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Pope Francis' record on Dirty War, sex abuse cases under scrutiny

Tom Roberts | Mar. 26, 2013
Pope Francis

Within days of the election of Pope Francis, stories began to surface about his conduct as the former Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, head of the Jesuit order in Argentina during that country's "Dirty War," as well as his handling of the sex abuse crisis later as head of the Buenos Aires archdiocese.

The stories revisit two of the most difficult crises that have confronted the modern church -- the role of its leaders in countries split by violent dictatorships and in dealing with clerics accused of sexual crimes against children. In both instances involving Bergoglio, the reporting has included liberal use of such terms as "cloudy" and "murky."

Bergoglio was appointed Jesuit provincial when he was 37, a position he held from 1973-79, a time of civil and religious turmoil. Religious orders were losing members at a significant rate at the time; additionally, in many countries in Latin America, orders were torn between their traditional ministries and a new sense of obligation to marginalized and oppressed.

The period during which Bergoglio headed the order in Argentina coincided with the rule of a vicious military junta that killed as many as 30,000 in what was billed as a fight against communism and was officially called the Process of National Reorganization. The purge of "enemies" of the regime, which included thousands who resisted the dictatorship, was carried out in some instances with the cooperation of religious authorities.

As a March 18 report in *The New York Times* notes, one Argentine priest is on trial for "working closely with torturers" during that period, another is accused of engaging in one of the many "baby thefts" that occurred during the period from mothers who were then " 'disappeared' into a system of clandestine prisons." A third, according to the *Times* report, "offered biblical justification for the military's death flights," which involved dropping people who had been drugged into the sea from aircraft.

As *NCR*'s John L. Allen Jr. noted in his pre-conclave profile of Bergoglio [1], an Argentine lawyer just prior to the 2005 conclave accused the cardinal of complicity in the kidnapping of two Jesuit priests during the Dirty War period. Bergoglio at the time flatly denied the charge, which was revived again when he was elected pope.

One of those advancing the charges is journalist Horacio Verbitsky, described in a recent *Wall Street Journal* column by Mary Anastasia O'Grady, who debunks the charges, as a former member of a guerrilla group in Argentina "and now an editor at the pro-government newspaper *Página 12*."

Bergoglio has delivered his own account, described as complex, in an autobiography, and since being elected pope has received strong support from Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, who said that Bergoglio was not a collaborator with the regime as were other bishops at the time.

Francis also received enthusiastic endorsements from liberation theologian and former Franciscan priest

Leonardo Boff of Brazil.

Jesuit Fr. Francisco Jalics, one of the kidnapped priests who now lives in a monastery in southern Germany, released a statement after Francis' election. He said that he met Bergoglio "years later," believed to be in 2000, to discuss the events.

"Following that, we celebrated Mass publicly together and hugged solemnly. I am reconciled to the events and consider the matter to be closed," he said in the statement. The other priest, Orlando Yorio, died in 2000.

If the tale of Bergoglio's activities during the period of government violence is inconclusive, so too, it seems, are the accounts of his handling of sex abuse cases.

Even his critics say he never acted to hide abuse and there appears to be agreement that Bergoglio acted with increasing resolve and in the latter part of his ministry in Argentina insisted that bishops immediately notify authorities of abusive priests.

Bergoglio endorsed a "zero tolerance" policy for sexual abuse by clergy in the 2012 book *Sobre el Cielo y la Tierra* ("On Heaven and Earth"), based on a series of conversations between Bergoglio and Rabbi Abraham Skorka, rector of the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary.

"We must never turn a blind eye. You cannot be in a position of power and destroy the life of another person," he says in the book. But he also says that he has never confronted a case of pedophilia in his archdiocese.

His critics also say he refused to meet with victims, never offered compensation and, in the case of one convicted priest, commissioned the writing of a report that has helped the priest to remain out of prison at least temporarily.

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