sociology of youth addressing this increasing political role of the highly religious youth in contemporary societies and explaining their role as counteracting progressive moral agendas in the public space. This article is a first step towards understanding the emergence of highly catholic youth as “moral entrepreneurs” in Spain and Mexico's public and political sphere. However, ample research, and much data, are needed to explore to what extent this increase in visibility of these actors correlates with a high number of them, to examine the global dimension of these movements, or to address how those youth Catholics non-engaged in conservative movements perceive and respond to this situation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTES

- More than 600 texts and images were collected on Facebook and Twitter, archived with screenshots, and ordered chronologically. All the research material was processed with the MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. For more information on digital ethnography's technical and ethical considerations in this research, see Delgado-Molina, 2020.
- There is no clear and systematic monitoring of youth religiosity in either country. In order to sustain the assertion about the growing public visibility, we rely on secondary sources that underline this fact (e. g., Vatican News, 2020; WCF, 2022) and on the data provided by the two qualitative research studies on which this article is based.

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