

From sinner to saint?

A new investigation asks whether the Pope really did collude with Argentina's brutal military junta

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POPE FRANCIS: Untying the Knots by PAUL VALLELY
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The jury is still out on Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who surprised the world in March when he stepped out onto a balcony above St Peter's Square in Rome as the 266th Pope. Since his election, this Argentinian cardinal has won plaudits for his humility, common touch and winning way with words as he has said repeatedly that he wants to lead "a poor Church, for the poor". But many of the world's 1.3bn Catholics are suspending judgment until Pope Francis comes up with plans for the institutional change needed to turn fine words into deeds.

One seasoned journalist (and Catholic), however, is trying to reach another, arguably equally important verdict by looking back rather than forward. Paul Vallely's biography of Francis — which stands, in terms of seriousness of purpose and depth of understanding, head and shoulders above other recent rushed cuttings jobs — seeks the truth behind persistent allegations that this crowd-pleasing Pope is fatally tainted by collusion with the brutal military

junta that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983.

This was the era of the "dirty war", when 10,000 Argentinians "disappeared" at the hands of the state and many more were tortured. It was also the time when Bergoglio was an unusually young and profoundly divisive provincial (or head) of his order, the Jesuits, in Argentina.

The prime allegation of complicity with the junta is that Bergoglio knew in advance about — and did nothing to prevent — the 1976 kidnapping by a military death squad of two of his Jesuits living and working in the slums of Buenos Aires — precisely the

sort of challenge that as Pope he is now telling priests to take up.

The pair in question were Fathers Orlando Yorio and Franz Jalics. They were living out the "theology of liberation", a radical form of Catholicism popular in the Latin American Church at the time, which not only urged a "preferential option for the poor", but also demanded that the world be seen through the eyes of the poor. To judge by his pronouncements as Pope Francis, you would imagine that Bergoglio would be keen, but he wasn't. He toed the line from the Vatican — which claimed the liberation theology was flawed

because it used Marxist analysis.

This put him at odds with at least half the Jesuits under his authority. Their memory of him remains one of a controlling conservative, Rome's representative, deploying the power of office to force his views on others. Many remain deeply suspicious of him. One even tells Vallely that the man who famously prefers buses and trams to chauffeur-driven cars was, back in the 1970s, all too fond of his limo.

When the junta unleashed its dirty war, Bergoglio demanded that Yorio and Jalics return to the Jesuit motherhouse for their own safety. They refused, seeing not concern for their welfare but a ploy to destroy their grass-roots work. They sought the protection of a more liberal Argentinian bishop, Miguel Raspanti.

Bergoglio is also charged with blocking that by giving them bad character references.

His accusers say he then made public the lack of official Jesuit/Church support for Yorio and Jalics and, therefore, as good as sent the death squads to the door of their slum presbytery. That version, like most other details of the case, is hotly disputed.

Vallely forensically picks over the evi-



dence as thoroughly as he can when the three principals don't or can't talk about it.

Yorio died in 2000. Jalics lives in seclusion in a retreat house, and before and after his elevation to the papacy Bergoglio has given incomplete answers to the many questions raised. In one recent account, he claimed that the two were on their way out of the Jesuits, and so were not his responsibility — something that Valley doubts.

Stranded in such contested territory, this sensible

biographer returns an open verdict. In the heightened atmosphere of repression at the time, and against the backdrop of profound theological disputes that split both the Jesuits and the Church itself, he concludes that such was the gulf that existed between an inflexible, inexperienced conservative provincial and two older, driven, fearless idealists (who had once been Bergoglio's professors), that all inevitably misunderstood what the others were trying to do.

What is beyond dispute is that Bergoglio then put his own life at risk by making two very personal appeals to the military henchman, General Jorge Videla, to release the two Jesuits (on the second occasion even taking the place of a priest going to say a private mass for the general's family). The fact that Videla agreed is usually quoted against Bergoglio, suggesting that he was regarded favourably by the regime, but, as Valley points out, only a small percentage of those taken to the main torture centre in Buenos

Aires came out alive.

Valley also collects a truckload of other accounts about the

quiet, behind-the-scenes work Bergoglio did as Jesuit provincial to protect, support and spirit out of the country priests and religious people who had been targeted by the death squads, in one case giving a refugee his own identity card to ease his passage across the border. He may not have spoken out publicly — a charge that can be laid against many Argentinian bishops at the time — but in private his sympathies were clear.

Not good enough? Certainly not, it seems, for Pope Francis himself. For the central thesis of this biography is that, once he had stood down as Jesuit provincial, he underwent the equivalent of a Road to Damascus experience. Exiled first to Germany, then to a provincial city in Argentina, he reflected on his actions, felt profound remorse, and repented of them. There was a tearful reunion with Jalics where the two reportedly fell weeping into each other's arms.

It wasn't quite as quick as St Paul's volte-face, but that heart-and-soul engagement with the poor, that willingness to ask the sort of structural, political and economic questions that liberation theology promoted, slowly became Bergoglio's touchstone when later he was rescued from exile and became first an assistant bishop in Buenos Aires, then cardinal archbishop and now Pope.

When the Sistine Chapel voters gave him the necessary two thirds majority to become Pope, Cardinal Bergoglio responded to them not with the traditional Latin "I accept", but instead by saying, "I am a great sinner, trusting in the mercy and patience of God in suffering, I

accept". Valley argues convincingly that what the new Pope had in mind was his own past failings, notably during Argentina's darkest days. Far from being infallible, as has been the claim of previous holders of this ancient office, he is all too aware of his own fallibility and sinfulness. That is, for this Catholic at least, a cause for great hope.

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Dirty war's victims

Orlando Yorio, above left, and Franz Jalics, right, were badly treated by the Argentinian junta before Bergoglio secured their release. Picked up in May 1976, they were illegally detained for five months, during which time they were held naked, and were hooded and tortured.

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**Remorseful about his past:
Pope Francis, June 2013**

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