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Hard questions about Francis in Argentina and a lesson from Chile

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

I spent early April in Buenos Aires, where I tried to learn more about Pope Francis from those who know him best as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio. The idea was to gain insight into the man and his vision of the church, and I published some of what I found along the way.

However, I also had to look into some hard questions about the new pope's record in Argentina. They include:

- Bergoglio's response to two priests accused of sexual abuse, where critics have suggested he dropped the ball;
- why Argentina's conference of Catholic bishops did not finish a set of sex abuse guidelines while he served as president;
- his relationship with Argentina's military dictatorship as a Jesuit provincial during the 1970s;
- Bergoglio's attitude toward liberation theology; and
- confusion over where he stood on the question of civil unions during a contentious national debate on gay marriage in 2009 and 2010.

The following are the best answers I can provide based on what I learned in Argentina.

Abuser priests

On March 18, *The Washington Post* moved a story from Argentina about Bergoglio's record on the sexual abuse crisis that highlighted two cases: Fr. Julio César Grassi, convicted in 2009 of two counts of abuse and acquitted of several others, and Fr. Napoleon Sasso, convicted in 2007 of abusing five minor girls.

In general, the story suggested Bergoglio did not handle either case by the standards now accepted by the church in other parts of the world. It noted he did not meet victims, did not offer apologies or financial restitution, and did not take ecclesiastical action against the priests involved.

To begin with, here's an important point not made in the *Post* story or in most subsequent commentary: Neither Grassi nor Sasso is a priest of the Buenos Aires archdiocese, and thus they were never under Bergoglio's direct supervision. (Among other things, that means Bergoglio was never in a position to impose ecclesiastical punishment, which would have to be done by their own bishops.)

Beyond that, observers say the two situations should be considered separately because Bergoglio's degree of involvement differs.

Sasso comes from the small diocese of Zárate-Campana. Most of his priestly work was in the San Juan archdiocese, where charges of sexual contact with minors first arose in 1994. After a psychological assessment in 1997, he was sent to a treatment center for priests in crisis in Buenos Aires called Domus Mariae.

Church sources say Sasso was not given priestly faculties by Bergoglio, and at no time did Bergoglio exercise any kind of supervision over him.

During 2002 and 2003, Sasso was back in the Zárate-Campana diocese, working in a soup kitchen in the city of Pilar, where he allegedly committed at least five acts of abuse against girls between the ages of 11 and 14. Those are the offenses for which he was criminally convicted in November 2007 and sentenced to 17 years in prison.

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The bishop of Zárate-Campana at the time the charges first arose was Rafael Eleuterio Rey, who resigned in February 2006 citing ill health. His successor is Bishop Oscar Domingo Sarlinga. During Sasso's 2007 trial, a letter was entered into evidence from Archbishop Italo Destéfano of San Juan, who died in 2002, urging the bishops to do something about Sasso.

Most church sources in Argentina believe that responsibility for how the Sasso case was handled belongs primarily with these prelates, not with Bergoglio.

Grassi, meanwhile, is a priest of the Morón diocese, where he was incardinated after leaving the Salesians in 1991. However, he had a more direct relationship with the future pope, since Bergoglio publicly supported the "Happy Children" foundation Grassi founded in 1993 to serve poor youth in the urban center.

Grassi has a high media profile in Argentina and is known as a savvy fundraiser adept at cultivating relationships with potential donors. Further, unlike Sasso, most of his priestly career has unfolded in Buenos Aires.

An Argentine television network first raised charges of molestation against Grassi in 2002. By the time a

nine-month trial wrapped up in 2009, Grassi had been convicted for two acts of abuse and sentenced to 15 years in prison, though he was acquitted of several other charges raised by two other accusers.

That sentence was upheld by an appellate court in 2010. Grassi is presently free after an order of house arrest was rescinded last February while he awaits the results of another appeal before the Buenos Aires Provincial Supreme Court.

Three points can be made about Bergoglio's response to the Grassi case.

First, critics have charged Bergoglio with failing to take ecclesiastical action against Grassi, such as removing him from the priesthood. Under canon law, however, such a step would have to come from Bishop Luis Guillermo Eichhorn of Morón. As the case has unfolded, the Morón diocese has said it will await a definitive result from the criminal justice system, which hasn't yet arrived.

