

## A Look Beyond Papal Trips that Read Like Thrillers

*By Dennis Redmont*



A papal trip to a Catholic country brings with it an explosive mixture of history, diplomacy, politics, and sensational events. And after the trip ends what remains in memory are the unusual events, but some of them only become clear years later.

I have been a witness of Popes and Portugal for over 50 years and travelled with three Popes on more than forty trips around the world as an Associated Press correspondent.

The first Pope was Paul VI on May 13, 1967, when I was an AP correspondent in Lisbon.

The pope unexpectedly landed at Alverca military base nearby Fatima because he did not want to pay direct tribute to Salazar's regime by landing in Lisbon, the capital.

Later only people understood this was part of a project which brought a secret visit of the leaders of Portuguese territories fighting for independence.

On July 1, 1970, the Pope received in Rome at a discreet Vatican audience formed by the leaders of the main liberation movements from the Portuguese colonies. They included Agostinho Neto, who led the Mpla (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), Marcelino dos Santos, who headed the Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) and Amílcar Cabral, secretary general of the Paigc (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde). At that time, they were all engaged in a single battle for the overthrow of Portuguese colonial rule and the establishment of free societies.

For the first time in history a pope was meeting with the leaders of guerrilla movements that moreover were fighting against "very Catholic" Portugal ruled by a regime, whose Catholic hierarchies, had always been on the side of colonialism with very rare exceptions.

Pope Paul VI's meeting with leaders of African independent movements almost caused a diplomatic incident with Portugal so much so that the latter, in protest, decided to withdraw its ambassador from Vatican territory. This lasted a few months.

But the visit which was later leaked set the stage for continuing Catholic presence in Portuguese speaking Africa. Still today there are many Catholic missions which operate schools and hospitals around these now independent countries and are able to, with some difficulties, continue their work.

Another time, in 1982, also in Fatima, John Paul II came to venerate the Virgin Mary for "saving" him after the notorious assassination attempt of 1981 by Turkish gun men Mehmet Ali Ağca . The Pope declared the Virgin had protected his life and the attempt of his life was a response to his support of freedom for his Polish country against Communism.

The Polish labor union led Solidarność movement was being materially and morally supported by the Vatican and the United States that eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet dominated eastern Europe.

On the first anniversary of his shooting, on May 13, 1982 , during the Pope's visit to Portugal got another blow. An unbalanced "ex- priest" Juan Fernandez Krohn took a swipe with a sharp bayonet at John Paul II when the Pope unexpectedly appeared for an evening prayer at the chapel of Fatima. It was on the heels of an assassination attempt in Rome in 1981, and the Vatican and Portugal went into a lockdown mode.

The next day the Pope looked shaken, but he went through his masses and speeches.

The Vatican stonewalled, saying the Pope had not been hit and when I confronted the bishop aide with proof of Public TV footage, snapped at me " Don't believe everything you see on videotapes!".

For years, the Vatican denied that John Paul had been hit, but after his death, his private secretary Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, confirmed in an interview and a memoir that the pontiff was bandaged up beneath his robes after the bayonet attack.

Gianfranco Svidercoschi, an Italian journalist and vaticanist, in 2014, wrote a book titled "*Ho vissuto con un santo*" and Cardinal Dziwisz revealed in the interview for the book that the Pope was injured.

The book takes its name from a sentence spoken by Cardinal Dziwisz during the interview, "I have lived next door to a saint. Or at least, for almost forty years, every day, I saw sainthood up close as I always thought it should be."

During the interview with Svidercoschi, Dziwisz also mentions the Fatima incident, revealing what had really happened on that occasion. Until then it had never been known that the Spanish priest managed to strike the Pope in the side with a long blade, causing him to lose blood.

"Today, - the cardinal confessed, - I can reveal for the first time that on the evening of the day of the attack, when the Holy Father returned to his room, he noticed that his white robe was stained with blood. The pontiff was medicated, but he decided to continue the journey anyway."

Five years ago, I tracked down Krohn, the infamous self-styled Spanish cleric, who attempted on Pope's life and got his version of the story and served a jail term in Portugal.

"What Dziwisz said is a lie," he indignantly told me: "the Pope's bodyguards immediately threw me to the ground. I stood right in front of the Pope; I was face to face with him. His face showed maturity and hardness, but John Paul II did not give the slightest sign that he had been hurt."

Krohn went on to say that that the action was to be a sacrifice to be made for the salvation of the Church of Spain and of his convictions as a Catholic and Spanish nationalist. Krohn was convinced that the Roman Curia was collaborating with the Communist police and the high hierarchs in Poland. Most likely he, who belonged to Lefebvre's Catholic-integralist current, could not accept the existence of a young, Eastern European pope who was showing a more open and tolerant face of the Church.

Today, Krohn still runs a blog out of Belgium in French and Spanish.

The forthcoming trip of Pope Francis has already promised its share of controversy with the price of the altar at many millions of Euros and the duration of his five-day stay, interrupting regular life mainly in Lisbon.

The Pope's recent appointments of new cardinals, including one more Portuguese just ahead of his trip as a gesture, bring the total of Portuguese voting cardinals to four in a future papal election, meaning these cardinals will protect Pope Francis' legacy and have a block of votes which should be one of the highest in the world per capital.

As people watch the ceremonies starting Wednesday August 2, they should be looking beyond the trip and into the future following the trail and connecting the dots.

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