

JORGE BERGOGLIO / POPE FRANCIS. HIS TRANSFORMATIONS AND OPPOSED VIEWS UPON HIM

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Abstract

In my paper, I present the current bishop of Rome against his Argentinian background and sketch the different stages in his life, pointing out meanwhile at his different perspectives as superior of the Jesuits, as auxiliary bishop and subsequently archbishop of Buenos Aires, being eventually elected as Pope. In this long process, continuities and discontinuities cannot be overlooked. It is clear that his style of exercising the function of bishop of Rome has not left anybody indifferent. The spectrum spans from a Franciscania to an unthinkable and ferocious resistance inside the Church and even within the Roman curia.

Some days ago, talking to my friend and dean of the Faculty of Catholic Theology of Lviv, Ukraine, about this terrible war and how can we help those sisters and brothers in great need, at a certain point he asked me: "Pablo, you are Argentinian. Is the Pope really a communist"? Four years ago, a similar question was thrown to me by a priest close to Cracow, Poland: "Why is he like this?" A month ago, being in Argentina, I could confirm again, that even in his own country, Bergoglio is resisted, however, on different grounds. He has not visited his country and on the contrary, some corrupt politicians were photographed with him at the Vatican.

With you and my colleagues today, we will attempt to answer this rather complex question: Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?

At the beginning of 2013, the Roman Catholic Church is within one of her deepest crises in history. Scandals, especially of abuse, were becoming stronger and more frequent. Pope Benedict, a highly respected intellectual, was clearly not a pastor and was more and

more secluded behind the Roman curia. Almost every year his pontificate came negatively in the headlines: his speech in Regensburg produced a huge wave of wrath in the Islamic world. Further faux pas were among other Benedict's intention of reconciling the schismatic conservatives brought the credibility of the Catholic Church to deep levels. The last drop were the so-called "Vatileaks", where confidential information from the Pope's office came to the media. These leaks showed the terrible fight for power within the Roman curia and the lack of power of the Pope himself. In this context, on February 11, Benedict takes perhaps his most important decision, with which he will be remembered by history. He resigned. It was a shock, first of the Cardinals themselves, that cannot understand the resignation speech in Latin, and then of the whole world. Benedict, who has starkly preached against the dictatorship of relativism, eventually relativized the papacy, and doing so, he modernized it.

On March 13, Cardinal Tauran announced that the new Pope was Jorge Mario Bergoglio and that he took the name of Francis. Who was this man, unknown to the most?

Only four years after being ordained a priest, Jorge Bergoglio - as most of Argentinians, a descendant of Italian immigrants - was appointed Provincial of the Argentinian Jesuits for the period 1973-1976. These were the most difficult years of the country's history: terrorism and brutal military repression that left more than ten thousand "desaparecidos" (missing people). His period as provincial remained almost until today highly problematic since he in fact divided the Jesuits to a degree that after his tenure, they had to bring a superior from Colombia, and difficult consequences of his governance continued for many years. Bergoglio himself has pointed out that he committed many mistakes, mainly being authoritarian, do not listening and often taking the wrong decisions. In addition to this, some believed that he was responsible of the two Jesuits being kidnapped by the military and eventually re-appearing with life (something totally unusual those days). Later it was proved that Bergoglio had no responsibility on this.

After those difficult years of being superior, the star of the young Jesuit increasingly fades. He was appointed rector of the Jesuit Theological Faculty, then sent to Germany to do his doctorate, which he interrupted after few months, and back to Argentina he was eventually appointed to teach some courses. In 1990 his students were suddenly informed that Padre Bergoglio would no longer be teaching them. He was sent to my city, Córdoba, where he should have no communication with the rest of the Jesuits and have there no other tasks than listening confessions. Some fellow Jesu-

its thought at that time that he had serious psychological problems. Absolutely ostracized and within a deep night, in many respects, the Jesuits had got rid of him and Bergoglio had come to his sheol.

He would remain almost two years in this situation and it would be there that another transformation took place. His only function in Córdoba was to listen and he fulfilled it. He learned to listen. In 1992 he was surprisingly been appointed auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires and a totally different Bergoglio emerged.

Arguably the best book on him, written by a British journalist, Paul Vallely, is called in its original English: "Untying the knots"¹. It refers to a devotion to the Mother of God Bergoglio found in Augsburg, Germany, and diffused in Argentina. She is the one who unties our knots (Knotenlöserin) and solves our problems. However, the book refers more to the process of Bergoglio in untying his own knots, the knots he had been tying in the first part of his life. In this sense, it is very significant the title that this book received in the German translation: *Von Reaktionär zum Revolutionär* "From Reactionary to Revolutionary", since it expresses the amazing transformation that took place in Bergoglio's life, a transformation that perhaps is not finished.

