

FR. BERGOGLIO'S 1990 RECOLLECTION OF HIS SALESIAN EDUCATION

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On October 20, 1990, then-Father Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, wrote a long letter to Salesian Cayetano Bruno, an historian of the Church in Argentina. The letter was written to remember Enrique Pozzoli, a Salesian friend of the family who baptized Jorge Bergoglio on December 25, 1936 and followed his spiritual journey.

Having finished those six typewritten pages, Fr. Bergoglio added an additional five pages where he brings together some "Salesian memories," in particular those related to 1949, the year in which, at thirteen, he frequented the Wilfrid Baron School of the Holy Angels at Ramos Mejia, in Greater Buenos Aires.

Fr. Bergoglio remembers with gratitude the Salesians' spirituality and an education that reflected a true and proper "Catholic culture" which prepared him "for life."

Below is the unabridged text, published last week in L'Osservatore Romano. The original is in Spanish; this ZENIT translation is from the Italian.

I have just finished the report of my memories of Father Enrique Pozzoli. Now I want to complete my promise to write some memories of my contact with the Salesians, just as they were. And I begin with a somewhat Voltaire-like anecdote. In 1976 we transferred the Provincial Curia to San Miguel. New vocations were beginning to arrive and it seemed appropriate that the Provincial be close to the House of Formation. We began to reform the program of studies: 2 years of juniorate (which disappeared), philosophy separated from theology began to be imposed, substituting that "mixture" of philosophy and theology that was called "curriculum" where one began to study Hegel (sic!). Being at San Miguel I saw the neighborhoods without pastoral care; this worried me and we began to follow the children. On Saturday afternoon we taught catechism, then they played, etc. I realized that we Professors had the vow to teach doctrine to children and the ignorant, and I began myself to do so together with the students. The endeavor began growing. Five large churches were built, the children of the area were mobilized in an organized way ... and only on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning ... Then the accusation came that this was not an apostolate proper of Jesuits; that I Salesianized (sic!) the formation. They accused me of being a pro-Salesian Jesuit, and perhaps this makes my memories somewhat biased ... but I remain at peace because my interlocutor at this moment is a pro-Jesuit Salesian, and he will be able to discern things.

It's not strange that I speak with affection of the Salesians, because my family was nourished spiritually by the Salesians of San Carlos. As a child I learned to go to the procession of Mary Help of Christians, and also to that of Saint Anthony of Mexico Street. When I was at my grandmother's home, I went to the Oratory of Saint Francis of Sales (following me there was the present Father Alberto Della Torre, chaplain of aviation). It is natural that I am a fan of San Lorenzo (otherwise something would be missing) and up until recently I kept a "History of the San Lorenzo Club" written by P. Mazza (I believe): I gave it to Don Hugo Chantada, Catholic journalist of "La Prensa", dogged fan of San Lorenzo. Now he has it. As a child I knew the famous Father confessors of San Carlos: Montaldo, Punto, Carlos Scandroglio, Pozzoli. And as a child I had in my hands the "Religious Instruction" of Father Moret. They had taught us to ask for "the blessing of Mary Help of Christians" every time we took leave of a Salesian.

3.[sic] But the most intense experience with the Salesians was in the year 1949, when I frequented as a boarder the sixth grade in the Wilfrid Baron School of the Holy Angels, at Ramos Mejia. Director Father Emilio Cantarutti, Counselor Father Placido Aviles; Catechist, Father Isidoro Holowaty; Prefect, Father Isidro Fueyo. Working in the Administration was the Deputy Mr. Fernandez [sic]. Of the clerics I remember Mr. (Leonardo or Leandro) Cangiani and Ruben Veiga. Among the elderly priests were Fathers Usher, Lambruschini, Cingolani, etc. It is hard for me to make a partial description of different aspects of the School, simply because I have reflected many times on this year of life and, little by little, I have formed a reflection of the whole, which is the one I want to transmit here. I am aware that it will be somewhat intellectualized, perhaps without the freshness of a simple anecdote, but – on the other hand – I know that this vision of the whole and the one I elaborated gradually and is born of my experience is, in my view, objective.