Second, when Grassi's first trial ended in 2009, the bishops' conference commissioned a well-known jurist in Argentina named Marcelo A. Sancinetti to study the case. Bergoglio was the president of the conference at the time, and a spokesperson for the bishops, Fr. Jorge Oesterheld, told me the cardinal approved the decision to commission an independent legal review.

Sancinetti has produced three volumes so far and is currently working on a fourth, totaling more than 1,000 pages of material. (I have a copy of Sancinetti's second volume, which examines the accusations for which Grassi was actually convicted.)

Sancinetti concludes that Grassi is innocent on all counts, insisting the accusations are inconsistent with the evidence and marred by internal contradictions. Critics charge that Sancinetti relied almost entirely on defense materials in framing that assessment, but his belief in Grassi's innocence remains strong in some Catholic quarters, which may help explain why Bergoglio was hesitant about making statements or meeting accusers.

Oesterheld told me Bergoglio's basic position in the Grassi case is that "he didn't want to get ahead of the justice system," preferring to wait for the appeals process to run its course before making any judgment.

Third, it has been reported by some news agencies that Bergoglio, or the church generally, is paying Grassi's legal bills. According to his lawyer, Daniel Cavo, that's not the case.

Cavo told me through an interpreter that Grassi's expenses are being paid by small donations from people who still support him and his "Happy Children" foundation and that he has not received any financial assistance from the church.

Abuse guidelines

On April 5, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the bishops' conference of Argentina failed to meet a Vatican-imposed deadline of May 2012 for submitting a formal set of policies on fighting child abuse, noting that Bergoglio is the former president of the conference.

In the eyes of some, that missed deadline raises questions about how serious Bergoglio was on the sex abuse issue.

Four points help round out the story.

First, the original version of the *Journal* piece did not note that Bergoglio's term as president of the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA) ended in November 2011, so at least technically, responsibility

for missing the Vatican deadline resides with his successor as president, Archbishop José María Arancedo of Santa Fe.

Second, the bishops say a set of guidelines is close to being finished. A draft will be discussed at a meeting of the conference Monday then forwarded to the Vatican for review, according to Bishop Sergio Buenanueva, auxiliary bishop of Mendoza, who's overseeing the process.

Third, the bishops say one reason it's taken time to finish the task is because they wanted to wait for a February 2012 summit on the abuse crisis at Rome's Gregorian University, which was organized in part to help conferences that didn't yet have guidelines to pull them together. The idea was to give conferences the information they needed to ensure that their policies are consistent not only with Vatican expectations but with best practices in other parts of the Catholic world, such as Germany and the United States.

That's basically a credible claim, given that representatives of several other conferences I spoke to at that event said much the same thing. Buenanueva said when the guidelines are finished, they'll embrace a "zero tolerance" approach along the lines of the American model.

Fourth, Oesterheld said another reason the process has taken longer than expected is because during his term as president, Bergoglio was "very respectful" of the fact that each bishop has a direct relationship with the Vatican and the desire not to "supplant" that autonomy may be part of the reason it's taking time to hammer out common policies.

That same respect for local authority, Oesterheld said, will likely lead Francis to support a broader "decentralization" as pope in favor of greater latitude for local churches and bishops' conferences.

Bergoglio and the "Dirty War"

One specific accusation against Bergoglio that first surfaced in the run-up to the conclave of 2005 and that came up again after his election as pope is whether he was involved in the arrest and torture of two Jesuit priests, Orlando Yorio and Franz Jalics, in 1976. Both were involved in social ministry and were suspected by the military of being linked to leftist opposition movements.

That charge has basically collapsed in light of a March 20 statement from Jalics, who today lives in a German monastery: "The fact is, Orlando Yorio and I were not denounced by Father Bergoglio," he said.

On the broader question of Bergoglio's record during the military dictatorship, I consulted historian Roberto Bosca at the University of Astral in Buenos Aires. I asked about Bergoglio's relationship with the military government that took power in March 1976 and that ruled the country through a euphemistically termed "National Reorganization Process" until December 1983.