Even the Jesuits that had known him for decades were puzzled by Bergoglio's transformation. One of them, a young Jesuit at that time, and now provincial superior, affirmed in an interview that then they could not understand what was going with Bergoglio. Having been in many regards a conservative, he was now focusing on the poor and on their problems. As an auxiliary bishop, he would very often go to the slums of Buenos Aires and care for the excluded. Curiously, as superior of the Jesuits he had forbidden his own priests to continue with that service in the slums and as already mentioned two of them were eventually kidnapped by the military. Bergoglio had come to understand the poor as locus theologicus, as subject more than object; the poor as the beloved by God; those who are closest to him. In this manner, he came to the same conclusions than those kidnapped priests twenty years later. As an auxiliary bishop and then, after 1998 as archbishop, he would live very modestly, not in the episcopal palace but in a small department with an elderly priest, caring and cooking for him. He would travel not with a limousine but with the underground and bus. Very often in the weekends, he went to replace priests in their parishes, so they

¹ Paul Vallely, *Pope Francis : untying the knots ; the struggle for the soul of Catholicism*, Bloomsbury, London, Oxford-New York, 2015. Revised and expanded Second edition.

could take some time off. Created a cardinal in 2001 he continued doing the same. He had the cardinal's garment of his predecessor being altered for him and asked friends and relatives not to travel to the ceremony in Rome but donate that money to the poor.

In the 2005 Conclave, he was the candidate of the liberals running after Ratzinger and could have blocked his election. Before his own election, as it is the rule with Catholic bishops who become 75, he presented his resignation and booked for him a room at a house for elderly retired priests. In March 2013, he bought an economy ticket (not the first-class ones paid by the Vatican) to go to Rome for the Conclave. He would never use the return ticket. What happened?

Before the Conclave for electing the bishop of Rome, the so-called "General Congregations" or Pre-conclave takes place. There cardinals are allowed to hold a short speech. Bergoglio only used 5 minutes of his allotted time. And these few minutes attracted the attention of all cardinals.

"The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all misery. When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick (...) When the Church is self-referential, inadvertently, she believes she has her own light..."

In other words, the Church has to go out, to everybody, especially to the excluded and marginalized, and bring them the joy of Christ's gospel. We can see already here – and Bergoglio has been repeating the same years before even in the Document of the General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America in 2007 – the main lines of his pastoral thought and plan.

The official Conclave started in the afternoon of March 12. The following day, and after five rounds, the cardinals elected him as the new bishop of Rome. Almost an hour after the *habemus papam*, he appeared in the loggia, shrouded in profound silence, timidly waving – an image very different to that of Benedict XVI in 2005 – with simple white papal robe. To many it appeared as an old man deprived of all charisma. This immediately changed after his initial words: *Buona sera*, "Good evening". People were shocked with this unusual normal greeting. His speech at the loggia although spontaneous is also a very clear program. First, he speaks of himself not as the Pope but as the new bishop of Rome. The church of Rome, he says quoting Ignatius of Antioch, presides in love. With this he

provided his comprehension of the primacy issue. Primacy is not a question of power and hierarchy, but of love and service. This primacy is referred to the church of Rome and not to her bishop. Furthermore, he explicitly states that the church of Rome starts a new way (*cammino*) in her relationship with her bishop. The term “way” is very central and he will repeat it the following day in his first mass with the cardinals. Indeed, three times he stressed there that the Church has to “walk” (*camminare*). This is a topic very central in the Vatican II Council and in Latin American theology. The Church is pilgrim and finds no place in this world and therefore cannot settle down until reaching the Kingdom of God. We can see already there the relevance of the current theme of synodality.

However, before giving the traditional blessing, another surprise took place. Francis asked the community of Rome (and of the world) to pray and bless her bishop, so he can bless her. With this he provided a deep insight into the sound ecclesiology of Vatican II, Latin American and especially Argentinian theology. It is key the biblical notion of “people of God”. Francis bent in order to receive the prayer and blessing of the people of God in Rome. Silence could not be more impressive. Some have seen here the moment in the Byzantine liturgy, when the priest bends in front of the iconostasis asking for the prayer of the assembly, before the anaphora. Already in Buenos Aires Bergoglio had also knelt before praying Evangelical Christians asking for their blessings. He would do the same in Phanar before the Ecumenical Patriarch. Before ending his short speech, Francis tells his people that in the following day he would go to main basilica dedicated in Rome to the Mother of God (under the name of *Salus populi romani*, “Protrectess of the Roman People”), to ask that she protect us all. Finally, he wishes everybody *buon riposo*, “sleep well”. *Francismania* has started.

