

ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE (AP) — Pope Francis says he wasn't offended by the "Communist crucifix"



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ABOARD THE PAPAL PLANE (AP) — Pope Francis says he wasn't offended by the "Communist crucifix" given to him by Bolivian President Evo Morales during his South American pilgrimage.

Morales surprised the pontiff with the unusual gift, a crucifix attached to a hammer and sickle, when Francis arrived in La Paz on Wednesday.

The crucifix was a replica of one designed by a Jesuit priest, the Rev. Luis Espinal, who was tortured and killed by Bolivian paramilitary squads in 1980. Francis prayed at the site of Espinal's assassination upon his arrival in Bolivia. The modified crucifix immediately raised eyebrows, with some questioning whether Morales, whose socialist and anti-church rhetoric is well-known, was trying to score a questionable political point with a questionable, and possibly sacrilegious, melding of faith and ideology.

Francis, an Argentine Jesuit, said Espinal was well-known among his fellow Jesuits as a proponent of the Marxist strain of liberation theology. The Vatican opposed it, fearing that Marxists were using liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor" as a call for armed revolution against oppressive right-wing regimes that were in power in much of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. During a news conference en route home to Rome on Sunday, Francis said he interpreted Morales' gift through the prism of Espinal's Marxist bent and viewed it as protest art. After taking into consideration the time in which he lived, Francis said: "I understand this work. For me it wasn't an offense."

Francis added that he brought the crucifix home with him