

The beards of Christ and Kropotkin

Although the aforementioned seem irreconcilable and churches burn at red-and-black ordes, dialogue between their followers has endured and showed its fruitfulness, among other times, long ago, right here.



(Members of the Comunidad del Sur arriving at El Arado on a Sunday in 1954 **Courtesy of Bruderhof Historical Archives**)

It's eight pm in Montevideo and six pm in New York. The phone screen lights up and a photo of Coretta Thomson appears (smiling, holding a baby, her blond hair peeking out from under a headscarf). His accented Spanish travels the length of the continent and through my headphone cord. It comes from the Bruderhof, a Christian community with Anabaptist roots that emerged just over a century ago,¹ based in the United States. Thomson was born there in 1987.

Then another call. From these latitudes. It's Laura Prieto. She was born in a different community, a libertarian one. The Comunidad del Sur, founded in 1955, is historically the largest and most influential Uruguayan communitarian and anarchist experience (although it was never explicitly named that way). My caller has gray hair and wears glasses, at least in her WhatsApp photo, and also smiles. She came into the world 30 years before Thomson and never spoke to her.

The women have only met in these paragraphs, but a common history has determined part of their lives. It began in the early 1950s, with the arrival of members of the Bruderhof to Uruguay. Although the congregation (which grew to 90 members) was associated with Protestant, Jewish and, to a lesser extent, Catholic groups, it forged its most important link with atheists: anarchists. They were university students in their 20s with libertarian ideas, mostly students of Fine Arts, and student activists. The bond with

the Christians was so important that they were inspired by them to form their own community. ²

According to Edda Ferreira, Prieto's mother and a founder of the Comunidad del Sur, the anarchists met the *barbudos* (that's what they called them) in a talk in a student center, around the corner from the bar where they met to talk of life and politics: «They dressed strangely: all in black, antiquated; the women, with long skirts and a scarf that covered their hair. They were strange. The talk interested us because they said that there were no thieves among them, that it was a place of solidarity, mutual respect, love. We went to visit them, and we liked them! They told us: "If you want to do something like this, why don't you start? They prodded us like that and we accepted."³

«I met the *barbudos* when I was a child. They grew strawberries and sold them at the market, and when they had a surplus, they brought it to us. These young people, who would later create the Comunidad del Sur, were already questioning property, power, the relationships between men and women, and the distribution of work, and were considering the need for social change. They began to look favorably on those people who had a community and an egalitarian ["horizontal"] structure, who put into practice the life of which they spoke," says Prieto, who estimates that some 40 people came to live together permanently in the community, but hundreds were linked to it.

At El Arado, the farm in rural Montevideo where the congregation stayed for most of its stay in Uruguay, the Christians planted fruits and vegetables, raised animals, and sold their products; some worked outside. Each family group had its own home, in addition to the common spaces where they ate, prayed, and shared songs and readings. They made decisions unanimously and the education of the children occupied a central place in the activity. The statutes of the Bruderhof establish the complete community of property and production and consumer goods, and urge the members to unconditionally hand over their income to the collective.⁴ «Everyone contributes what they can and everyone takes what they need, according to the capacities and needs of each one. It's [Karl] Marx's vision, only Marx stole it from the early Christians and then took God out of it," says Thomson half jokingly, half seriously.

The Comunidad del Sur, influenced by libertarian theory and the practice of the *barbudos*, set out to redefine all the dimensions of life under the premises of self-management and the rejection of private property. Work at home and in the printing press was egalitarian and with rotation of roles; the assemblies and decision making were always collective and by total agreement. And, although they still recognized biological parenthood, all the members were involved in raising the children. ⁵

Four years ago, Thomson came to Uruguay to perfect her Spanish and research the history (which she compiled in a Bachelor's thesis) of the Bruderhof's passage through this country. Findings such as those shown in the El Arado documents about the intense bond with the anarchists surprised even academics dedicated to political and religious issues. Not so much her: «The Bruderhof has been associated with left-wing organizations. It is not that we are a left group, but we have sympathy with social justice movements and those fighting for the rights of the poor. In its origins, the community was made up of people dissatisfied with the good salaries of pastors and the vertical structure of the Church, and with people from radical leftist circles.

