

Liberation Theology Haunts New Pope

Liberation theology holds that Jesus was committed to making society address the needs of the poor, not just giving them charity. But traditional Church leaders condemn it as Marxism in Christian trappings and have sat back as rightist regimes tortured and killed priests and nuns, a history that now haunts Pope Francis.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

Blase Bonpane, who served as a Maryknoll father in Guatemala until he was expelled by the right-wing military in 1967, was among the priests and nuns who believed in the teachings of liberation theology, which held that the Catholic Church must address the plight and marginalization of the poor.

Bonpane, now director of the Office of the Americas and host of "World Focus" on Pacifica Radio, expressed grave concerns about the silence of the new Pope Francis, who as Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio did not speak out publicly against the Argentine junta as it conducted a "dirty war" killing some 30,000 people, including 150 Catholic priests. Bonpane was interviewed by Dennis J. Bernstein.

DB: Talk to us about the new pope Francis, who has been portrayed widely as a pope of the people, who rides the bus, love sports and has a lot of sympathy for the poor How would you describe his background and his relationship, if any, to the Argentine "dirty wars."

BB: I would say that he is a populist conservative. But we have a problem that is structural within the church, and that is that the church has generally been subsidiary to the state and has generally gone along with the state in its history since the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

There seems to be no exception in Argentina where most of the reports we received during the "dirty wars" were of the clerics not speaking out as they should have. And many of them opposing individual priests that were liberation theologians. In certain cases this led to the arrest of priests, such as Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalic who were kidnapped and practically killed by the Junta.

Afterward, Orlando Yorio spoke about the situation of surviving months of imprisonment. He felt it was because the church had said he was a liberation theologian and they didn't want to approve of him and his work in the slums of Buenos Aires. So yes, there are many accusations, most of them in the book *The Silence*, which refers to just that, the fact that silence is complicity and in

some cases there is direct participation of clerics together with the junta.

[Junta leader Jorge Rafael] Videla could go to holy communion anytime and would be well received by the higher church in Argentina. This is tragic. But look at the situation in the U.S. Are our bishops speaking out against Guantanamo and that people are being held there? Are they speaking out on behalf of Bradley Manning? No. There's a silence here as well.

There is a history of silence. The Church supported Franco in Spain. We have the terrible situation with [Pope] Pius XII and his relationship to the Germans in the period of the Third Reich. It's not unusual. It's been a subservient church in many ways. The new pope has not been comfortable with liberation theology. It is possible to speak on behalf of the poor without supporting the real fundamental changes that are present with liberation theology.

DB: You are somebody who is connected to this in many different ways, and have followed U.S. policies and global policies and how they impact Central and South America, the Spanish speaking world. What information do you have, because you know a lot about this? Did this pope ever speak up, was he outspoken on behalf of the people? He was there during the worst parts of the slaughter. What do we know about what he did and did not do?

BB: There's a lot of allegations, most of them appear in the book, *The Silence*. It does look like a case of coexistence with a horrible "dirty war." That is tragic. I don't think we should be defensive about it. We aren't in a court of law where we can say we've gone through all the evidence, but there are certainly substantial reports of not speaking out against the junta, and in some cases being aligned.

One [Argentine] priest was so much aligned with the junta that he was arrested when they began arresting the members of the "dirty war." He had to serve time because he was working directly with the junta. In the case of the higher clergy, silence is not acceptable.

DB: As a high official in the Catholic hierarchy in Argentina at the time that the slaughter was going on, he would certainly not be unaware of what various priests were doing and the roles they were playing within this "dirty war." So here, complicity is also being a part of a mass murder situation. Silence is complicity, yes?

BB: One of the priests, Father Yorio, accused [Father] Bergoglio of effectively handing him over, and his colleague to the death squads, by declining to tell the regime that he endorsed their work. In other words, he was on the margin. The other priest refused to discuss it and he moved into seclusion in a German

monastery.

Bergoglio discussed this incident of two priests being handed over to the death squad in his biography by Sergio Ruben. The claim in the biography is that Bergoglio took extraordinary behind-the-scenes action to try to save these two guys after they were picked up by Jorge Videla's death squad. Whether that claim is true I don't know. This is coming from him and his biographer.

He acknowledges that these priests were picked up and practically killed. He doesn't accept the fact that it was because of him. At least one of the priests said it was because of him, so these things are going to haunt him for sure. But the overall thing is to look at the structure and the problem of the church being subservient to the state in so many ways. That is true in the U.S. I think it's true in Argentina. It's true throughout much of the world.

The liberation church is saying we don't agree with the imperial church which came about after the fourth century Council of Nicea. We agree with the anti-imperial church that defied Rome and Roman power when it was illegal to be a Christian and with the death penalty. We are part of that primitive Christianity and the essence of what we are is a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Step #1 is to focus on the needs of the poor. This applies to both the church and state. States can understand it, such as under [the late Venezuelan President] Hugo Chavez who have a preferential option for the poor. [Cuba's Fidel] Castro had a preferential option for the poor. [Bolivian President] Evo Morales sees it. [President] Jose Mujica in Uruguay. These people served time in prison, they were rebels and their focus was a preferential option for the poor.

If that applied in the United States, the first thing the President would talk about would be that we have one million people sleeping on the streets of the United States every year. So these liberation theologians come along, who I totally support, and they say we want an authentic interpretation of this man we claim to follow, this carpenter from Nazareth. This is the conflict.

