

The New Pope: A “Geopolitical” Interpretation

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

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On March 13, 2013 the Conclave crowned Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the new Pope of the Catholic Church. The seventy-six year old Argentinean, whose parents originated from the Italian region of Piedmont, has archbishop of Buenos Aires since 1998, a cardinal since 2001, and both the first person from the Americas and the first Jesuit to ascend to the pontifical seat. Viewed from outside the strictly religious sphere, his election can be read as depending on three different kinds of problems.

The challenge within the Church

Within the Catholic Church various sensibilities and currents of thought coexist. The media usually summarize them with two labels: “conservatives” and “progressives”. The now emeritus pope Joseph Ratzinger, listed in a preeminent position among those so-called “conservative” ecclesiastics, during his pontificate posed the struggle against moral relativism as a key problem and engaged in restoring different traditional features that had fallen into disuse in the meantime. Like his predecessor John Paul II, born Karol Wojtyla, he showed intransigence on themes such as ordination of women priests, use of contraceptives, extra-marital unions or abortion. On the contrary, the so-called “progressives” reveal themselves more flexible on these issues. Among the main representatives of the last group are cardinals Karl Lehmann and Godfried Danneels. The German Lehman, who presides over the Conference of German Bishops, tried for example to allow divorced people to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion and made the Catholic Church take part in the counselling system, and in some cases issued certificates for abortion in public hospitals.

However, it must be underlined that the most extreme positions have been excluded from the ruling circles of Catholic Church and above all due to the long pontificate of John Paul II, at the end of which almost all voting cardinals had been nominated by him. John Paul II was a conservative but at the same time supported the “modernism” of the Second Vatican Council. On the one hand “traditionalists”, who refused the innovations of the aforementioned Council, were marginalized or even expelled from the Church through excommunication. This was the case of the Society of Saint Pius X, founded by the archbishop Marcel Lefebvre in 1970. On the other hand we have the Swiss priest Hans Küng who was one of the experts of the Second Vatican Council and later accused John Paul II of having betrayed its real spirit. Küng denied papal infallibility and was in favour of euthanasia; which led to his interdiction from teaching theology by the Holy See.

Beyond habits and moral questions, social themes have been highly divisive. The opening towards modernity of the Second Vatican Council laid the way, in Latin America, to an interpretation which took the name “Theology of Liberation”, whose main theory is that the Gospel is a means for the liberation from poverty and injustice that begins already in this life. The Theology of Liberation has been condemned more than once by Paul VI, John Paul II

and Benedict XVI, accusing it of subordinating the evangelical message to Marxist doctrine. One of its major supporters, the Franciscan Leonardo Boff, was forced to leave the Catholic Church after a trial by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (directed at that time by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) that condemned him to “obsequious silence”.

Another of the themes treated during the Second Vatican Council was the role of the bishops, which was strengthened. Over the years tension has developed between the local levels of the Catholic Church, represented by the bishops, and the central power represented by the Pope and the Roman Curia. This tension seems to have been transformed into open conflict, according to what has been reported by most journalistic sources, as the Curia has come under scrutiny for its management of the Vatican bank, and more generally for ecclesiastical corruption.

In these still open questions, how can we place the figure of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, just elected Pope Francis? Bergoglio is not unwanted by “progressives”: it is said that he was the most voted of Ratzinger’s opponents during the previous Conclave, and his election has now gained Hans Küng’s approval. However, his position on customs and moral issues is in line with the conservatives: when he was Cardinal, he strongly opposed the introduction of gay marriage in Argentina, defined the homosexual way of living as “immoral”, and did not show any openness to euthanasia and abortion. Cardinal Bergoglio also showed great attention to poor people, extensively related by the media in recent days, but at the same time he has always set evangelization above everything else. Particularly, he has been a bitter enemy of the Theology of Liberation, with which he has been in conflict since the 60’s. In his first speech as pontiff, Bergoglio never used the word “pope” (not even referring to Benedict XVI), but always and only “Bishop of Rome”, of the diocese *“that presides in charity over all the churches”*. In the days following election he wanted to remain among the cardinals, behaving as one of them. This suggests the will to exalt the bishops’ role and not to aim for an “authoritative” papacy. His election occurred mainly thanks to the solid formation reached by American cardinals, both from North and South America. However, this potentially dangerous sign for the Roman Curia is mitigated by the defeat of one who would have been the main opponent to Bergoglio, Archbishop Angelo Scola. The latter was in fact the most unpopular candidate to secretary of state Tarcisio Bertone. Maybe the same members of the Roman Curia focused their votes on Bergoglio. So it is seen how, in all matters that have divided the Catholic Church until now, Pope Francis emerges as a pontiff of compromise between the different ecclesiastical factions.