4. School life was a “whole.” I was immersed in a way of life prepared so that there wouldn’t be time to be lazy. The day passed as an arrow without time for one to be bored. I felt myself submerged in a world that, although prepared “artificially” (with pedagogic resources), had nothing artificial about it. The most natural thing was to go to Mass in the morning, as well as having breakfast, studying, going to lessons, playing during recreation, hearing the “Good night” of the Father Director. Each one was made to live different assembled aspects of life, and this created *a conscience* in me: not only a moral conscience but a sort of human conscience (social, ludic, artistic, etc.) Said differently: the School created, through the awakening of the conscience in the truth of things, *a Catholic culture* that was not at all “bigoted” or “disoriented.” Study, the social values of living together, the social references to the neediest (I remember having learned there to deprive myself of some things to give to persons who were poorer than me), sport, competence, piety ... everything was *real*, and everything formed habits that, all together, molded a cultural way of being. One lived in this world but open to the transcendence of the other world. It was very easy for me then in secondary school, to do the “transfer” (in the psycho-pedagogic sense) to other realities. And this simply because I lived *well* the realities lived in the School; without distortions, with realism, with a sense of responsibility and a horizon of transcendence. This *Catholic culture* is – in my opinion – the best that I received at Ramos Mejia.

5. Everything was done with *a meaning*. There was nothing “without meaning” (at least in the fundamental order; because accidentally there were gestures of impatience by some educators or little daily injustices, etc.). I learned there, almost unwittingly, to seek the meaning of things. One of the key moments of this learning to seek the meaning of things was the “Good night” that the Father Director generally gave. Sometimes the Father Inspector did it, when he passed through the School. In this connection I still remember, as if it was today, a “Good night” of Monsignor Miguel Raspanti who at that time was Inspector. It was at the beginning of October of ‘49. He had gone to Cordoba because his Mother died on September 29. On his return, he spoke to us of death. Now, when I am almost 54, I recognize that that little evening reflection was the point of reference of my whole subsequent life in regard to the problem of death. That evening, without feeling fear, I felt that I would be dead one day, and it seemed to me the most natural thing. When one or two years later I came to know how Father Isidoro Holowaty died, of how he endured for the sake of mortification so many days of pain in his stomach (he was a nurse) until one Wednesday Father Pozzoli, who had gone there to confess the Salesians, ordered him to see a doctor, well, when I came to know this it seemed to me the most natural thing that a Salesian should die this way, exercising virtue. Another “Good night” that made an impression was one of Father Cantarutti on the need to pray to the most Holy Virgin to understand well one’s own vocation. I remember that that night I prayed intensely as I went to the dormitory (if you must note something because two days later Father Aviles flung a comment to me) ... and since that evening I have never fallen asleep without praying. It was a psychological moment adapted to giving a meaning to the day, to things.

6. I learned to study in the School. The hours of study, in silence, created a habit of concentration, of a quite strong control of dispersion. Always with the help of professors, I learned a method of study, mnemonic –technical rules, etc. *Sport* was an essential aspect of life. One played well and a lot. The values that sport teaches (in addition to health) we already knew. In study as in sport the dimension of *competition* had a certain importance: we were taught to *compete well and to compete as Christians*. Over the years I have heard some criticisms of this competitive aspect of life ... But, curiously, they were done by Christians “liberated” from this pedagogic aspect but who in daily life slaughtered one another for money or power ... and did not compete as Christians.

7. A dimension that grew a lot in the subsequent years to the one spent in the School was my capacity to *feel good*: and I realized that the base was set the year of boarding school.. They *educated* my *sentiment* there. The Salesians have a special ability for this. I am not referring to “sentimentalism” but to “sentiment” as a value of the heart. Not to be afraid and to say to oneself what one is feeling.

8. *Education to piety* was another key dimension. I virile piety, appropriate to the age. In piety devotion to the Most Holy Virgin merits a special mention. They impressed this on me with fire ... and, in as much as I remember, also on my companions. And the recourse to Our Lady is essential for life. It goes from the awareness of having a

Mother in heaven that takes care of me to the recitation of the three Hail Marys, or of the Rosary. But the Virgin remained, and could not go out of our heart. We were inculcated also, and it remained impressed, in respect and love for the Pope. Sometimes I have heard criticisms of the “piety” that was inculcated in the School (I heard them years later), but they are always the usual rigmaroles of those who do not want to go to Mass because they were obliged to do so in School, etc. It is an anachronistic criticism because it transfers to the field of the pedagogy of piety a precise problem such as that of adolescent or youthful rebellion.

