

The Jesuit Who Humiliated the Generals

The story never told before of the clandestine network with which the young Bergoglio saved dozens of "subversives" from the ferocity of the Argentine dictators.

In his interview with "La Civiltà Cattolica" that has gone all around the world, Pope Francis describes the Church as "a field hospital after battle," where the very first thing to do is "heal wounds."

But what changes when the battle is fully underway? In his Argentina, between 1976 and 1983, Jorge Mario Bergoglio lived through the 'years of lead' of the military dictatorship. Kidnappings, torture, massacres, 30,000 disappeared, 500 mothers killed after giving birth in prison to children who were taken away from them. What the young provincial of the Argentine Jesuits at the time did during those years long remained a mystery. So dense as to prompt the suspicion that he had passively witnessed the horror, or worse, had exposed to greater danger some of his confrères, those most committed among the resistance.

Last spring, immediately after his election as pope, these accusations were issued again. They were also immediately contradicted by authoritative voices, albeit highly critical of the overall role of the Argentine Church in those years: the mothers of Plaza de Mayo, Nobel peace laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Amnesty International. The Argentine magistracy itself had exonerated Bergoglio of all accusations, after having subjected him to questioning in a proceeding between 2010 and 2011. But if at this point it was established that the current pope had done nothing worthy of condemnation, it was still unknown what good he might have done during those terrible years, to "heal wounds."

Unknown until yesterday. Because to lift the veil from this hidden face of the past of Pope Francis for the first time a book has now been published by EMI, small in its dimensions but explosive in its content. It will be in Italian bookstores as of October 3, and then gradually in eight other countries of the world where translations are already underway. "Bergoglio's List" is its title. And one thinks immediately of "Schindler's list" immortalized by the film of Steven Spielberg. Because the substance is the same, as the subtitle of the book says: "Those saved by Francis during the dictatorship. The story never told."

There is in the final part of the book the complete transcription of the questioning to which the then-archbishop of Buenos Aires was subjected on November 8, 2010. In front of three judges, Bergoglio was hammered for three hours and forty-five minutes with insidious questions, above all by the attorney Luis Zamora, the lawyer for the victims. A key passage of the questioning comes when Bergoglio is asked to justify his meetings with the generals Jorge Videla and Emilio Massera, in 1977.

Two priests very close to him, Frs. Franz Yalics and Orlando Yorio, had been abducted and confined in a secret location. The first had been for two years his spiritual director, and the second his professor of theology, before they dedicated themselves to working with the poor of the "villas miseria" of Buenos Aires, which had made them a target of the repression. When they were captured, the then-provincial of the Jesuits found out where they were being kept. He learned that they were at the infamous Escuela Superior de Medicina of the naval officers, from which few came out alive.

To ask for their liberation, Bergoglio wanted to meet above all with General Videla, who at the time was the first in command of the junta. And he was able to do so twice, the second time convincing the priest who said Mass at the home of the general to pretend to be sick so that he could replace him. From his conversation with the general he received definitive confirmation that the two Jesuits were in the prisons of the navy. So there was nothing else to do than to go to Admiral Massera, an irascible and vindictive personage. Again there were two meetings. The second was very brief. "I told him: Look, Massera, I want them back alive. I got up and left," Bergoglio stated during the questioning of 2010.

The following night fathers Yalics and Yorio were drugged, loaded onto a helicopter, and unloaded in the middle of a swamp. But the two priests, during six months of imprisonment and torture, had been made to believe that they had been informed on by their father provincial. And in a file of the secret service someone wrote: "In spite of the good will of father Bergoglio, the Society of Jesus in Argentina has not cleaned itself up," insinuating complicity with the repression. "A dirty trick" was the dismissive comment on this insinuation from the prosecutor of the 1985 trial that sentenced to life in prison both Videla and Massera. As for Frs. Yalics and Yorio, both of them acknowledged the falsity of the accusations against their superior, with whom they were publicly reconciled.

The provincial of the Jesuits at the time had succeeded in giving the generals the idea that he had taken refuge at his Colegio Máximo of San Miguel, waiting for better days. But what the book reveals for the first time is a great deal more. Nello Scavo, a legal affairs reporter for "Avvenire" and the author of the investigation, discovered by tracking down numerous escapees and putting their testimonies together like a puzzle that Bergoglio had silently stitched together a clandestine network that succeeded in saving many dozens if not hundreds of persons in danger of their lives.

While General Videla was hatching his bloody plans from the great halls of the Casa Rosada, a few steps away, down the alley that leads to the quarter of Monserrat, there was the church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, with an adjoining Jesuit residence and school. And there the provincial of the Jesuits met with the targets of persecution for their last instructions before they clandestinely boarded boats that were carrying fruit and merchandise from Buenos Aires to Montevideo, in Uruguay, an hour away by water. The military officers could never have imagined that this priest would defy them from so nearby. The success of every operation was tied to the secrecy that held even among those who conducted them or benefited from them. The persons who entered the network of protection organized by Bergoglio did not know about the others who were in the same condition as themselves. At the college of San Miguel there arrived and departed, apparently in order to study or for a spiritual retreat or the discernment of a vocation, men and women who in reality were wanted as "subversives." To get them to safety the destination was often Brazil, where there was an analogous network of protection organized by the local Jesuits.

But Bergoglio was the only one who held all the strings. The elderly Jesuit Juan Manuel Scannone, who is today the most important theologian of Argentina and the one most esteemed by the current pope, was also at San Miguel at the time. But he didn't have a clue. Only after many years did he and others begin to confide in each other and understand. "If one of us had known and had been abducted and subjected to torture, the whole network of protection would have fallen apart. Father Bergoglio was aware of this risk, and for this reason he kept everything secret. A secret that he maintained even afterward, because he never wanted to boast about that exceptional mission of his."

The "list" of Bergoglio is a collection of highly diverse personal stories, which make for exhilarating reading, whose common characteristic is that the people in them were saved by him. There is Alicia Oliveira, the first woman to become a judge in the criminal courts in Argentina and also the first to be dismissed after the military coup, non-Catholic and not even baptized, who went underground and was taken by Bergoglio, in the trunk of his car, to the college of San Miguel, to see her three children. There are the three seminarians of the bishop of La Rioja, Enrique Angelelli, who was killed in 1976 by members of the military in a staged auto accident, after he had discovered who was truly responsible for numerous assassinations. There is Alfredo Somoza, the scholar saved without his knowledge. There are Sergio and Ana Gobulin, who worked in the slums and were married by Father Bergoglio, he arrested and she wanted, both saved and expatriated with the help of the Italian vice-consul in Argentina at the time, Enrico Calamai, another hero of the story.

As pope, but first as a man, Francis does not cease to amaze.