The following day, he held the first mass in front of the Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel. There, with very simple liturgical garments, he insisted to the cardinals that the Church has to walk, move and go to the peripheries. Two days later, he had his first encounter with the press. After thanking the journalists that had worked so hard covering the election, he said off-the-cuff: “*Come vorrei una Chiesa povera e per i poveri!*” (“How I long for a poor Church for the poor”). After finishing, speaking now in Spanish, he offered a silent blessing to the journalists, acknowledging that not all of them were Catholic or believers. The New York Times saw in it “a rare gesture for a pontiff and a sign of openness toward other faiths and engagement with the secular world” (New York Times, 16 of March 2013.).

Few days later, Francis started his first Paschal celebration by the traditional rite of washing of feet on Maundy Thursday. He did not perform it, however, in the Vatican Basilica, but in a jail to young prisoners, among them a Muslim woman.

Another shift took place with the papal trips. After the World Youth Day in Rio, where he drove in a small car through the crowds of the city and visited the *favelas*, the slums in Rio, he chose his first trip to be to the island of Lampedusa, where thousands of immigrants arrive and many more die in their way. There he cried for those, who nobody cries for, and denounced the “the globalization of indifference” in front of this fact. Albania, Korea, and Philippines brought him to the peripheries of the world. This was even stressed more with the appointment of cardinals from “the end of the world” instead of the traditional European main dioceses.

Cardinal Nolan from New York declared later: “When we chose him, we were not aware we were electing a rock star”. This clear exaggeration reveals however the opposed views that would develop on Francis.

On the one hand, the new bishop of Rome became increasingly popular from his first appearance in March 2013. “Person of the Year” for important magazines such as Times, the Rolling Stones, and even the Advocate, a known gay publication. There are books for CEOs regarding what they can gain from Francis’ style of leadership. Jewish publications discuss what rabbis can learn from the bishop of Rome. German Green Party (*die Grüne*) feels itself reflected in many aspects of Francis’ actions. It is a fact that many women and men feel strongly appealed by him. Why?

Most people see in him an ordinary person, like you and me, with powerful gestures and signs. They feel addressed by him in his simple language and in the meantime unpretentious ways. They find in him a very authentic and coherent person, who lives what he says. In a world, where leaders live in luxury far from the people, they are amazed by Francis’ existential message; somebody who chooses modesty and simplicity, who denounces the idol of money and luxury in favour of the Gospel’s values. His choice of living in a simple hotel’s room instead of the Vatican palaces, of having his meals with the employees, of travelling in regular small cars, of carrying his own bag, of austere garments have an enormous impact beyond any speech.

On the other hand, resistance to him has increased to an unparalleled level. And this opposition paradoxically takes place within the Catholic Church. Strongly and openly criticized by priests, bishops, cardinals even from his own curia such as Burke,

Sara and Müller. On which grounds do conservatives -who traditionally are papists - oppose their pope? Some have even gone so far as to assert that he was not rightly elected and that Benedict is still the pope. In addition to this a great lack of clearness about the new function of an "emeritus" pope - based also in the symbolic aspects of garments and title claimed by Benedict - has contributed to this almost unique situation in the history of the Church, where the bishop of Rome is called in question by his own ministers. Main criticism to Francis is based on his apparent lack of clarity, even mistakes, in traditional doctrine (for instance regarding giving communion to divorced and re-married Christians), loss of papal dignity, obscuring his primacy, "fraternity" with Islam, kissing the feet of Muslim prisoners at jail for Maundy Thursday instead of celebrating at St. Peter, focusing upon refugees, etc.

Just to offer a picture in this regard, on October 7, 2017 Catholics in Poland were encouraged to go to designated points along the country's borders for a mass rosary prayer for the salvation of Poland and the world. While Church leaders affirmed the event was purely religious, there were concerns it could be seen as endorsing the state's refusal to let in Muslim migrants. That day the Catholic church celebrates Our Lady of the Rosary but it also marks the anniversary of a Christian victory over Ottoman Turks at the sea battle of Lepanto in 1571.

In the same vein, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the retired Vatican ambassador to Washington, wrote a bombshell letter calling on Pope Francis to resign. This and similar stances of harsh and open criticism of the Pope within the Church is unparalleled. It is impossible to think that this even have been thought for instance under John Paul II.

His stark criticism of capitalism had brought him few friends in the world of international finances and especially of conservative Americans, who attempt to disqualify him as somebody who does not understand economics. He is even considered by some of them as a communist because he stands up for the poor and excluded from this world. It reminds us the famous saying of Brazilian bishop Helder Camara: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist".