Although faith in Christ and marriage between a man and a woman for life, something about which the Bruderhof is convinced, are principles that are at the opposite end of the spectrum from those of the Comunidad del Sur, pacifism, the international perspective and the desire to build a better world were important common ground.⁶ The bond between the members of both groups became so close that, Prieto says, her family lived for a few months in El Arado. Her parents decided to go there to work on their "relationship problems." "You were excited about that, it seemed to you that things were possible," recalls an old anarchist from his time in the Comunidad del Sur and the time of the *barbudos*.

OLD TIES

The dialogue between libertarians and Christians is nothing new. "In Uruguay it began in the factories, where anarchists, Catholics and Christians came together in the unions, in the middle of the last century," says the researcher specialized in religion Nicolás Iglesias. He adds that Christians and anarchists have carried out joint activities and publications over time.

At 85, Juan Carlos Mechoso, a past member of the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation, says that in the 1950s, union activists and anarchists, together with members of the La Teja Christian Community, occupied municipal homes that were to be handed over to political clubs to that could be inhabited by people who had nowhere to live: "We broke down the doors, but the Christians accompanied us." He also remembers the participation of a Methodist pastor in the meetings at the Ateneo del Cerro-Teja in support of the meat-packing strike, at the same time, and of the youth of the Student Worker Resistance who were in the Church of the Cerro to go out and put up posters around the neighborhood. He naturally mentions the meetings of anarchists (and other groups) in the churches of La Teja and La Unión, shortly before the dictatorship. «The priests did not set any conditions. The Bibles were there, on the

benches. You would pile them up in a corner and sit down," he says, and it makes him laugh a bit.

The anarcho-Christian bond not only goes back beyond this era, but there are those who consider that the first Christians, the "true" ones, embodied part of what anarchist ideals have been. It is what is known by the name of *primitive or communal Christianity*. "According to a possible interpretation of the Gospels, in the 1st and 2nd centuries Christians shared property and no one lacked anything. They lived in community, without private property, making decisions together, that is, sharing the religious dimension, but also daily life. Based on these stories from the Bible, many Christian groups at different times in history have decided to return to that type of simple life, without hierarchies, as a way of approaching the essence of the Christian faith, beyond institutional structures and the power of the day," says Iglesias. He clarifies that communal Christianity does not exist from a confessional point of view: it is a theological-ideological trend, a way of living the faith. It is, to clarify, a minority expression within Christianity.

In the same vein, Gerardo Garay, a Ph.D. in Educational Sciences and a Philosophy professor, maintains that anarchism and Christianity have several points in common, although "it is generally believed that they pass along different and antagonistic paths." "These currents have manifested as a way of life, both individual and collective, and deep down, their utopias are not so different," he points out. He indicates that the libertarian Paraguayan writer Rafael Barret (to whom he dedicated a book) quoted Jesus and the apostles more than anarchist authors. «In history there have been anarchists who call themselves Christians, like Leo Tolstoy. In the United States, which has a very large anarchist socio-intellectual development, there have been anarchist nuns," he adds. Obviously, anarchism, a heterogeneous and complex world, harbors various aspects and not all of them are identified with aspects of Christianity, which is why Garay prefers to speak of anarchisms, in the plural: "Atheism, the harsh criticism of religious belief and dogmatism, has been a very strong current in the history of anarchism. But there is also the other: if for some people communities of faith or the figure of Jesus generate spaces of growing freedom, why outlaw them?».

The revolution has never been in the Bruderhof's plans, unlike currents of Christianity associated with the left that have had warlike dimensions, such as liberation theology (which since its birth in the 1960s has garnered more attention than communal Christianity, mainly in the Latin American continent). The classic dilemma over means and ends has also raised differences and divisions within anarchists. Garay considers: "It is possible that insurrectionalism, confrontation and violence, and a sabotage of the State as a way of putting bourgeois society in tension, all prevail in the world

today." However, he explains, certain conceptions seek to combat power with pacifist practices that have to do, mainly, with the organization of daily life.

