

FRANCIS

A POPE FOR OUR TIME

The Definitive Biography

by Luis Rosales and Daniel Olivera



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Francis: A Pope for Our Time
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Preface

FOR TWO ARGENTINE journalists, as are both authors of this book, to write and tell the world about Pope Francis is like describing a part of ourselves. We approached it in two parts. The first, by Daniel Olivera, describes the man and his life; the second, by Luis Rosales, focuses on his doctrine and the challenges that lie ahead.

Humanix Books called upon us precisely given these two conditions: our profession and our nationality. As social commentators, the “Pope mania” that broke out in Argentina as a consequence of his election is an especially interesting phenomenon for us to observe, and it will probably create an impact that will last a long time. The news coverage of Francis’ almost surprise ascent to Peter’s Throne, as well as the enormous amount of attention paid to his every action and gesture, are just a prelude to an influence that will become much more than just a passing fad. We belong to a global society, interconnected and instant — a world in crisis where ideologies are exhaustively discussed and yet where people’s attention barely lasts as long as a TV segment, a few messages on a social network, or a few minutes on a website. That is why the possibility of the renewal and strengthening of a stable and permanent institution such as the Catholic Church is at the very least an interesting subject to analyze — even more so if the new leadership in Rome is willing to question, from its own standpoint, the practices, customs, and traditions of one of the world’s most influential organizations.

Introduction

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH is going through a profound crisis. Beyond internal institutional and doctrinal struggles, it is also faced with the strong and growing tendency of people today to distance themselves from spirituality. Advancements in science and technology have embedded the idea of godlessness in society, without considering how these formidable achievements of modern life can help lead to a more transcendent objective. Hence, Pope Francis' arrival is deeply moving and emotional to a community in dire need of direction and spiritual renewal. His humility and simplicity, combined with his proven political prowess and his ability to communicate, create reason to hope that the Vatican will change its course after years of abandoning the essence of Christ's teachings and path.

Many hope Francis will be a dogmatic reformer and that he will "modernize" the institution over which he presides, following the pulse of public opinion. But these hopes are the antithesis of Francis' philosophy. He strongly believes, and has shown it throughout his pastoral life, that following the changing winds of public opinion is unnecessary in order to be influential or successful. He knows his role is more analogous to that of a lighthouse that must signal the presence of cliffs and dangers, especially during stormy nights, pointing out the boundaries where mankind seriously risks losing sight of its own meaning and reason for existence.

Conservative and strict when it comes to the dogmatic and an almost irreverent reformer when it comes to the symbolic, Francis promises to leave his mark.

His name choice — Francis — defines his path. Invoking the wisdom, discipline, and politics of the Jesuit order, it stands at the intersection where piety, dialogue, and Franciscan humility meet. Without altering the essence of faith's doctrines, his personal stamp and life example will cause a profound renaissance in the Church's practices and internal life, which have strayed considerably from Christ's original mandate to Peter. Ending the constant intrigue and destructive bureaucracy governing from the Vatican's palaces will be no easy task. It never has been easy, but during these last few years, the distortions have reached a point comparable to the worst of times, when the Pope was more akin to a ruler, with power, authority, and even armies. There will likely be much resistance, but choosing a man from the order created by Saint Ignatius of Loyola seems like the right path. It is perhaps a paradox of destiny that the so-called, first "Black Pope" (referring to the black garb of the Jesuit order) has been chosen to maintain the pristine, white vestment that symbolizes Peter's successor.

Francis will have to bring transparency to the Vatican's financial management, not only to push away doubts and suspicions, but also to clean up the coffers and be able to plan for future pastoral and charitable work. But that will only be the beginning, as his impact will be felt beyond the walls that surround Vatican City. The Catholic Church, with its 1.2 billion believers (almost 17 percent of humankind), constitutes the biggest religious organization in the world. In addition, it is the Christian family's core. Together with the eastern churches (divided in the schism of 1054) and the Protestant diaspora (a product of sixteenth-century reform), it represents the beliefs of more than a third of the people on the planet. Yet the divisions between the various branches of Christianity remain as entrenched as ever.

As a cardinal, Francis demonstrated in infinite instances that he is open to dialogue and meetings, and as the current Pope, unity and consensus remain key words in his lexicon and thoughts. His humble introduction to the world stage — emphasizing his role as Rome's bishop rather than highlighting the pomp of the Papacy — was not only a transcendent gesture, but almost an essential condition as he attempts to unify the Catholic Church, its followers, and fellow members of the Christian faith.

But his calling to unite goes even beyond this. While in Buenos Aires, he was in constant dialogue with representatives of other creeds, especially Judaism and Islam. A common enemy threatens all of them. The apparent

triumph of Nietzsche's idea that "God is dead" is clearly manifest in the fact that millions of people live and die without even questioning who created them or why. That is why an interreligious dialogue will be an important issue for Francis, as it always has been.