DB: Blase Bonpane has written five books, including *Guerillas of Peace, Liberation Theology and the Central American Revolution*. I don't want to belabor this. But this was Argentina at a time when activists, liberation theologians, social workers, teachers, kids, families, anybody, were being disappeared, tortured, executed. It would be rather difficult to believe that he [Pope Francis] wasn't fully knowledgeable about a lot of what was going on. These were his parishioners, right?

BB: That is quite correct. There are some 30,000 deceased involved here. To be

unaware would be impossible. So the awareness simply had to be there. We saw similarities to this with Augusto Pinochet in Chile. He had his friends in the clergy as well. Again, you can see Jorge Mario Bergoglio giving holy communion to Videla.

DB: Giving holy communion to the mass murderer?

BB: Yes.

DB: So you've got a high-level official purging a head of state and a known mass murderer. Every human rights organization on the face of this earth nailed this down in terms of what was happening in Argentina. This is troubling.

BB: Very much so. But this is the rule, rather than the exception. This is part of Church history. We saw it with Cardinal Spellman supporting the war in Vietnam, supporting [South Vietnamese President] Diem, being the military vicar of the United States of America as a cardinal. This is not unusual. The unusual people are the Archbishop Romero, Bishop Samuel Ruiz in Mexico. They are the exception and are worthy of being identified as the exception.

Romero, in El Salvador, started off in the stereotypical fashion and then he got to the point where he said "me convertete," the poor converted me to understanding that I was too much aligned with the wealthy and with the military. They used to call that the trinity in Latin America, the military, the oligarchy and the church. So we are not talking about an exceptional situation.

DB: And we know that Romero was essentially shot through the voice, if you will, for speaking out for the poor. Again, this is a huge bit of information that must have been shared with the church leaders in the community. Can we ever expect that the new pope will say at a certain point, I was wrong, the Church was wrong, we were silent. Here now, on my new perch he could come clean and say I am going to change history and make a difference, have a real clearing of the air. Can we expect anything like that?

BB: I would have hope of that. I would be very surprised if it happened because as we have seen there has been a tradition of cover-up to protect the image. It's like a corporation saying we must protect the image of Coca-Cola. I don't care about the image of Coca-Cola. I care about the junk that's in it.

Protecting an image is not a very transparent way to conduct a Church. I think it's very important to identify the sins of the church. There have been wonderful books written about it by people such as Gary Wills, an active Catholic writer who wrote about the sins of the church in his recent book called

Why Priests? It's important that the laity, the people who are members of the church, take it upon themselves to identify these crimes.

We have a history emanating from the Council of Nicea, which evolved into Crusades, Inquisitions, Conquistadores. The Inquisition was present in Mexico in the 19th Century. You can go to the Museum of the Inquisition in Mexico City where Father Hidalgo, the father of the Mexican revolution was condemned by the Inquisition and called a Lutheran, a Jew and an atheist.

We have quite a problem here with history and it doesn't do any good to try to put it under the rug. It certainly didn't do any good to put the pedophilia scandal under the rug. We have people like Roy Bourgeois are being told they are a scandal from the holy office. He is my colleague and Maryknoll and father of the School of Americas Watch to close the school.

DB: The school where they help train the mass murderers who did this kind of thing in Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, you name it.

BB: Absolutely. They trained the people who killed Archbishop Romero. [Father Bourgeois] was condemned because he was told to recant his opinion that women should be priests. He said I can't recant, it's about conscience. It's the same reason that Pope Benedict gave for stepping down. He said in my conscience I have to do this.

People should know that conscience is the ultimate norm of morality in the Church. You can't act against your conscience. Roy couldn't act against his conscience. He wanted to see women priests and wouldn't recant so he's called a scandal. What about the scandal of pedophilia? Are we going to talk about that?

DB: Before I let you go, Blase Bonpane, that's exactly what I want to talk to you about. Now, Pope Francis I, from Argentina, can we expect him to be bold? Have the priests been better in Argentina than in the United States?

BB: I think the problem is bad throughout the world. Many areas are very good at covering it up. Latin America was not a place where people were going to talk about it. So I would expect it to be equally a problem in Latin America. I hope they don't attempt to keep this quiet. This goes back to the Lateran Council of the 11th century that gave us a law of celibacy.

I think the law has a terrible history. I think that celibacy is wonderful for those who choose it. But a law of celibacy leads to many, many problems and some of them are related to this situation we've had in the U.S. church and elsewhere.

DB: We know that the former pope, the first one to resign in 600 or 700 years, before he became the pope, was a kind of mister cover-up. He was directing the office that was making sure that everybody shut their mouths as these revelations began to unfold.

BB: Our evidence shows that he insisted that every case of pedophilia be sent to his office, the Holy Office. Then, as far as we can record and get the information, he made it clear to the bishops of the world that he wanted to avoid having these cases go to the civil authorities, or even to psychiatrists, who might feel they were bound in some cases to report these cases to the civil authorities.

It is a terrible history and may be one of the reasons that he resigned. There may have been others, but that may be one of them. Now that he is pope emeritus he probably could find it easier not to engage in discussing the matter. But the problems go on and they must get dealt with.

What's wonderful is that through making decisions in the base communities, they are going ahead and following their consciences. Women are celebrating the Eucharist because of their convictions that women have been held back throughout the entire world, not only in Christianity, but in Islam, Judaism, and most religions. In most civic life they have been held back and this is part of their liberation.

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