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## The Silences of Pope Francis Church Complicity With the Horrors of Spain's Fascists

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When Catholic Church leaders chose the new pope, for the most part the media responded favorably; they underlined how Francis' style diverged from that of his predecessors, and how the new pope seemed to already assume a distinctive and progressive new role in the Church. Some, including myself, however, expressed reservations. We were wary of the silence maintained by former Argentinian bishop Bergoglio during the brutal human rights violations under the Argentinian dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. The dictatorship, established in defense of the more privileged groups in Argentina, was especially brutal to any dissidents and opponents of its reign. This silence reflected a lack of sensitivity to gross human rights violations carried out by dictatorships with close ties to the Catholic Church.

The Church issued an immediate response to these reservations, emphasizing that Bishop Bergoglio had not collaborated with the dictatorship (unlike many fellow Argentinian Catholic leaders at the time) and that his silence was in an effort to help victims as best he could, while avoiding antagonizing their persecutors. I have to admit that I did not find this response

convincing, as it is has been issued by the Church on many occasions when its silence in the face of human rights violations is criticized.

Still, given Pope Francis' actions since he began his papacy, his excuse regarding his silence during the Argentinian dictatorship seems to confirm that it was a tactical and honest move. He has repeatedly encouraged the Catholic faithful to extend their commitment to the poor beyond helping individuals and to seek elimination of poverty's root causes, even intervening actively in struggles against oppression, if necessary. Moreover, he has indicated more than once that the causes of poverty stem from the exploitation of the working world for the benefit of capital and its relentless quest to increase profits. The fact that he has demonstrated understanding of, if not sympathy with, liberation theology also seems to confirm that my suspicions were unfounded. It seems, after all, that Bergoglio's silence was a tactical one justified by a special situation.

However, the recent Tarragona service (honoring the members of the Church who had fallen during the Spanish Civil War on the fascist side) casts doubt on what motivated Bergoglio's silence during the Argentinian coup, a silence that parallels the Catholic Church's silence in front of the brutalities carried out during the 1936 military coup in Spain and the ensuing dictatorship, characterized by enormous brutality. For every political assassination Mussolini carried out, Franco issued 10,000. Under the systematic repression of this fascist state, thousands upon thousands of Spanish Republicans, defenders of the pre-existing, democratically elected government, were killed, tortured, and exiled, with many of these Republicans (114,000) still missing.

It is safe to assume that Pope Francis knows very well that the Catholic Church supported this military coup and dictatorship of General Franco, as evidence of this abounds. The statements of the highest Spanish ecclesiastical authorities are well-known, as these Church leaders publicly encouraged the military coup and supported the repressive government over the previous democratically elected government. In fact, the Church worked with the fascist regime closely, not merely cooperating, but essentially functioning as part of the dictatorial state itself. As a result, the Spanish Catholic Church benefited in its earthly interests, including its properties and business affairs. The Catholic Church was one of the major landowners in Spain and opposed the land reform initiated by the democratically elected Republican government. The Church was even directly involved in the repression of the Republicans who lost the war, giving support to the courts that issued death squad orders and imprisonment. There is even further evidence that many of the alleged "martyrs" honored at Tarragona were in fact individuals who had directly

facilitated this repression (see “Beatos y Cínicos” by Jose M. García Márquez in *Público* 14.10.13).

These facts are publicly available, known to anyone who chooses to know. However, the Catholic Church and the Vatican, now led by Pope Francis, attempt to avoid knowledge of these facts, or they are deliberately lying. I am not making accusations without knowledge of the facts, myself. Cardinal Amato, Pope Francis’ representative at the Tarragona event, lied repeatedly in his speech, using the language of the Crusades that still exists in the Church today. It is a discourse identical to the one that was used during the coup to justify the military action against a democratically elected government. Surprisingly, this discourse (emphasizing a conflict between Jesus and the Church on one hand, and an antichrist-like evil ideology on the other) is still repeated by the Church today “calling for reconciliation.”

Reconciliation? With whom? With the families of the murdered Republicans still missing, murders in which the Church collaborated and participated? And in this post-dictatorship period, after the establishment of democracy in Spain, the Church as an institution still hinders the recovery of the Republican lost dead, denying the recognition of and tribute to these real martyrs of democracy? The inconsistency and hypocrisy that the Church engages in is extraordinary. What is equally shameful is that the Church-supported political party, the governing Popular Party (founded by some leading figures of the Fascist party), have done everything to prevent finding those still missing from the war. This shows Spain to the international community in an embarrassing way (if indeed its leaders are capable of feeling embarrassed). How can the pope remain silent in the face of this reality?

Truly, it is impossible that Pope Francis could not be aware of these facts. This is what makes the silence of the Church and its representatives truly insulting, and an indignity to anyone with democratic sensibilities. Truth exists, and it is easy to verify. The Church, in the defense of its worldly and material interests, protected its interests and privileges, including property, opposing the Republican government as it threatened the Church’s business privileges. This was the true reasoning behind its opposition to the Republic. The repression of the Republic had little to do with religious beliefs (as there was freedom of religion under this government; both Protestantism and Judaism were also respected), and much to do with the Church’s defense of its material interests.

Pope Francis’ representative was not credible when he praised his “martyrs” and presented them as innocent, because it is impossible to avoid the real truth. To say that the Church had no

involvement in the military coup and was not the cornerstone of the dictatorship is a falsehood, and the Church leadership knows that. Hence, it is inexcusable that, once again, Pope Francis has maintained silence. This time his silence is doubly guilty, as it is silence in the face of an extensive and brutal regime, along with silence about the fact that the Church directly supported this regime. In this instance, keeping silent is to be complicit in these horrors.

Through his complicity via this silence, Pope Francis made a hugely inconsistent statement, unfortunately undermining the credibility of his position in defense of the poor. Spain's brutal repression was against the Popular Front government (with Catholics among its members), a government characterized by the struggle against poverty, a fight that threatened the material interests of the Church. Again, the evidence is overwhelming.

A final observation: It is extraordinarily shameful that the Spanish state and the Catalan authorities and government officials, now ruled by the right (which has scaled back any and all commitment the state had made to find the missing war victims), has also presented this act of beatification as an act of reconciliation.