The member of the Bruderhof differentiates "the anarchists of the anarcho-socialist type, who speak of love and justice", which includes the Comunidad del Sur,⁷ from the "bomb-throwing *ácratas*." "We must be the change we want to see. Maybe one day the world will change, maybe not. Some anarchists say: 'We are going to do it more quickly: we are going to start the revolution.' That is a difference they have with us," she says.

UNINTENDED ALL CAPS AND A LANTERN

In 1960 the Bruderhof congregation began its withdrawal from Uruguay, a country to which it had arrived almost by chance, after fleeing Nazism in Germany and emigrating to various countries. When they left for the United States, the *barbudos* left benches, chairs and wooden toys they had made to the Comunidad del Sur. Prieto says that one of the members of El Arado fell in love with a Uruguayan from the community and stayed to live with the anarchists, and that, conversely, a young libertarian left with the religious.

After the *barbudos* left, the communities kept in contact. During and after their exile,⁸ some anarchists traveled to visit them. Thomson cites in her research an email, dated 2000, that Ruben Prieto, Laura's father and founder of the Comunidad de Sur, sent to Klaus Meier, a member of the Bruderhof, both deceased: «I would like to start a long-distance dialogue on common themes and, above all, maintain a bond that encourages us in moments of weakness. THE "BARBUDOS" WERE AND ARE A REFERENCE FOR US. (All caps was accidental, but I leave them because it is true.)». According to Thomson, the reasons for the departure had to do with the configuration of the movement on a global level: "In South America the Bruderhof did not manage to enlarge its community considerably, probably due to a cultural issue. In addition, they had financial difficulties and sought to reduce the number of congregations."

In parallel, the bearded men began to distance themselves from the libertarians. The upheaval of the sixties began: «The anarchists became politicized. Coming close to a movement of utopian seekers is one thing and being highly involved with a more political group is... After all, we are not here for politics. Many times, the members of El Arado wondered how they could continue to help their friends, who asked them for practical answers on how to do this or that. They told them that their actions were based on faith in God and a life in which there is forgiveness of sins, and that it was not possible to just imitate them. Perhaps that was the moment to leave the anarchist

movement." The different conceptions about amorous relationships, in which the Comunidad del Sur became a lot looser when the groups were already in different continents, did not help the rapprochement either.

For Prieto, the departure of the congregation was closely linked to their distancing from the Comunidad del Sur: «The *barbudos* left here because there was too much anarchist influence in their community. When I went to visit them in New York, on their return from exile, one of the old men who had been in Montevideo told me that the Comunidad del Sur was like a lantern that lacked its light, which was God. Perhaps they left because they were afraid of losing the light.

1. A current of Protestantism that does not practice infant baptism.
2. Coretta Thomson, « Una estela en el Río de la Plata. El Bruderhof en Uruguay, 1950-1960», thesis of the Bachelor of Humanities, University of Montevideo, 2020.
3. Ivonne Trías and Universindo Rodríguez, *Gerardo Gatti: Revolucionario*, Trilce, Montevideo, 2012.
4. Thomson, ob. cit.
5. Adriana Miniño, «En torno a los orígenes de la Comunidad del Sur. Indicios de una plural y heterodoxa genealogía”, II International Congress of Researchers on Anarchism (s), Montevideo, 2019. Currently, for a master's thesis, Miniño delves into the links between the Southern Community and the Society of Brothers (Bruderhof) .
6. Thomson, ob. cit.
7. Prieto states: "Although it had contact with armed groups during the dictatorship, the Comunidad del Sur was always pacifist and tried to change the world through daily life."
8. During the dictatorship the group sold its land and, with the exile of several of its members, it scattered. After the democratic opening, some of the original members and a group of young people re-founded the Comunidad del Sur.