Pope Francis – Where is the Catholic Church Headed?

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In the six months since Jorge Mario Bergoglio, an Argentine cardinal, became Pope Francis, it has become clear—particularly from his recent interview—that he is a reformer who intends to turn the Catholic Church away from some of the rightwing attitudes and elitist style of his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI. Through his posture and attitude, Pope Francis is attempting to create a new more positive and open image of the church intended to overcome past scandals involving the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, irregularities at the Vatican Bank, and above all the rigid orthodoxy of his precursor that alienated so many Catholics and others.

Yet, despite the press play and the public perception, it would be a mistake to think that his reformist rhetoric and positive gestures represent a move toward fundamental change in the Catholic Church. Nor should we think that it will lead to a resurgence of the Theology of Liberation that once flourished in Latin America. Pope Francis is committed to limited reforms intended to make the church more successful in addressing the challenges of contemporary life, not to changing the theology or basic institutions of the church. He is a mild reformer, not a radical innovator, and certainly not a revolutionary, though it is not impossible to imagine that his initiatives might lead the church to more significant reforms than those of any pope since John XXIII convened Vatican II in the 1960s.

Francis's rise to pope is in many ways remarkable. His antecedent, Pope Benedict, became the first pope in 600 years to resign, because, "God told me to," thus making way for Bergoglio. Francis is the first Jesuit pope, the first Latin American pope, and the first pope from the Global South. He has become pope at perilous moment in church history, taking command of an institution shaken by moral and institutional crises and challenged by the accelerating tempo of technological change and post-modern intellectual and cultural fragmentation. He becomes the head of a church challenged by feminism, the gay rights movement, by rival Evangelical churches in Latin America, and by pervasive secular humanism in Europe. He also becomes pope as governments continue to deal with the effects of the greatest world economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The pope's liberal and reformist rhetoric alone will have an important impact, but he question is: How much of a reformer is Pope Francis and how will the Church change under his leadership?

The Son of Immigrants

Pope Francis's populist rhetoric owes something to his plebeian origins. He was born on December 17, 1936 in Buenos Aires, the son of Italian immigrant parents, his father an accountant and his mother a housewife. They fled fascism in Italy only to suffer through the Great Depression in Argentina. He attended a Catholic grammar school and a public technical secondary school where he earned a diploma qualifying him to work as a chemical technician, which he did briefly before entering the Immaculate Conception Seminary.

After a brief flirtation with a young woman, he went off as a Jesuit novice to study humanities in Santiago, Chile. He earned a B.A. in philosophy at a college in Buenos Aires, and subsequently taught literature and psychology in Catholic high schools in different Argentine cities. After he became a priest in 1969, he studied philosophy and theology in Argentina and then finished his education in Spain. Returning to Argentina he quickly rose to become Provincial Superior of the

Society of Jesus in Argentina in 1973. He continued studies of philosophy and theology in Germany in the 1980s and was named cardinal in 2001.

In many ways, Pope Francis represents the classical Jesuit, the intellectual and highly educated fighter for the Catholic faith. Originally founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1534, the Society of Jesus, "soldiers of God," became the shock troops of the counter-reformation, a league of intellectual priests whose job was to counter the arguments of Martin Luther, John Calvin and other protests theologians who had broken from Rome and created independent churches.

The Jesuits not only fought back against Protestantism in Europe, they also engaged in missionary expeditions to Russia, the Americas and Asia, particularly China. In Latin America they created a virtually independent theocratic and quasi-socialist state in Paraguay and Brazil. Threatening the interests of other Catholic orders the papacy itself, they were suppressed in 1773 and not restored until 1814. The Jesuits returned to the bosom of the Catholic Church chastened, contrite and became Catholic conformists.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, as the most important teaching order of the Catholic Church, the Jesuits represented religious orthodoxy: monasticism, medieval Thomistic theology, Catholic dogma and rigid personal rules of behavior. When John XXIII convened Vatican II in 1962 and began to reform the church, the Jesuits embraced the new reformed and more popular Catholicism enthusiastically. In Latin America, where the Vatican II reforms led to the development of the radical Theology of Liberation, the Jesuits also became advocates of the new theology's "preferential option for the poor."

Thus, within a few years, the Jesuits moved from the right to the left of the Catholic Church—though still remaining very much Catholics. In the United States, Latin America and parts of Asia over the last forty years one could find the Jesuits involved in progressive popular and labor movements, including putting themselves in harm's way for the cause. Bergoglio was part of that trend. Though never a radical himself, he was sympathetic to Liberation Theology and focused his work on helping the poor in the Argentine slums.

A number of years ago, Bergoglio was falsely accused in court and in the press of having cooperated with the Argentine military dictatorship in the kidnapping of two priests who were disappeared and tortured, though in fact he had tried to protect them. As one of the two priests later explained, a colleague of theirs who had become a guerrilla had under interrogation provided their names to the military, leading to their arrest. Bergoglio, he said, had no involvement in the affair.

Why did the cardinals choose the 76-year-old Bergoglio to be the new pope? First, he was an outsider untainted by connections to the Vatican and the alleged financial corruption and cover-ups of sexual misconduct. Second, he was from the church's fastest growing and increasingly important region, the developing world of the southern hemisphere. Third, he was a quietly charismatic man whose modesty and humility represented an apparent antidote to the poisonous atmosphere created by Benedict's pomp and dogmatism. While the Italian cardinals arrived at the conclave in their Mercedes Benz limousines, he walked across town.

In his remarks in Italian to the cardinals during their meeting to choose the pope, Cardinal Bergoglio talked about the need for reaching out of the church toward the "peripheries," a word in Italian suggesting the poor, and he called for a "new evangelizing." Ultimately he was backed by a coalition of Latin American, African, American, and European cardinals and he proved acceptable even to the conservative "Ratzinger bloc," that is, the followers of the retiring Pope Benedict XVI. (1) He chose the name "Francis" after Francis of Assisi so long identified with the poor.

