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DAILY COMMENT

# THE POPE OF LATIN AMERICA

By **Jon Lee Anderson**, JULY 17, 2015

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*When Pope Francis visited Bolivia, President Evo Morales presented him with a crucifix made in the shape of a hammer and sickle.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO / POOL / AP

**T**here are countries in the world where the history has been so brutal, so humiliating, and so unreconciled, that it has become part of the national

iconography—sometimes to a degree that can startle foreign visitors. Bolivia's President, Evo Morales, luridly underscored this point during Pope Francis's recent visit there. In a ceremony that was held in front of television cameras, Morales handed the Pope the gift of a wooden crucifix made in the shape of a hammer and sickle. The Pope

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gift had been offered “out of love” for the man he called “the Pope of the poor.”)

The crucifix turned out to have been a specially commissioned replica of one made by the late Luís Espinal Camps, a left-wing Spanish priest and filmmaker who was murdered in La Paz, in 1980, by a Bolivian-government death squad. The killers gruesomely tortured Espinal before shooting him to death in a slaughterhouse. Since assuming office in 2006, Morales has championed the priest, who espoused the Marxist-influenced brand of Catholic activism known as liberation theology, as a national martyr.

Upon his arrival in La Paz, Pope Francis dutifully halted his motorcade at the spot where Espinal was killed, to offer prayers on his behalf. He said that the priest had been murdered “by those who did not want him to fight for freedom in Bolivia.” It was an allusion to a period that carries dark resonations for the Catholic Church in Bolivia and across Latin America.

Two days after Espinal's murder, El Salvador's outspoken Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who similarly spoke out against injustice and on behalf of the poor, was celebrating Mass when he was assassinated by a sniper acting on the orders of a right-wing death squad linked to his own country's military and private sector. In a move toward his eventual sainthood, which Pope Francis actively supported, Romero was beatified in a ceremony in San Salvador in May. In Bolivia, there are similar calls to beatify Espinal.

Espinal and Romero were merely two of the most prominent religious figures in Latin America who, having been largely abandoned by the Vatican, fell victims to the anticommunist witch hunt that took place in the region during the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Tens of thousands died in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia, and

Paraguay during Operation Condor, a transnational murder campaign that was carried out by those countries' militaries and their civilian accomplices—a scheme concocted by General Augusto Pinochet's regime after he seized power in Chile, in 1973, and embarked on a bloody purge of the country. The terror campaign was soon adopted by

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on the target lists.

Espinal was the first victim on a death list of names that was drawn up by the right-wing military dictatorship then ruling Bolivia. His killers operated under the orders of the country's interior minister. They called themselves Los Novios de la Muerte—The Bridegrooms of Death. Los Novios were led by a number of international fugitives, including the neo-fascist Italian terrorist Stefano Delle Chiaie. The Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie, who had been living in Bolivia since 1951, for much of that time more or less openly, was also closely associated with Los Novios.

Morales, in his meeting with the Pope, wore a badge that displayed a photograph of the late Argentine revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara. Guevara was executed in Bolivia in 1967, on the orders of the country's military President, in an operation that was overseen by C.I.A. agents. Since becoming President, in 2006, Morales, a former leader of Bolivia's coca-grower's union and a protégé of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, has resurrected Che to the status of a national hero, hanging a portrait of him, fashioned out of coca leaves, in his office. In such ways, Morales has made it a central feature of his Presidency to challenge everything that he perceives as the status quo in Bolivia.

As an ethnic Aymara (one of Bolivia's two main indigenous groups, who make up two thirds of the country's ten million people), Morales perhaps has more demons to exorcise, in his relations with the Vatican, than most other Latin American leaders. He is the first indigenous citizen to wield power in Bolivia, a country traditionally ruled by members of its minority mestizo or white population, who are descended from European settlers. The Church played a prominent role in the colonial history of Bolivia, which was one of the most cruelly exploited countries in Latin America. Bolivia remains poor and has been extremely volatile, with almost two hundred coups

and revolutions since it won its independence from Spain, in 1825. Today, Bolivia is South America's second-largest producer of natural gas, after Venezuela, and the world's second-largest producer of cocaine, after Peru and before Colombia.

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Drug Enforcement Administration and threw out the U.S. Ambassador—who still has not been replaced. Like many of his fellow-leaders, Morales has also overseen the creation a new constitution, which enshrines the rights of the country's indigenous majority. He has also replaced Catholic rites at official ceremonies with indigenous Andean ones and nationalized the country's gas reserves.

In remarks he made during his stay in Bolivia, the Pope inveighed against unbridled free-market capitalism as a “new colonialism” that encouraged materialism, despoiled the environment, and created inequality. And he went out of his way to apologize, on behalf of the Catholic Church, for the “many grave sins committed against the native peoples in the name of God” during the “so-called conquest of the Americas.” It was an echo of something that Pope John Paul II had said on a visit he made to the country back in the eighties, but which, in places like Bolivia, bears repeating.

At the time, Pope John Paul II also warned his priests to fight against the spread of evangelical Protestantism, which had begun to undermine the Catholic Church in many parts of Latin America. In the intervening years, that process has continued apace, as Pope Francis knows all too well. Indeed, if the Catholic Church is to have any relevance in Latin America a half century from now, it needs a makeover, and that includes a demonstrable new sense of humility on the part of its ecclesiastical authorities.

Pope Francis, who was born in Argentina, knows how to talk in a language that is not simply a replay of liberation theology. During his trip, which included visits to Ecuador and Paraguay, he repeatedly invoked the idea of a “Patria Grande,” a great Latin American homeland, brought about through greater social, political, and economic unity. Such appeals for unity have been made in the recent past by the likes of Fidel

Castro and Hugo Chávez, but they have their origins in the stirring rhetoric of Latin American independence heroes such as José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar.

Notably Pope Francis was a crucial figure behind the scenes in the recent secret

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remarked, “If the Pope continues to speak like this, sooner or later I will start praying again and I will return to the Catholic Church—and I’m not saying this jokingly.” Evo Morales, for his part, said, “For the first time in my life, I feel like I have a Pope—Pope Francis.”

But it is not only the leftists of Latin America who see something in the pontiff. Paraguay’s conservative President, Horacio Cartes, was equally effusive, lauding him for “his direction [that] lights the way and also gives us a grand task: to work together, with sacrifice and perseverance, so that we might have a country that is more equal for all.”

At a time when Latin America lacks a popular unifying figure, Pope Francis has emerged as a leader with broad authority, someone who cuts across all the usual boundary lines. In a region that is now largely democratic and full of creative energy and portent, but is nonetheless still rife with social problems and political and economic contradictions, his is an intriguing presence—as familiar, somehow, as it is unexpected.



*Jon Lee Anderson, a staff writer, began contributing to The New Yorker in 1998.* [MORE](#)

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