Bosca's basic take is that Bergoglio, like most people in Argentina at the time, was neither a supporter nor a critic.

"There's almost no record of anything he either said or wrote during that period either in favor of the regime or against it," Bosca said.

"Bergoglio was not really a church authority back then. He wasn't a bishop yet in Buenos Aires, he was simply the regional superior of a religious order. The nature of his job didn't lend itself to taking positions for or against the government, and my impression is that during that period was simply trying to do his job," Bosca said.

"If it's fair to ask what stand Bergoglio took, you might as well ask the same question for members of any other profession -- what stand did an individual doctor take, for instance, or a mechanic, or a barber? Further, there's no reason why the government would have listened had he said anything because he wasn't a high enough authority to be taken seriously," Bosca said.

"His way of coping with the regime was more or less the way most people in Argentina handled it, which is they still went to work and tried to get on with their lives," he said.

Liberation theology

Despite Bergoglio's reputation as an opponent of liberation theology during the 1970s, Bosca insists that wasn't actually the case. He said Bergoglio accepted the premise of liberation theology, especially the option for the poor, but in a "nonideological" fashion.

Bergoglio's insistence on moving priests into the *villas miserias*, the poor slums of Buenos Aires, reflects that instinct, Bosca said.

If Bergoglio was opposed to something back then, Bosca said, it was giving a Catholic blessing to armed insurgency. That was not just a theoretical possibility in Argentina, Bosca said, in light of the rise of the Montoneros movement.

The Montoneros, he said, were "a Catholic guerilla movement" resting on "three ideological pillars: socialism, Peronism and liberation theology," he said. ("Peronism" refers to the various political currents in Argentina that draw inspiration from former President Juan Perón and his wife, Eva, who wanted to carve out a third way between capitalism and communism.)

"There were a few priests in Argentina who joined the Montoneros and who became guerilla priests, like Camillo Torres in Colombia," Bosca said.

As the military regime in Argentina wore on, the Montoneros became less a resistance movement and more a leftist urban terror group, akin to the Red Brigades in Europe. One estimate from the mid-1980s held the Montoneros responsible for approximately 6,000 deaths among the military, police forces and civilian population during the previous decade.

"For sure, [Bergoglio] was in opposition to the Montoneros," Bosca said. "It wasn't opposition to liberation theology in itself or the option for the poor."

Gay marriage and civil unions

On March 19, *The New York Times* reported that when Argentina was gearing up for a bitter national debate on gay marriage in 2009 and 2010, Bergoglio quietly favored a compromise solution that would have included civil unions for same-sex couples.

One source for that story was an Argentine journalist named Sergio Rubin, co-author with Francesca Ambrogetti of an interview book with Bergoglio titled *El Jesuita*. (I met Ambrogetti while I was in Buenos Aires. She told me the full version of how it took years for the notoriously media-averse Bergoglio to agree to the interview.)

Rubin's version of events was swiftly denied by Miguel Woites, director of the Argentinian Catholic Information Agency, a news outlet linked to the Buenos Aires archdiocese. Woites insisted Bergoglio would "never" have favored any legal recognition of same-sex unions and said the *Times* report was a

"complete error."

On this score, I was told by three sources in Argentina that the *Times* basically got it right: Bergoglio did, in fact, favor civil unions.

That was confirmed on background by two senior officials of the bishops' conference in Argentina, both of whom worked with Bergoglio and took part in the behind-the-scenes discussions as the conference tried to shape its position.

"Bergoglio supported civil unions," one of those officials told me.

Mariano de Vedia, a veteran journalist for *La Nación*, has covered church/state issues in Argentina for years and said he could confirm Bergoglio's position had been correctly described in the *Times* account.

Guillermo Villarreal, a Catholic journalist in Argentina, said it was well known at the time that Bergoglio's moderate position was opposed by Archbishop Héctor Rubén Aguer of La Plata, the leader of the hawks. The difference was not over whether to oppose gay marriage, but how ferociously to do so and whether there was room for a compromise on civil unions.

Villareal described the standoff over gay marriage as the only vote Bergoglio ever lost during his six years as president of the conference.

