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Pope Francis meets with Jesuits in Hungary at the apostolic nunciature in Budapest April 29, 2

Pope Francis meets with Jesuits in Hungary at the apostolic nunciature in Budapest April 29, 2023. On his foreign trips, the pope usually responds to questions from local Jesuits, and a transcript of the encounter is published several weeks later in the Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Questioned by the confreres of a Hungarian Jesuit kidnapped with another priest and imprisoned during Argentina's murderous military dictatorship, Pope Francis said, "I did what I felt I had to do to defend them. It was a very painful affair."

Francis met with 32 Jesuits April 29 during his three-day trip to Budapest, Hungary. As is customary during his trips, he spent time with local Jesuits, answering their questions. The transcript of the encounter was published May 9 by La Civiltà Cattolica, an Italian Jesuit journal.

One of the Jesuits at the meeting asked the pope what his relationship with Fr. Ferenc Jálics, the Hungarian, had been like and noted, "Serious accusations have been made against you."

Jálics and another Jesuit, Fr. Orlando Yorio, were kidnapped by Argentina's military junta in 1976. The pope, then-Jesuit Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was the Jesuit provincial of Argentina from 1973 to 1979, the height of the clandestine war that saw as many as 30,000 Argentines kidnapped, tortured, murdered or disappeared, never to be seen again.

Allegations periodically have surfaced that then-Fr. Bergoglio either failed to protect Jálics and Yorio or even that he facilitated their kidnapping.

Responding to the question in Budapest, Francis told the Jesuits that Jálics had been his spiritual director and confessor during his initial theology studies.

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"In the neighborhood where he worked there was a guerrilla cell. But the two Jesuits had nothing to do with them: they were pastors, not politicians," the pope said. "They were innocent when taken prisoner. The military found nothing to charge them with, but they had to spend nine months in prison, suffering threats and torture."

They were released, "but these things leave deep wounds," the pope said, and because the situation in the country was "confusing and uncertain," he said he advised Jálics to go to the United States, where his mother was.

"Then the legend developed that I had handed them over to be imprisoned," the pope said. "You should know that a month ago the Argentine bishops' conference published two volumes, of three planned, with all the documents related to what happened between the church and the military. You will find everything there."

Later, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, the pope was formally questioned about the kidnapping.

Francis told the Hungarian Jesuits that he was questioned "about the way I behaved" during the dictatorship for "four hours and 10 minutes."

"In the end, my innocence was established," he said.

The pope said he had met several times with Jálics in the years since his release, including in Rome.

"But when he came the last time to see me in the Vatican, I could see that he was suffering because he didn't know how to talk to me. There was a distance," the pope said. "The wounds of those past years remained both in me and in him, because we both experienced that persecution."

Jálics died in Budapest in 2021 at the age of 94. Yorio died in 2000 in Uruguay.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Hungary** feature series. View the full series.