NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Former student recalls life lessons from literature teacher, the pope

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Mar. 12, 2014 The Francis Chronicles
Vatican City

As some high school teachers may know, it can be a challenge to get a room full of rowdy teenage boys to learn, much less be interested in, the required class curriculum.

But a 28-year-old Pope Francis survived and succeeded when he taught literature at the Jesuit-run School of the Immaculate Conception in Santa Fe, Argentina, according to a former student.

Jorge Milia, today an Argentine writer, reveals in a lengthy interview then-Fr. Jorge Bergoglio's approach to education and teaching methods, which also shed light on his pastoral style as pope.

"We were a group of rebellious adolescents, in full hormonal turmoil, hankering and hungry for anything new," he said. "We had no desire to study."

But Bergoglio knew how to handle the chaos, Milia said. The Jesuit loved "to pose challenges" and thrash out new ways of encouraging them to do the work.

He'd break up a more cumbersome piece of reading with a snippet of poetry "that moved everyone of us so much that, 50 years later, many of us still remember the whole thing by heart."

His signature style was one of accompaniment, Milia said.

Bergoglio exuded genuine "wonder when discovering some image hidden in the passage of a text" and was able to transmit to others that same awe and passion for the magic of literature.

"His ability to read Italian and German also offered an interesting range" of material and perspective, Milia said.

The future pope walked through the material together with the students, getting them to participate and find their way, guiding them with suggestions and explanations rather than like the "typical teacher, who orchestrates and dictates," Milia said.

The future pope helped shore up their self-confidence and build new skills by making the students: take turns at teaching a class; explore creative writing; spend the summer cataloguing the school library; and experience teamwork and foster team spirit by putting on plays, he said.

"He gave importance and support to whoever ventured an in-depth pursuit on their own," Milia said.

He made them read existentialist and leftist writers, "not to propose them as an example" to follow, but to parse their opinions, "analyze them, break them down piece by piece" so the students would be able to "examine any kind of argument" and never be "hoodwinked."

"His unwavering vocation (was) to not let us flounder, to entrust us with concrete goals, to convince us what

counted was working methodically, every day and not trying just to wing it."

The students always went to Bergoglio for help and support, he said, adding, "We knew we could tell him any kind of problem and be absolutely certain that he would help us find a solution."

For example, a group of students wanted to form a Beatles cover band. Milia said they went to the priest, who "listened with interest" and reminded them if they wanted something, they'd have to work hard for it.

Bit by bit, with the priest's support, the students got hold of the instruments, sound equipment, sheet music and practice space they needed, and "The Shouters" was formed.

Milia said the same open-door policy Bergoglio had with students, he had with their parents, devoting time and attention to the mothers and fathers who wanted to follow up and check on their children's progress.

Milia said his own parents were especially grateful to the young priest "for knowing how to deal with me. I was an unruly adolescent. He didn't try to limit my exuberance, but sought to channel it in a positive way, giving it structure" and purpose.

Bergoglio actually flunked Milia in literature his senior year, he said, "even though I was a member of the Academy of Literature" and a co-author of a collection of short stories.

The former student said he had failed to hand in an assignment and study for the test. Even though he did OK on the final, his grade average was poor.

"Deep down, I was asking for it, and this didn't make him happy at all," he said.

The Jesuit teacher wanted the students to understand the importance of diligent, dedicated work and being responsible. Being called out on his poor attitude and lack of effort was something "I'll always be grateful to him for," Milia said.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *09/04/2015 - 23:15*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/former-student-recalls-life-lessons-literature-teacher-pope