Behind the scenes, sources say Bergoglio tried to avoid fireworks on the gay marriage issue. One young Catholic told me, for instance, he had wanted to organize a public recitation of the rosary on the eve of the vote outside the legislature, knowing that supporters of gay marriage would also be there and the prayer would be a provocation. He wrote to Bergoglio seeking advice, he said, and Bergoglio called him directly, suggesting they pray at home instead.

Oesterheld suggested Bergoglio went along with the harder line espoused by the majority of the bishops' conference even if it wasn't his own instinct.

"At that time, there were different views within the bishops' conference on how open the church should be [to compromise solutions]," Oesterheld said. "The cardinal went along with what the majority wanted. He didn't impose his own views. He never publicly expressed his own feelings on the matter, because he didn't want to seem to be undercutting the common position of the bishops."

* * *

The more you move around, the more you sense that the problems the church faces are often pretty much the same everywhere. My experience on Monday and Tuesday in Santiago, Chile, brought the point home.

I was in Chile for a conference on church communications sponsored by the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and the country's bishops' conference. The audience was composed mainly of people involved in media work about the church, either as church spokespersons or as independent journalists, bloggers and so on.

Despite the obvious differences in culture and geography that separate Chile from the United States or Europe, I was struck by how eerily similar the conversations seemed. I found the same concern about a hostile press climate, the same frustration that it's difficult to tell positive stories about the church, which one often hears from Catholics in the West.

My friend and colleague Andrea Torielli, for instance, spoke on the same day he published an article for *La Stampa*

back in Italy about how priests were reporting an increase in demand for confession, which they attribute to the "Francis effect." Tornielli told the crowd in Santiago that priests told him Italians were showing up in droves, citing Francis' line that "God never gets tired of forgiving us; it's we who get tired of asking forgiveness."

Tornielli said at a moment when commentators are focused on other matters about the new pope, it would seem "they haven't understood what's really going on."

Heads nodded up and down the room as Chileans said the same thing was true in terms of commentary here.

Fr. Josè Maria La Porte, a Spaniard who teaches at the Opus Dei-run University of the Holy Cross Rome, described a recent trip he'd taken to Cuba in which he met priests who travel around the countryside ministering to the poorest of the poor, traveling in a beat-up old car where they have to carry cans of gas because it's too expensive to buy it along the way, even if they could find stations that work. He described seeing them stop the car and take out a rubber hose, sucking on it to get the gas flowing and then pouring it into the tank.

"I wish we could see stories about priests like this in the media sometimes," La Porte said, once again drawing strong agreement from the locals, who said these types of stories rarely see the light of day in their media.

I was asked to speak about unity in the church. Jokingly, I told the crowd that inviting a journalist to talk about unity is a bit like asking a terrorist to talk about peace in the sense that we're not really in the unity business. If everybody got along, frankly, we'd have precious little to talk about.

That said, I told the crowd I have thought a fair bit about the subject of unity, perhaps because I come from a Catholic culture in the United States that in many ways is profoundly divided. I served up my usual diagnosis, which is that although people say we American Catholics are polarized, the truth is that we're more tribalized.

Looking around, what one sees are different tribes: pro-life Catholic, peace-and-justice Catholics, liturgical traditionalist Catholics, church reform Catholics, Obama Catholics, neo-con Catholics, the movements, various ethnic churches, and on and on. In principle, all that diversity is a treasure, but it becomes dysfunctional when these various tribes start seeing one another as the enemy, and too often that's our situation.

I suggested that what the church in the United States needs is a grassroots effort to build zones of friendship across the tribal lines, places where Catholics of different temperaments and outlooks can rub shoulders -- not to debate issues, but simply to get to know one another.

I was struck by how much all this seemed to resonate with the Chileans, who told me that many of the same tribal divisions exist in their backyard, too.

Along the way, I told a story about Benedict XVI's trip to the United Kingdom in 2010, and as a joking aside, I said poking fun of the pope is sort of the national sport in the U.K. Within seconds, somebody in the crowd had tweeted out: "What about Chile?"

Of course, the Catholic church is a global brand with almost 1.2 billion members, and the situations it faces around the world are often wildly diverse. The moral of my experience in Chile, however, is that sometimes we have more in common than we might think.

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