NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

One of Pope Francis' allegiances might tell us something about the church's future

Jamie Manson | Mar. 15, 2013 Grace on the Margins
Pope Francis

I suppose my assessment of the new pope is probably similar to those who have been reading the mainstream news since Wednesday night's historic election.

I have been touched by Francis' clear love of the poor and the images of his bathing the feet of sick children and AIDS patients. I am troubled by his alleged failure stand up with Argentine dictators during the "Dirty War" and his harmful words about LGBT families. I am worried by reports that he was unpopular among his brother Jesuits because of his unfavorable views of base communities and liberation theology.

But what most piqued my interest about Pope Francis is his strong tie to a movement called *Comunione e Liberazione*, or Communion and Liberation (CL).

As John Allen reported [1] in the days before Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Francis, the Argentine cardinal "became close to the *Comunione e Liberazione* movement" over the years, "sometimes speaking at its massive annual gathering in Rimini, Italy." Allen also notes Bergoglio presented the books of CL's founder, Fr. Luigi Giussani, at literary fairs in Argentina. (It should be noted that Cardinal Angelo Scola, widely considered the conclave's front-runner, is also a longtime CL collaborator.)

Giussani started CL in 1969 in response to a period of rapid social and cultural change in Italy. The movement blossomed among high school and university students, especially since its main instrument of evangelization came in weekly catechetical sessions. These gatherings, called *Scuola di comunità* (School of Community), are considered the heart of the group to this day.

Its popularity has spread globally in the last 15 years. Although it now claims to be present in 80 countries, its presence in the United States is not as apparent as other groups like Opus Dei or the Legionaries of Christ. Its lack of visibility is ironic, since when compared to these two organizations, CL is far less secretive and its membership is far more open and flexible.

But CL has not been immune to intrigue, especially in commentaries among Italian journalists. In his 2011 book *La Lobby di Dio* (*God's Lobby*), Ferruccio Pinotti argues [2] CL is "more powerful than Opus Dei, more well-oiled than freemasonry, and more 'plugged in' than Confindustria, Italy's manufacturer's association." *La Repubblica*'s editor, Eugenio Scalfari, has been quoted as saying, "Not even the Mafia has so much power. In hospitals, healthcare, universities ..."

Members of CL are known as *ciellini*, and Bergoglio's relationship with them was another cause for consternation among his Jesuit brothers since, as John Allen noted, "the *ciellini* once upon a time were seen as the main opposition to Bergoglio's fellow Jesuit in Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini."

It was Martini who, before his death last year, gave a highly publicized last interview [3] saying the Catholic

church is "200 years out of date."

Much of what I have learned about CL, other than from the organization's website [4], comes from the essay "Comunione e Liberazione: A Fundamentalist Idea of Power," written by theologian and political scientist Dario Zadra. The article appears in the volume *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), edited by Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby.

The book was one of several volumes that came out of the work of The Fundamentalism Project [5], a program that offered a scholarly investigation into global conservative religious movements. Marty, who is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and Appleby, who directs of Notre Dame's Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, co-directed this project.

In his article on CL, Zadra explains that the movement's worldview stems from two main ideas: "That Christ is the saving event in human history, and that religious authority is a fundamental element of the human condition." He continues: "Members place religion at the center of a new worldview and in their evangelistic efforts at transforming the relationship between modern society and religion."

Much like evangelical Protestantism, CL understands the central, saving event of one's life begins with a graced encounter with Christ. But unlike the Protestants, CL understands the saving agent to be the Roman Catholic church. Zadra explains: "In CL the authoritative character of the event of salvation is directly translated into the authority of the Church. ... The central event in life is a saving encounter with the communion embodied in the Church."

The church's "authority," Zadra explains, is best expressed by the pope. CL's insistence on "total fidelity and communion with the Succession of Peter" (a direct quote from Benedict XVI himself) has made the movement particularly popular among members of the hierarchy.

Obedience to the authority of the church seems as crucial to Pope Francis as it did to his predecessor and as it does to CL. In a 2005 profile [6] of Cardinal Bergoglio, Jose Maria Poirier, editor of the Argentinean Catholic magazine *Criterio*, wrote, "He exercised his authority as provincial with an iron fist, calmly demanding strict obedience and clamping down on critical voices. Many Jesuits complained that he considered himself the sole interpreter of St Ignatius of Loyola, and to this day speak of him warily."

After spending a good part of his research interviewing leaders in CL and its young members, Zadra realized that, though the organization had broad appeal, it was different from typical traditionalist movements:

> Its beliefs and practices offer a new religious and countercultural way of looking at modern society and culture. CL boldly claims that the Church embodies authoritative truth that is binding on society at large. By claiming the presence of Christ, the Church also claims divine authority -- a kind of inerrancy, not of the biblical text (as in Protestant fundamentalism) but of the Church.

This belief in the inerrancy of the church influences CL's understanding of human conscience. "The conscience of the individual is shaped by and beholden to the Church," Zadra writes, "and the Church ought to be considered the living and legitimate paradigm of society."

Although CL members are comfortable in the modern, technological and political world, they reject the modern insistence on "a freedom of conscience that excludes the religious attitude at its very root." Zadra explains that those who center their political and cultural ideas on human values rather than the living presence of Jesus Christ are considered "enemies of CL."

Zadra concludes that "the political rhetoric and vision of the movement seem to continue a long-standing

political position in the Catholic world -- that of returning the Roman Catholic Church to its traditional role of political power."

My purpose in exploring CL is not to demonize the movement or the new pope, but rather to piece together a fuller picture of Francis by exploring in a little more depth an organization with which he has an enduring relationship. Those who hope Francis' humility indicates he may decentralize Rome's authority or relax the demand for absolute orthodoxy to the pope may want to read more about CL's understanding of the papacy.

Those who believe that Francis' criticisms of his fellow bishops indicates he may embrace those who are critical of some of the church's positions should be aware of CL's belief that the individual conscience is beholden to the church.

Those who are convinced that Francis' zeal for the poor and marginalized will lead him to engage the secular world without the broader agenda of "evangelizing" it ought to learn more about CL's belief that the church's authoritative truth is binding on all of society.

On this last point, Pope Francis actually tipped his hand in his brief opening statement on the evening of his election. Just before he asked the people to pray for him, the new pope said, "My hope is that this journey of the church that we begin today, together with help of my cardinal vicar [of Rome], be fruitful for the evangelization of this beautiful city."

Whether Pope Francis will have better luck than his predecessor in evangelizing Europe remains questionable, especially given the church's track record in his native land. Although Cardinal Bergoglio encouraged his flock to join political campaigns against same-sex marriage, Argentina became the first Latin American country to pass marriage equality in 2010. And as The Associated Press reported Wednesday evening [7], while Argentina's 33 million Catholics account for more than two-thirds of the country's population, fewer than 10 percent attend Mass regularly.

CL's organization and ideology may be mighty in Italy, but time will tell whether it can achieve global influence -- and what role Pope Francis might play in wielding it.

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Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [8].

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