Leading by example with his life, his gestures, and his thoughts, Francis' work with the poor demonstrates firsthand our collective obligation to help, genuinely and without assumption, those who are in need. His spiritual ancestors — Saint Francis of Assisi and the Piedmontese saints, Don Bosco, Don Cafasso, and Don Orione — illustrated a path he has always followed: to help in times of crisis and bestow the tools for betterment upon those in need, distributing fish to satisfy hunger, while also teaching how to fish.

As his fellow countrymen, Francis' election gives us a profound sense of joy and pride. It is a happiness shared with all Latin Americans and residents of other regions of the underdeveloped world, who regard him as a symbol of their struggle and triumph in the face of adversity. We look to his papacy as an opportunity — harnessing one of the most influential, spiritual positions in the history of humankind — to demonstrate our collective tenacity and resolve.

And yet, Western values subverted by perpetual crisis, suffering, and injustice represent a dichotomy that is especially evident in Argentina. Francis, as with all middle-class Argentines, has one foot in each world. By way of heritage, culture, and blood, he is the son of a cultured and abundant Europe. Yet through his pastoral work, he understands the poor and disenfranchised people of the earth as well as anyone. It is precisely this balance that is essential to extracting transcendental meaning from a world that may so often seem arbitrary and unjust.

The energy and passion we dedicate to everything in this region is already being felt from Saint Peter's Basilica—strength to denounce injustice but also strength to suggest solutions, and ingenuity to resolve situations that sometimes may appear to be hopeless. That is also why we are proud, due to the contribution we can make from the world's periphery, precisely now that the center is in trouble. We must take advantage of this opportunity for so many millions of silenced voices to be heard — those who simply dream of a better future for themselves and their children. In short, this is about collaborating from an exceptional place, with Francis' example and life, in the construction of a world that, in peace and harmony, manages to integrate and embrace all of its residents.

. . . When he turned fifteen and had earned his employers' trust, Jorge received his first promotion: as a reward for a job well done, he was transferred to the accounting department, where he began to perform administrative tasks. However, what was at first considered an achievement over time became dull and routine, with few incentives for a young man with his level of curiosity and drive, especially for one willing to attend high school in the morning and work in the afternoon.

Having been exposed to the working world thanks to his father's "urging," this time Francis decided that he would take the initiative and find a job that would better hold his interest and perhaps provide him with a stable future . . . or so he planned at the time, anyway.

He decided to study in an industrial school specializing in food chemistry; the goal would be to work in a laboratory. He tenaciously searched for a position, and almost to the day he was to begin his second-to-last year in high school, he was accepted as a junior employee in a lab in his hometown neighborhood. He worked from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m., had a one-hour lunch break, and then headed to school until 8 p.m.

This schedule may seem excessively demanding for someone who had barely reached his seventeenth birthday, especially compared to today's average high schooler, but looking back, Francis has a totally opposite point of view on the matter. Today, he says he is "very grateful" that his father insisted that he work at such an early age. "Work was one of the lessons that most helped me in life," he emphasized while recounting his story.

Those words also implicitly disclose an even deeper lesson gleaned from secular work. Francis remembers his second job fondly — the one in the lab, which he found on his own merit. To this day, he believes that his time in that lab taught him both the positive and negative aspects of all earthly work, important insights that would carry over to his pastoral work with the poor and downtrodden of Argentina.

What's more, the experience was an invaluable one because it brought yet another influential woman into his life: in this case, it was the lab chief, Esther Ballestrino de Careaga. A biochemistry technician born in Paraguay, Careaga was a supporter of the Communist Party. This last piece of information is not to be taken lightly. Her political affiliation, which was such a significant influence in shaping young Francis' own political positions, would also be the reason she was kidnapped and murdered in 1977 by members of a secret government security force during Argentina's last military dictatorship. Her violent death — one of an estimated thirty thousand that occurred during Argentina's greatest tragedy — was still twentyfive years away.

Chapter 3: Bearing Witness

Francis was only sixteen years old when he met Esther, and he would have never imagined that the name of the woman he so admired would end up on the list of “the disappeared” that would be published in North America and Europe a quarter century later.

Why was Esther Ballestrino de Careaga’s case so internationally renowned? She was aligned with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a small group of women who had organized to search for their missing children, and were willing to speak out against the brutal injustices that occurred at the hand of a sinister dictatorship — the darkest and most grievous chapter in Argentine history. Among those who met the same, tragic end were two French nuns who were compassionate enough to offer a safe haven where the group could meet. Both nuns, Esther, and eleven others were kidnapped between December 8 and December 10, 1977, by a “task force,” a term used to describe the military death squads who dedicated themselves to kidnapping and killing political, union, and social leaders in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. . . .