His visit to Lampedusa and his greetings to immigrants for Ramadan produced a very positive image in the Muslim world as well as his defence against caricaturizing Islam or his visit of the West Bank in Palestine. His trip to Jerusalem was undertaken with two old friends of Buenos Aires, a Muslim and a rabbi. In addition to this, already in Buenos Aires he had criticized the opportunity of Benedict's speech on Islam.

On the ecumenical field, as observed, his understanding of Roman primate from the very outset as well as his meetings with Christian leaders have been highly impressive. The same can be especially said about his relation with the Ecumenical Patriarch, whom he addresses as *il mio fratello Andrea*, “my brother Andrew”. He met him in Jerusalem, where he kissed his hand after Bartholomew’s speech. He invited him for peace prayers in Rome together with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and eventually visited him in Phanar. There, he explicitly stated that Rome is ready for union with the Orthodox churches not requiring from them more than the common faith. On that same occasion and off-the-cuff he went to the Patriarch, bent in front of him (as he did in the loggia after his election), and asked him to bless him and the Roman church.

But also, to the Evangelical Christians he had sent powerful signals and asked them to pray for him. These, at a convention in Texas, deeply moved by his request, fervently prayed for the bishop of Rome.

In this way, we are confronted with a paradoxical situation, where much support comes from outside the Church and even from the non-believers, while violent criticism proceeds from inside, even from the own Roman curia.

How, does Bergoglio/Francis see the Church? One of the key images is the one of a “field hospital”. Urgent compassion and care are the main tasks of the Church. After a battle, you do not ask the wounded if they have cholesterol!

Francis’ revolution appears to be a re-focusing of the Church on Jesus’ main message of compassion and mercy. To many, Christians or not, Francis brings new fresh air into the world. Compassion is his key message, supported by powerful signs. What no everybody knows but can, nevertheless, feel is that Francis preaches mercy because he had experienced it in his own personal life. As Valley makes it clear, Francis’ revolution is first of all a revolution, a transformation that took place first in Bergoglio’s life itself. He always repeats that he is a sinner and there is no exaggeration in this. The motto of his episcopal and papal coat of arms states “*misericordia atque eligendo*”. Taken from a homily from a Latin Church Father, Bede, it refers to Jesus choosing Matthew: he had compassion on him and chose him. In this, young Bergoglio saw his priestly vocation. From his own mistakes, Bergoglio learnt what compassion does mean.

Indeed, it is his compassion what touches people. He avoids nobody and even looks for the excluded. He spends his birthday

with homeless people, he stops the Papal car and gets off from it in order to touch and bless handicapped people or even invite them for a ride in that car. Pictures of him hugging a disfigured sick man or letting a small orphan sit on his papal chair have gone around the world. Short after his election, an Italian magazine titled an article on him: *Rivoluzione della tenerezza*, "the Revolution of tenderness".

Jesus' (and therefore the Church's) main message is that nobody is excluded from God's compassion: the poor, the abused, the marginalized, the persecuted, the old people, the sick, those who live irregular situations, the transgendered, those who have been crushed by life and terrible experiences. Throughout history, many popes are remembered by their constructions: basilicas, palaces, squares, fountains, and museums. Francis will be remembered, however, by setting showers for the homeless of Rome, by inviting them to celebrate with him his birthday and to visit the Vatican museums. In cold Roman nights, there are priests and an archbishop, who through the streets of the ancient capital distribute food and blankets.

I travel much to Orthodox countries such as Greece and Romania. In this country, I coincided with the Pope's visit. It is known that the Orthodox churches and believers have difficulties with Catholics and often see in the Catholic church a sort of imperialism, bringing always to mind besides the filioque the sack of Constantinople in 1204. Scepticism and suspicion in Romania were great in 2019, when the Pope arrived and stayed three days traveling through many places of the country. Romanian television was broadcasting live during the entire visit. At the end of it, Orthodox ordinary and poor people on the streets, with tears in their eyes, said: "He is one of us".

Personally, I still remember what he said in Italian (although behind it, it is even more clear in Spanish) at the airport of Iasi:

„Noi apparteniamo gli uni agli altri e la felicità personale passa da rendere felici gli altri. Tutto il resto sono favole” (“We belong to each other and personal happiness depends on making others happy. Everything else is a fairy tale”.)

I believe this clearly summarizes Francis' teaching. Especially in these days of unprecedented suffering, when a Christian country is destroyed by another Christian country, when thousands of fellow human beings are killed and many other flee for their life. The message of the Gospel resounds as "the" commandment of God:

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did for me” (Mat 25:40).