BERGOGLIO AND THE “DIRTY WAR”

Por John Lee Anderson

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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 as 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."