9. Closely united to love and to devotion to the Most Holy Virgin was love of *purity*. In this connection (and I believe altogether in Don Bosco’s preventive system) there is a very great misunderstanding. I was taught to love purity without any sort of obsessive teaching. There was not sexual obsession in the School, at least in the year I was there. I found more sexual obsession later in other educators or psychologists that shows ostentatiously a “*laissez-passer*” in this regard (but which deep down they interpreted behaviors in a Freudian key, which saw sex everywhere).

10. There was also room for hobbies, crafts, personal anxieties. Father Lambruschini taught us to sing, with Father Aviles I learned to build machinery to reproduce documents and to use it; there was a Ukrainian Father (Father Esteban) who wished to teach us to serve the table in the Ukrainian rite — and so many other things (theater, organization of championships, academic ceremonies, taxidermy, etc.) that channeled hobbies and anxieties. We were educated to *creativity*.

11. How did our educators address *crises*? They made us feel that we could trust, that they loved us, they were able to listen, they gave us good opportune advice, and they defended us both from rebellion as well as melancholy.

12. All these things configured a *Catholic culture*. They prepared me well for secondary school and for life. Never (in so far as I remember) was a truth negotiated. The most typical case was that of sin. The *sense of sin* is part of the Catholic culture ... and what I brought from home in that sense was reinforced, took shape. One could then play the rebel, the atheist ... but imprinted deep down was the sense of sin: a truth that could not be thrown out, to make everything easier. I speak of Catholic culture because everything we did and learned had, also, a *harmonious unity*. There was no “partiality,” but one thing referred to another and they completed one another. Unconsciously one felt oneself growing in harmony, something which I certainly could not make explicit at that time, but yes later. And, on the other hand, everything was of a striking realism.

13. I do not wish to fall into the psychology of the former student, a nostalgic, Proust-like attitude, where the memory selects the rosy part of life and denies the more limited or lacking aspects. There were lacks in the School, but the educational structure was not wanting. It is what I just wrote in the preceding paragraphs. There were things in 1949 that are not applicable in 1990 ... but I am convinced that the Salesian cultural patrimony of 1949, this pedagogic patrimony, is capable of creating in its pupils a Catholic culture also in 1990, as it was able to create it in 1930.

I say this because towards the end of last year something happened that saddened me. A Salesian Father that I esteem a lot, told me in a conversation that they were thinking of *leaving* some Schools in the hands of the laity. I asked him if it was because of a lack of vocations. In part, he told me, this was the reason, but because young Salesians do not want to work in the Schools, they do not feel attracted to this apostolate. I told him that the opposite happened with young Jesuits: they want to work in the Schools and they are not entirely conservatives. There is more: in the last 18 years the Argentine Province of the Society opened several Schools, using the form of the parish school. While I was Rector of the Maximo, two Schools were opened in its grounds: one of technical education and another of adult education. And now a third has been opened there in fact ... That Father also told me that another area was that of *making a gesture of insertion*” (sic!) in the neighborhoods, and this is why they left the Schools or some of them. He said that it was a pastoral *option*. In face of this I could not help but think of the Salesians that I knew in the School, I do not know if they “made gestures of insertion,” but they did spend themselves the whole day and did not even have time to have a little rest, this I do know. If those men that I knew

in the School – and I conclude with this reflection – could create a “Catholic culture,” it was because *they had faith*. They believed in Jesus Christ and – a bit by faith and a bit by nerve – they had the courage to “preach”: with the word, with their life, with their work. They were not ashamed to be humiliated with the language of the cross of Jesus which is shame and folly for others. I ask myself: when a work languishes and loses its flavor and its capacity to leaven the dough, is it not rather because Jesus Christ has been substituted by other options: psychological, sociological, pastoral? I do not want to be simplistic, but I do not cease to be concerned about the fact that – to make radical gestures of social insertion – adherence to the living Jesus Christ is abandoned [in favor of] the consequent insertion in whatever environmental context including the educational, to build a Catholic culture.