

THE NEW BISHOP OF ROME: A REVOLUTION?

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Abstract: To many, Christians or not, Francis, the new Bishop of Rome, brings new fresh air into the world. Francis understands the Church as the “People of God” and wants to decentralize its organization. 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.

In regard to the Catholic Church, his image of a “field hospital” is a very powerful one. Urgent compassion and care is the main task of the Church. But, Francis’ revolution appears to be a re-focusing of the Church on Jesus’ main message of compassion and mercy.

Keywords: Francis, Church, revolution, compassion, mercy, message.

At the beginning of 2013, the Roman Catholic Church is within one of her deepest crisis 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 was 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.

In the evening of March 13, 2013, first with smoke and then with bells the world was notified that a new Pope had been elected. Following ancient ceremonies one of the cardinals came out to St. Peter’s loggia and announced in Latin:

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Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum; habemus Papam: Eminentissimum ac Reverendissimum Dominum, Dominum Georgium Marium Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem Bergoglio (I announce you a great joy. We have a pope, the most eminent and reverend Lord, Lord Jorge Mario, cardinal of the Holy Roman Church, Bergoglio”.

St. Peter’s square is full of people. Joy is immense with the announcement. The vast majority of them, and most of the world, do not know who this Bergoglio is. However, they would be shocked by the following sentence of the Cardinal. *Qui sibi nomen imposuit Franciscum* (“who has given himself the name of Francis”). You can perceive the blow in the people, journalists, and the whole world. The Pope will be called Francis, like the *poveretto* (the little poor) of Assisi, the one who embraced the lepers and poverty, the excluded, who undertook a deep spiritual reform of the Church.

The present symposium takes place to some extent within the framework of another one dedicated to Leo I, as a bridge between Eastern and Western Christianity. Leo is, in his awareness of his office, arguably the first pope and we know that much of later evolution of the papacy has been problematic in many respects. Since XIXth century the popes had lost political power, at least in a direct form. This has brought up the challenge of understanding their role as spiritual leaders. From this perspective, I will attempt to elucidate now Francis’ comprehension of the function of the bishop of Rome today.

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. His period as provincial remained almost until today highly problematic since he in fact divided the Jesuits 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. 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 eventually 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. In some 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 his transformation took its final form. His only function in Córdoba was to listen and he fulfilled it. He learned to listen. In 1992 he was surprisingly 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”. 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, affirms in an interview that at that time they could not understand what was going with Bergoglio then. Having been a conservative, he was focusing now on the poor, 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 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 weekend he went to replace priests in their parishes, so they could take some time off. Created a Cardinal in 2001 he continued doing the same. In the 2005 Conclave, he was the candidate of the liberals running after Ratzinger and could have blocked his election. Before his election, as it is the rule with Catholic bishops who become 75, he presented his resignation and found 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...Put simply, there are two images of the Church: Church which evangelizes and comes out of herself (...) and the worldly Church, living within herself, of herself, for herself. This should shed light on the possible changes and reforms, which must be done for the salvation of souls.

Thinking of the next Pope: He must be a man who, from the contemplation and adoration of Jesus Christ, helps the Church to go out to the existential peripheries, that helps her to be the fruitful mother, who gains life from “the sweet and comforting joy of evangelizing.”

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 saying 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 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. Three times he stressed that the

Church has to “walk”. 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 the Kingdom of God. 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*, “Protrectress 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, as already mentioned, he went in a very modest car to Santa Maria Maggiore to pray to the Virgin Mary and in returning he passed by to the hotel where he stayed before the conclave to get his suitcase and pay the bill of a hotel, that actually now belonged to him. In the afternoon, 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. Instead of receiving the greetings of the cardinals sitting while they kneel (in old times they used to kiss the pope’s foot as a sign of obedience!), he stood up and went himself to greet them. 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”¹.

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.

¹ *New York Times*. 16 of March 2013.

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.

It is clear that deep changes are taking place in the Catholic Church. Changes applauded by many, nevertheless also criticized by other sectors (within the Roman church, traditional groups and even some cardinals are clearly against the opening of the Church and accuse Francis of leaving aside “papal dignity” as well as traditional doctrine). Let us now focus on this phenomenon. Many see here a revolution. As Vallely makes clear, Francis revolution is first of all a revolution, a transformation that took place first in Bergoglio’s life itself.

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. On the other hand, 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. In this sense, Francis is a master of PR.

However, 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”.

As I already stated, fortunately popes are no longer, as they were in the past, political leaders. They have however an impact upon international political life. Francis for instance was instrumental in Cuban embargo lift by the United States and in his coming trip to this country he will stop in the island of the Caribbean. His presence, speech and especially signs at Lampedusa as well as in Brussels at the headquarters of the European Union had a powerful effect. The same happened in the last days where he openly denounced Armenian “genocide”.

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.

Especially in the last time and due to the terrible events in the Middle East, Francis often speaks about the “ecumenism of blood”. Christians killed are not asked if they are Orthodox, Copts, Evangelical or Catholic but *together* they lay witness of Christ’s passion.

In regard to the Catholic church, his image of a “field hospital” is a very powerful one. Urgent compassion and care is the main task of the Church. After a battle, you do not ask the wounded if they have cholesterol! In addition of this, Francis has strongly criticized clericalism, focusing instead upon the Gospel’s model of pastors. Indeed in the first Maundy Thursday after his election, he addressed Catholic priests throughout the world:

This is precisely the reason why some priests grow dissatisfied, lose heart and become in a sense collectors of antiquities or novelties – instead of being shepherds living with ‘the smell of the sheep.’ This is what I am asking you – be shepherds with the smell of sheep.

He also has strongly addressed scandals of abuse, money and corruption within the Church and even the Vatican, where Francis has undertaken the highly difficult reform of the Curia and has addressed its problems and sicknesses in a long list, among which he mentioned “spiritual Alzheimer”.

Francis understands the Church as the “People of God” and wants to decentralize its organization. In this context he appointed a group of eight cardinals from all continents to assist him in the governance of the Church. This synodality is also expressed in giving more power and decision to the episcopal conferences. In addition to this, most of the new cardinals come from the “global South”.

Francis’ revolution appears to be a re-focusing of the Church on Jesus’ main message of compassion and mercy. Already the day after his election, in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, he asked the confessors to be merciful. Few days later, at his first Angelus message he insisted on the same issue, as he did with the above-mentioned image of the “field hospital”. At the coming Synod on Family he has placed the theme of what the Church ought to do with those who live irregular situations, mainly the remarried divorced and their access to communion. Finally, on the second anniversary of his election, he had proclaimed an “Extraordinary Jubilee of 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. 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 “*miserando 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 means.

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.

Coming now to an end, I usually close my presentations on Francis with a powerful picture. In it, we could see on the left, archbishop Bergoglio kneeling in front of a wheelchair. Sitting there on the right side, we have a sick boy with Aids and no more hair. The bishop devotedly kisses his feet. My final question to my audience and also to you today is the following: On which side of this picture, left or right, is the *Vicar of Christ*?

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me“².

² Matthew 25,40.