

This Is How 5 Catholic Leaders Killed During Argentina’s Brutal Dictatorship Could Become Saints (It Involves Pope Francis)

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — It was time for Mass, but no one opened the church door.

When a teenager climbed through a window to investigate, he found five bloodied bodies, face-down on the floor in their living quarters. Police officers had stormed into the San Patricio church after midnight on July 4, 1976 and shot to death three priests and two seminarians – the bloodiest single act of violence against the Roman Catholic Church during Argentina’s brutal dictatorship.

Now Catholic officials in Argentina are working to have them declared saints. And the man who promoted their cause as archbishop will have the last word, as Pope Francis.

“This parish has been blessed by the presence of those who chose to live not for themselves, but to die so that others may live,” then-Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio said in 2001 during a service marking the 25th anniversary of the killings of the Pallottine churchmen.



Pope Francis walks with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, left, on the occasion of their private audience in the pontiff’s library, at the Vatican, Tuesday, April 9, 2013. Credit: AP

What became to be known as the San Patricio Massacre is a searing example of the strains within the Argentine church where Bergoglio spent his entire career. In all, 18 priests, 11 seminarians and about 50 Catholic lay workers would be killed or made to disappear as death squads sought to eliminate left-leaning activists during Argentina’s “dirty war.”

Bergoglio himself was accused of not doing enough to protect two of his priests as a young Jesuit leader during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. But he also saved others inside church properties before ushering them into exile

using false identities, at a time when top church officials were publicly aligning themselves with the junta leaders.

“The killings were a milestone ... The message that everyone got from the church’s higher levels was: `Be afraid because if anyone from any community criticizes this government, all might be targeted.” said Francisco Chirichella, a layman who is gathering documentation to justify their martyrdom, a key step toward sainthood.

The slayings occurred in the capital’s upscale Belgrano neighborhood just three months after military officers seized control of the government and intensified a crackdown on people they suspected of being “subversives.”



In this photo taken on March 23, 2013, a group of volunteers at San Patricio church, review documents to add to the canonization case for three priests and two seminarians who were killed inside the church in a 1976 massacre. Credit: AP

The army announced that “subversives” killed the priests, despite evidence they were shot in revenge for the bombing of a police station that killed 20 federal police officers two days earlier.

Privately, the Vatican’s top diplomat in Argentina, Pio Laghi, told U.S. Ambassador Robert Hill that he and the country’s top cardinal had learned that police officers killed the priests, and that that a top junta official had warned him that the government intended to “clean up the Catholic church.”

Laghi feared that the murders “may presage a wave of right-wing terror worse than anything we have seen before,” Hill wrote in a secret cable to Washington that July 8. “Embassy is inclined to agree.”

But in public, top church officials seemed to bow down before the junta leaders, saying they had full faith in their false claim that violent leftists were responsible.

“The government and the armed forces share our grief and, we dare say, our astonishment,” the church statement said. “We pray to the Lord to guide Your Excellencies so you may achieve the honorable and noble responsibilities of your work.”

Years later, the names of the alleged gunmen became public after a sailor told a judge that a colleague had confessed. A detainee at a navy torture center said her captor bragged about it. A military document called the killings unauthorized but justified. Still, the case stalled until the suspects were covered by amnesty laws, and no one has ever been prosecuted.



This photo taken on March 28, 2013, shows the facade of the San Patricio church in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In what became known as the San Patricio Massacre, gunmen believed to be from a military unit stormed into the church after midnight on July 4, 1976, and shot to death three priests and two seminarians – the bloodiest single act of violence against the Roman Catholic Church during Argentina’s brutal dictatorship. Now Catholic officials in Argentina are working to have them declared saints. And the man who promoted their cause as archbishop has become Pope Francis. Credit: AP

At first glance, San Patricio seemed an unlikely target. None of the three priests were members of the far-left Movement of Priests for the Third World.

Alfredo Leaden, 57, was regional delegate of the Ireland-based Pallottine order and focused on liturgical issues. Alfredo Dufau, 67, built and directed the San Vicente Pallotti school for children of housekeepers in the Belgrano neighborhood. The most outspoken was probably Alfredo Kelly, 43, who led the parish and had admonished members of his congregation for buying property stolen from political prisoners, calling the thieves “cockroaches.”

But the ambassador’s cable, declassified in 2006 and posted by Wikileaks on the Internet this week, says police believed the two seminarians were involved in the Third World priests’ movement, and “hence, they were considered fair game in a wave of vigilante-type executions police have carried out in retaliation” for the bombing.

They were philosophy teacher Salvador Barbeito, 29, rector of the San Maron school; and 23-year-old Emilio Barletti, who allowed young members of the Montoneros guerrilla organization to meet inside the parish house and use the mimeograph machine to print anti-dictatorship pamphlets, historian Roberto Baschetti said.

All five were Argentine, although Barbeito was born in Spain.

“Kelly told me and other colleagues, at a dinner on that July 3 at the parish, that he feared for his life because there was a letter floating around calling him a communist,” said Rodolfo Capalozza, who was then a 20-year-old seminary student, and escaped death because he happened to stay at his parents’ home that night.

“We talked a lot about the situation in the country and they all had different opinions; they weren’t killed because of their ideology or politics but because they preached the gospel of life in a time when life was being threatened,” added Capalozza, who now leads the Santa Isabel de Hungria church in Buenos Aires.



In this photo taken on March 27, 2013, parish priest Rodolfo Capalozza stands in the church aisle of Santa Isabel de Hungria during an interview in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Gunmen believed to be from a military unit stormed into the San Patricio church after midnight on July 4, 1976, and shot to death three priests and two seminarians – the bloodiest single act of violence against the Roman Catholic Church during Argentina’s brutal dictatorship. Capalozza, was then a 20-year-old seminary student, and escaped death in what became known as the San Patricio Massacre because he happened to stay at his parents’ home that night. Credit: AP

Sainthood would be “a just response” to the massacre, Capalozza said.

The bodies were found face-down on the living room carpet. Two messages were scribbled at the scene. One said: “These lefties died for brainwashing innocent minds and being MSTM,” initials for the Third World priests’ group.

Another referred to the July 2 attack on the police: “For our comrades blown up at Federal Security. We will prevail. Long live the Fatherland.”

Because the killers struck in Belgrano, where government officials and many Argentine elites live, it “had an amplifying effect on their message,” Capalozza said: Nobody in the church would be immune if they spoke out against the country’s rulers or got too involved in social work.

In 2001, the Pallottine order asked the Argentine Church to formally consider them to be martyrs. “As time went by the cause changed, and today we are asking for sainthood,” said Pablo Bocca, the current priest at the church.

Bergoglio, who had been close to Kelly and heard his confessions, formally approved the sainthood investigation in 2005.

“I am a witness, because I was with Alfie in his spiritual guidance, in his confession, until his death. He only thought of God. And I name him because I am a witness to his heart, and when I mention him I mention all of them,” Bergoglio said in his memorial homily.

Normally, proof of two miracles are required for sainthood. But martyrdom — dying for one’s faith — counts as the first miracle. A Vatican tribunal must eventually rule, and the pope makes the final decision.

“I have a lot of hope in this process,” Bocca said, “because now the pope is someone who knows the cause, who lived in this country and who shared the commitment of the church.”

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