News

Jesuit Francisco de Paula Oliva is pictured in a March 14, 2018, photo in Asunción, Paraguay.

Jesuit Francisco de Paula Oliva is pictured in a March 14, 2018, photo in Asunción, Paraguay. (CNS photo/Santi Carneri)

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Asuncion, Paraguay — January 4, 2022

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After a life in Paraguay working in the poorest neighborhoods and training several generations of young leaders, Jesuit Father Francisco de Paula Oliva died Jan. 3 in Asunción. He was 93.

The Spanish-born Jesuit lived through the revolution in Nicaragua. He fought with words in the media against Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner and the Colorado Party. He was expelled to Argentina, was almost kidnapped and survived as a refugee in England and Ecuador until he returned to Paraguay.

Father Oliva, known in the Guarani language as "Pa'i Oliva," was an emblem of the daily struggle for social equality in Paraguay, one of the most unequal countries in the Americas, where 2.5% of the population owns more than 80% of the arable land.

Esperanza Martínez, Paraguayan senator and former minister of health, described him as "our dear Pa'i Oliva, a tireless companion in all the struggles and all the claims for social injustices."

Paraguayan historian Margarita Durán-Estragó wrote on her social network profile: "We have a new Paraguayan saint. San Pa'i Oliva. ... He left without ceasing to amaze us. A great among the greats. Aguyje pa'i (Thanks, father)".

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Father Oliva, born in Seville Spain, joined the Jesuits in 1946 and, in 1964, he settled in Paraguay to work as a teacher. He became a Paraguayan national the following year, and a month later he was expelled by the Stroessner dictatorship. The police arrested him, put him on a boat and took him to the other side of the river, to Argentina. There he stayed for nine years, assisting Paraguayan and Bolivian migrants in Buenos Aires while under surveillance by the police and the army.

At the invitation of the Anglican Church, he was able to travel to England just when the military intended to kidnap him in the midst of the Argentine dictatorship. Two of his collaborators "disappeared."

At the time, his Jesuit superior in Argentina, with whom he had constant conversations, was Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Pope Francis and Father Oliva met again in 2015 in Asunción and embraced as friends.

Hundreds of people from the neighborhood where Father Oliva lived and worked watched over his body before its burial Jan. 4.