

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 17, 2013 at 4:50am

Francis, the Jesuits and the Dirty War

by Thomas Reese

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Rumors and questions are circulating about Pope Francis' time as the Jesuit provincial of Argentina and his relationship to two imprisoned Jesuits and the Argentine military dictatorship.

The Society of Jesus is filled with intelligent men who are passionate about their ideas and work, so of course there are arguments and disagreements just as there are in any family. I have had debates with other Jesuits over dinner where voices were raised, but that does not mean I don't love them and would not be willing to die for them. We are a family.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio, like Pope John Paul II, had serious reservations about liberation theology, which was embraced by many other Latin American Jesuits. As a North American, I have trouble understanding these disputes, since John Paul and Bergoglio obviously wanted justice for the poor while the liberation theologians were not in favor of violent revolution as their detractors claimed. But clearly this was an issue that divided the church in Latin America.

Part of the problem was the use of the term "Marxist analysis" by some liberation theologians, when they sought to show how the wealthy used their economic and political power to keep the masses down. The word "Marxist," of course, drove John Paul crazy. Meanwhile, the Latin American establishment labeled as Communist anyone who wanted economic justice and political power for workers. Even many decent but cautious people feared that strikes and demonstrations would lead to violence. What is "prudent" can divide people of good will.

There were also disagreements about how to respond to the military junta in Argentina. As provincial, Father Bergoglio was responsible for the safety of his men. He feared that Jesuit Fr. Orlando Yorio and Jesuit Fr. Franz Jalics were at risk and wanted to pull them out of their ministry. They, naturally, did not

want to leave their work with the poor.

Yorio and Jalics were arrested when a former lay colleague, who had joined the rebels and then been arrested, gave up their names under torture as people he had worked with in the past. This was normal practice for the military. The junta did not get information from Bergoglio. Contrary to rumor, he did not throw them out of the society and therefore remove them from the protection of the Society of Jesus. They were Jesuits when they were arrested. Yorio later left the society, but Jalics is still a Jesuit today, living in a Jesuit retreat house in Germany.

The Jesuit historian Fr. Jeff Klaiber interviewed Jesuit Fr. Juan Luis Moyano, who had also been imprisoned and deported by the military. Moyano told Klaiber that Bergoglio did go to bat for imprisoned Jesuits. There are disagreements over whether he did as much as he should have for them, but such debates always occur in these circumstances.

Adolfo Esquivel, the Argentine who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980, says Bergoglio was not involved with the military and did try to help the two Jesuits. He himself was imprisoned by the military and his son is married to Mercedes Moyano, the sister of Juan Luis Moyano.

Other rumors circulating say that as archbishop, Bergoglio allowed the military to hide prisoners in an archdiocesan retreat house so that they would not be seen by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights visiting the ESMA prison. Fact: Bergoglio was not archbishop when this took place. Horacio Verbitsky, an Argentine investigative journalist, says Bergoglio helped him investigate the case.

It is also said there is written evidence in the Argentine foreign ministry files that Bergoglio gave information on the Jesuits to the military. The alleged conversation took place when Bergoglio was trying to get the passport of one of the Jesuits extended. Not only did this take place after they were arrested and after they were released, it was after they were safely out of the country. Nothing he could say would endanger them, nor was he telling the government anything it did not already know. He was simply trying to convince a bureaucrat that it was a good idea to extend the passport of this man so he could stay in Germany and not have to return to Argentina.

More recently, Cardinal Bergoglio was involved in getting the Argentine bishops to ask forgiveness for not having done enough during the dirty war, as it was called in Argentina.

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In the face of tyranny, there are those who take a prophetic stance and die martyrs. There are those who collaborate with the regime. And there are others who do what they can while keeping their heads low. When admirers tried to claim that John Paul worked in the underground against Nazism, he set them straight and said he was no hero.

Those who have not lived under a dictatorship should not be quick to judge those who have, whether the dictatorship was in ancient Rome, Latin America, Africa, Nazi Germany, Communist Eastern Europe, or today's China. We should revere martyrs, but not demand every Christian be one.

Follow Reese on Twitter: [@ThomasReeseSJ](#). His email is reesesj@NCRonline.org.

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