The confessional challenge in Latin America

Latin America is the only region in the world where every country has a Catholic majority. This happens neither in Europe, divided among Catholics, Protestant and Orthodox Christians, nor in North America, nor Africa, nor in Asia where Christians are clearly a minority. The percentage of Catholics in South America exceeds 80% and decreases a little in Central America and the Caribbean. This share of population is largely superior than that observed in Central or Western Europe. Latin America alone has about one third of all Catholics in the world (adding those of Anglo-Saxon America almost half is reached), against a little more than a quarter in Europe. So it is clear why the Americas, and particularly Latin America, have gained such a great importance within the Catholic Church as to elect a pope.

However, Catholicism in Latin America is facing the challenge launched by the evangelical

Protestant churches of North America. On the strength of financial resources gathered in the USA, taking advantage of the Catholic establishment which is not always close to the vast multitudes living in poverty, evangelicals are rapidly gaining ground in Latin America. This phenomenon is particularly clear in Brazil, a very problematic country because it has the greatest number of Catholics in the world (almost 125 million). Today only 65% of Brazilians proclaim to be Catholic and only a minority of these are observant. On the other hand the Protestant churches have risen to a quarter of the population now, while during the 60's they were less than 5%. Some have even foreseen that Protestants are going to become the majority within Brazil in a decade. This phenomenon is of a lesser magnitude in other countries but no less alarming. If Protestantism represented a tiny percentage during past decades, it now accounts for 15% in Chile and Colombia, 10% in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela. A Latin American pope who has good empathy with the people, whose priority is recapturing devotees, is probably the best weapon that the Catholic Church could find to stop the drain towards reformed churches.

The political challenge in Latin America

But the evangelical one is not the only rising tide in Latin America and more precisely in South America. In a continent where until a few decades ago there were many military regimes and where politics and wealth were the privilege of a restricted class of people, today governments in office are mainly left wing or close to social themes and redistribution of wealth in any case. Often these governments, an expression of what has been called "the pink wave", are also bearers of ideologies and sensibilities that clash with the Catholic spirit, or compete at least against ecclesiastic institutions to control the heart and soul of the continent's inhabitants.

It is known that in the past while many members of the clergy opposed social injustices and dictatorships, even paying for it with their lives, a part of the Catholic Church hierarchy tended instead to be more accommodating towards the regimes in power, sometimes only to safeguard the Catholic Church and the faithful, sometimes due to sincere support for the values and interests of these same regimes. The same Pope Francis has ended up as a target for criticism for his role during the military regime in Argentina, which liquidated tens of thousands of opponents. The critics accuse Bergoglio of having not opposed the repression or even of having allowed some clerics considered too politicized to be imprisoned. His supporters, instead, deny these accusations and declare that Bergoglio had in fact contributed to saving many lives. This is however not a matter to be expounded upon in this article. It is enough to note that the Latin American Church has strongly got into local politics and that many of those who rule in the region today are the same that some years ago fought against military governments.

Let us observe more closely, for example, the case of Argentina, if for no other reason than because it is the country where the new pope comes from. The relationship between the Argentinean Church and Peron was positive at the beginning because the president tried to include Catholicism in the state's ideology, which had to support his power. But soon some problems emerged, connected to the will of the Catholics and the Vatican to have an independent role in politics. High members of the Catholic Church hierarchy, such as archbishop Manuel Tato, were among the inspirers of the coup d'état of 1955, significantly accomplished with the assistance of military aircraft on which the motto *Cristo vence* was painted. During the years of the second dictatorship and of the *Guerra sucia*, some clerics and Catholic activists took part in the opposition, also armed, while others, among them high ranking prelates, supported the government. For example Father Christian von Wernich

was condemned in 2007 because he took part in 42 kidnappings, 32 episodes of torture and 7 murders when he was chaplain in the Buenos Aires police. He is serving a life sentence but was never suspended from the priesthood.

Nestor Kirchner, the deceased Argentinean president and dead husband of the current president Cristina Fernandez, in his youth was a Peronista militant that fought against the dictatorship. He was also present at the massacre of Ezeiza, when right wing terrorists shot at the huge crowd assembled at the airport to greet Peron who was coming back to Argentina. Some of his friends and political companions were killed and the same Kirchner, along with his wife, decided finally to leave Buenos Aires for the safer province, and so they got by with only a few days in prison during the dictatorship. The relationship of Nestor and Cristina Kirchner with the bishop of Buenos Aires at that time has always been tense and not only because of the legalization of gay marriage and artificial insemination, on the occasion of which the tone of the clash became more intense. This explains why, as noticed by everyone, the Argentinean government took a couple of hours to make a public statement of congratulations about the archbishop of its capital becoming pope, and why the press close to the government showed itself to be cold if not openly critical in the face of Bergoglio's rise to the pontifical seat.

The Catholic Church is therefore facing political currents in Latin America, which do not accept its moral authority like their predecessors, and oppose radically its preferences on different themes. These currents have gained large approval engaging in social issues and in favour of the lower middle classes. A local pope, acknowledged for his diligence in helping poor people and who is also a critic of Neoliberalism, while even rejecting Theology of Liberation and everything with a scent of Socialism, can be the charismatic figure the Catholic Church needs to reconquer Latin America on the political plane, too.

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