Opinion
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Pope Francis holds hands and prays with a dozen Jesuits working in South Sudan during a meeting Feb. 4, in Juba. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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When the Holy Father visited Hungary at the end of April, he met with the local Jesuit community. This practice of always meeting with the local Jesuits was initiated by Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, the editor of La Civilta Cattolica, which also publishes the transcript of these meetings.

The pope's remarks in Hungary made headlines because one of the Jesuits asked him about his experiences during Argentina's "dirty war." Some accused then-Jesuit Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio of complicity in turning over Fr. Ferenc Jálics, a Hungarian-born Jesuit who was working in Argentina, to the military junta. The pope has been exonerated of such charges.

Still, his answer was remarkable. All these years later, the subject is still clearly painful for the pope: "When Jálics and Yorio were taken by the military, the situation in Argentina was bewildering and it was not at all clear what should be done. I did

what I felt I had to do to defend them. It was a very painful affair." Later he commended one of the communist judges who examined him. Francis does not resolve the "bewildering" quality of that time with a neat, moralistic, ideological narrative to make a point about Christian living or social justice.

Pope Francis meets with Jesuits in Hungary at the apostolic nunciature in Budapest April 29. C

Pope Francis meets with Jesuits in Hungary at the apostolic nunciature in Budapest April 29. 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/Vatican Media)

The pope goes on to say, "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 wounds of those past years remained both in me and in him, because we both experienced that persecution." Again, there is no ideological narrative placed between him and the suffering he encountered in his friend. It is remarkable he speaks about "wounds," not scars. A scar is a wound that has healed. For the pope, this particular wound is still unhealed.

When asked about the reception of Vatican II, the pope's answer was unsurprisingly forward-looking. "It takes a century for a Council to be assimilated, they say. And I know the resistance to its decrees is terrible," Francis told the Hungarian Jesuits. "There is unbelievable restorationism, what I call '*indietrismo*' (backwardness), as the Letter to the Hebrews (10:39) says: 'But we do not belong to those who shrink back.' The flow of history and grace goes from the roots upward like the sap of a tree that bears fruit. But without this flow you remain a mummy. Going backwards does not preserve life, ever." He goes on to refer to the "nostalgic disease."

The pope asserted that the "this *indietrismo* … was not in the pastoral vision of my predecessors." This historical claim corresponds to the comments made by Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia at the time Pope Francis finally took steps to manage the celebration of the pre-Vatican II rite, and DiNoia worked closely with Pope Benedict XVI and with Francis on these very issues. It will be many years before we get the archives of this pope and his two immediate predecessors. I hope that Benedict recorded his growing concerns about his own decision to liberalize access to the Tridentine rite.

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Francis was asked about the formation of young Jesuits and young people more generally. "Speak clearly … show them consistency. Young people have a nose for when there is no consistency," he began. They certainly do. He added that a "key word is authenticity" and that "it is important for the young to dialogue with the old."

And, the pope reminded his questioner: " 'Tenderness' is one of God's key words: closeness, compassion and tenderness. On this path we will never go wrong. This is God's style." Tenderness is certainly one of the words that looms large in Francis' pastoral vision.

These talks with local Jesuits are always fascinating because the pope is so clearly at ease. In addition, because of the nature of his audience, the conversation starts at 50 miles per hour. It is a bit specialized compared, say, with a sermon or with his remarks upon arriving at the airport. Given the questions he is asked, he often reflects on his life before he became pope. When he met with the Jesuits in Congo earlier this year, he revealed he had twice refused nomination as a bishop.

When he met with the Jesuits in Ireland he spoke beautifully about the relationship of joy and penitence. "To have the freshness of the Gospel is to love sinners," the pope said. "I know one confessor. When sinners come to confess, he welcomes them in such a way that they feel free, renewed. … And when the penitent has something difficult to say, he does not insist but says, 'I understand, I understand,' freeing that person of embarrassment. He makes of that confession an encounter with Jesus Christ, not a torture room or a psychiatrist's couch."

You read a comment like that and ask why conservative Catholics have trouble with the pope if it is not their preference for neo-Pelagianism? And the next time you need to go to confession, you want to go to confession with the pope!

Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, director of the Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica, greets Pope Franc

Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, director of the Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica, greets Pope Francis during a meeting with Jesuits Sept. 15, 2022, at the apostolic nunciature in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. The journal published a transcript of the pope's remarks to them Sept. 28, 2022. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Earlier this year, NCR marked the 10-year anniversary of Francis' election with a series of articles looking at this pontificate from different perspectives. My colleague Christopher White penned an excellent profile of the other Jesuits the pope has appointed to important positions. None of us, including myself, thought to focus on these unique texts. It was an oversight.

Francis' sense of Jesuit identity is so wrapped up with his understanding of ecclesial renewal, these documents are priceless windows into his thinking. Would "discernment" play such a key role in our understanding of synodality but for the fact the pope is a Jesuit? Would his easy, albeit patient, exercise of authority, such as refusing the request of the Amazonian synod that older married men be ordained, be comprehensible but for his Jesuit understanding of obedience?

It is impossible to understand Francis without paying close attention to the fact he is a Jesuit, and these transcripts provide a hermeneutical key to his Jesuit sensibilities.