A Popular Pope

From the moment he was elected, Pope Francis began to create an image altogether different from his predecessor and the long tradition of papal luxury. Instead of living in the sumptuous papal suites, he decided to stay in the rooms of a modestly furnished religious guest house. He also continued to drive his 1984 Renault 4 automobile. Instead of always moving through crowds in the pope-mobile, he gets out of the car and walks among the people. When he received an interesting letter from a young man, he called the man on the phone to thank him and talk with him, and has made similar calls to others. Most important he argued in several informal conversations and then in a lengthy official interview for a different set of priorities for the Catholic Church.

In the interview, published in English in *America: The National Catholic Review*, Pope Francis declared that the Church must not be focused on the hierarchy or on the church bureaucracy, and must not be guided by rigid rules, but must instead emphasize the spirituality and salvation through Jesus. The interview makes clear that he admires Pope John XXIII and the Vatican II reforms and places himself in that reformist tradition. He believes that the Church is made up not only of the Pope, the Bishops, but also of all of the people of the Catholic faith. "We should not even think, therefore, that 'thinking with the church' means only thinking with the hierarchy of the Church."

Pope Francis calls for a new openness, writing, "If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing….Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal 'security,' those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists—they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith become an ideology among others ideologies." As opposed to such doctrinal rigidity, Pope Francis argues that we must "seek God in every human life," including those whose lives has been destroyed by vices or drugs.

The new pope's idea of the Church is popular, that is, based on the faith of the common people. "I see holiness in the patience of the people of God: a woman who is raising children, a man who works to bring home the bread, the sick, the elderly priests who have so many wounds but a smile on their faces because they served the Lord, the sisters who work hard to live a hidden sanctity."

"This Church with which we should be thinking is the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal Church to the nest protecting our mediocrity," says Pope Francis.

Comparing the Church to a field hospital after battle, the pope says, "It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds….and you have to start from the ground up. The Church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The importing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you."

A Change in Style–or in Substance?

We see this new rhetoric and style in the pope's discussion of homosexuality. Pope Francis said on the flight back from his visit to Rio de Janeiro, "If a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge." In the recent interview he elaborates: "A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: 'Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person.' We must always consider the person."

"The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent," says Pope Francis. "The

church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently….We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel."

Yet, it is clear that Pope Francis is talking mostly about a change in style not a change in substance. He says, "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in context. *The teaching of the Church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the Church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time."* [My italics. – DL]

Pope Francis continues to uphold the Catholic doctrine that homosexual acts, sex outside of heterosexual marriage, the use of contraceptives, and the practice of abortion are all sinful, are prohibited and are condemned by God. Though, it is interesting to note that in Argentina during a debate over the question of marriage rights Cardinal Bergoglio, while opposing gay marriage, supported civil unions. As pope, under pressure from Catholic conservatives, Pope Francis recently condemned abortion.

The pope is not an advocate of full equality for women in the church. Women, for this pope, have "a different make-up than a man." He accuses some or what he calls "female *machismo*," presumably referring to the aggressive demands of women for equality in the church and in society. For this pope, woman is essential for the Church, but not in roles that would make her the equal of men. On the question of celibacy priests and women religious, a spokesman for the pope says that that is open for discussion. This reflects a realistic and pragmatic outlook intended to address the church's shrinking number of priests.

The Pope's Views of Contemporary Capitalism

On economic issues, Pope Francis said in a speech in the Vatican, "We have created new idols. The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any truly humane goal."

Pope Francis maintains the Catholic position of supporting capitalism, but calling for economic regulation. As he said, "Ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and deny the right of control to States, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good." He continues, "There is a need for financial reform along ethical lines that would produce in its turn an economic reform to benefit everyone," he said. "Money has to serve, not to rule."

This position is fully consistent with Catholic social teaching from Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 to John Paul II's encyclical *Laborum Exercens* of 1981 and represents no new or radical departure. The Catholic Church accepts and supports the capitalist system, but calls for a more just sharing of the wealth between the capitalists and the workers; it supports the rights of workers to organize unions in order to win a larger share of the wealth and a working life of greater dignity.

Will Pope Francis' reformist rhetoric, populist style and gestures encourage the existing remnant movements of the old Theology of Liberation of the 1970s in Latin America or will they lead to a new religious liberation movement? At present this seems unlikely.

The Theology of Liberation arose in Latin America, including Mexico, at particular moment, not long

after the Cuban Revolution, simultaneousy with the Sino-Soviet split, and not long before as the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia, that is, it arose at a time of great social ferment and political upheaval. The Theology of Liberation of the 1970s in several countries, and in particular in Nicaragua, became a kind of Christian socialism, with some priests and many Catholic lay people becoming involved in organizing working class communities, forming labor unions, and even in guerrilla movements and revolutionary upheavals. While the left shift in Latin America—Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador, the Kirchners in Argentina—is certainly significant, it is not the same sort of dramatic change as represented by the era of the 1960s and 70s.

Yet, it is possible that a new generation will take Pope Francis' reformist rhetoric more seriously than he does himself, creating a new more radical Catholicism. The rise new reformist currents in Catholicism under the impact of the new pope's rhetoric, should that occur, could help to encourage progressive developments not only in Latin America, but throughout the developing world. Even so, Catholic support for capitalism and its notion of sharing the wealth between capitalist and workers will be a barrier to be overcome by more radical Catholic activists.

(1) See the excellent article on the choice of the new pope by Stacy Meichtry and Allesandra Galloni, "Fifteen Days in Rome, How the Pope Was Picked," in *The Wall Street Journal*.