

Pope preaches dogma of reaction in Latin America

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Pope Francis carried out a weeklong tour of Chile and Peru last week that exposed the deeply reactionary character of the Catholic Church that he heads, even as he attempted to defuse mounting popular anger against the two countries' ruling elites.

Since he assumed the papacy in 2013, the former Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio has struck a posture of public humility and sympathy for the poor, attempting to give the decaying institution of Catholicism something of a "left" face, even as he and the Vatican maneuver with the most reactionary regimes on the planet.

It was noteworthy that Bergoglio made no stop in neighboring Argentina during his Latin American visit. He has not set foot in his home country in the five years since being elevated to the position of the Catholic Church's "supreme pontiff."

He undoubtedly has good reason to stay away. He was accused by priests and lay workers of collaborating with the military dictatorship as part of a common effort to "cleanse" the Church of "leftists" during Argentina's "dirty war."

This collaboration was not merely a personal issue, but was carried out by the entire Argentine church hierarchy, which provided priests cover to bless the military's torturers and assassins, assuring them they were doing "God's work."

The week-long visit by Pope Francis to Latin America has underscored that he has not strayed far from the ideology that guided him and the Argentine Church in aiding the bloody work of the junta.

In Chile, he was dogged by continuous protests, including by those who as children were sexually abused by priests whose actions were covered up by the Church hierarchy. Among the most prominent were parishioners from the town of Osorno, about 500 miles north of Santiago, where the Church installed Juan Barros Madrid,

accused of playing a key role in the cover-up, as bishop.

Pope Francis, echoing the rhetoric of Argentina's "dirty war," dismissed those who protested the installation of Barros as "fools manipulated by leftists."

Barros' case is intimately bound up with that of his mentor, the Chilean priest Fernando Karadima, who was found guilty by the Vatican of wholesale sexual abuse of minors, but was merely instructed to do "penance." Karadima was acquitted in a criminal trial, where he was defended by lawyers with intimate connections to Chile's extreme right and the former Pinochet dictatorship.

The Pope held a brief meeting, in private, with two individuals who had been abused by priests, but on his return flight to the Vatican denounced the charges against Barros as "slander."

After Chile, Pope Francis spent three days in Peru. There, he refused to meet with the relatives of the victims who died in the massacres conducted by the paramilitary group Colina, under the direction of then-President Alberto Fujimori. The massacres took place in the early 1990s at the teachers' university La Cantuta and at a social gathering in the densely populated working class neighborhood of Barrios Altos.

The relatives of the victims sent a letter to the Pope asking to meet with him to discuss the pardon recently granted to Fujimori by current President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (PPK). In the early 2000s, Fujimori was found guilty of crimes against humanity and had been serving a 25 year sentence before his release in December.

Kuczynski granted the pardon as part of a corrupt deal to win the votes needed to avoid impeachment by Congress for his participation in the vast corruption scandal involving Brazilian construction company Odebrecht.

In meetings with the bishops of Peru, Francis cynically declared that he didn't understand why Peruvian presidents "wind up in jail." It is an astonishing remark,

given that former “presidents” whom he had supported in Argentina—the senior military officers like Videla, Viola and Massera—were all jailed, at least briefly—for their roles in the reign of terror unleashed by the dictatorship in the 1970s.

The former dictator Jorge Videla claimed in an interview that “he had received the blessing of the country’s top clergymen for the actions of his regime.”

Pope Francis visited Peru in the context of rampant corruption engulfing the entire ruling elite. Last year saw two presidents in jail, another becoming a fugitive under the protection of the US government, and two others investigated by the Lava Jato Commission of the Peruvian Congress for receiving multimillion-dollar bribes from the corrupt Brazilian mega construction company, Odebrecht.

The highpoint of the Pope’s visit to Lima was the open mass held on Sunday, January 21, in Las Palmas, the Peruvian Air Force Academy, where the airfield served to accommodate the more than 1.5 million people that turned out for the event.

Members of leading parties in government, Keiko Fujimori (Frente Popular) and President Kuczynski (Peruanos por el Cambio) attended the mass at Las Palmas airfield. Prime Minister Mercedes Aráoz, took advantage of the moment to say that when Peruvians are united, “everything comes out better.”

The bourgeois left party Nuevo Peru, led by the former presidential candidate Veronika Mendoza, sent a public letter in which she praised the Pope, the head of the most reactionary anti-working class institution on the planet. Mendoza wrote: “Because I know that your voice is heard by an important part of the Peruvian people, I ask you” to speak out against poverty, inequality, sexual abuse by the priests, the pardon of Fujimori, corruption and other subjects.

The promotion of illusions in the Pope and the Catholic Church on the part of Mendoza is the surest indication of her party’s complete subordination to the Peruvian bourgeoisie and its determination to oppose any independent political movement of the working class.

Mendoza was merely adding her small contributions to the efforts of the ruling establishment and the media to use the Pope’s visit to divert popular consciousness from the intense crisis gripping Peruvian capitalist society and the corruption-riddled government.

All the old symbols used for centuries to enslave the minds of the people were trotted out once again. Behind the altar at the open-air mass at the Las Palmas airfield was an enormous figure of Peru’s “El Señor de los

Milagros” (The Lord of Miracles), also known as the “Black Christ.” The Peruvian clergy brought out all of their treasured icons. Statues of the Virgin, saints and patrons—some shipped in from distant parts, like Cusco, Huanca and Sicuani—were paraded through the streets of downtown Lima.

What defines daily life in Peru is inequality, hundreds of unresolved social conflicts and the unpopularity and discrediting of virtually every politician and political party. There is also a growing crime and drug epidemic affecting mainly working class youth, Lima airport becoming a main hub for drug trafficking. After two years of economic stagnation, 100,000 construction workers lost their jobs in 2017 in Lima alone.

A climatic point during Sunday’s mass came when Francis spoke in words that were emblazoned on the headline of the daily *La Republica*: “Que no les roben la esperanza” (“Don’t let them rob you of hope”).

Such “hope” is cold comfort for a population whose majority confronts intense social misery.

In a rare moment of earthly sanity, *La Republica* contrasted Francis’s injunction that “Hope does not disappoint,” to the reality that in Peru “reconstruction has still not come together after the El Niño Costero.”

The reference was to heavy rains, floods and avalanches that destroyed thousands of agricultural hectares and devastated the northern region of Peru a year ago, leaving 97 dead, an estimated 115,000 homes destroyed and over 100 bridges washed out.

There are reasons for the Pope to be concerned about the future of his church in Peru. Between 1996 and 2013 it lost 14.5 percent of its membership. There is a growing disenchantment with all religions, especially among the youth.

This decline goes hand-in-hand with students’ and workers’ interest in advances in science, and the massive use of social networks with the potential of uniting in action the seven billion human beings that share the planet in a common struggle against the oppression, war and inequality created by capitalism and the obscurantism promoted by the Catholic Church—and religion in general—to justify these intolerable conditions.



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