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Pope's sister: Francis 'plenty tough enough' to lead

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 3, 2013 NCR Today
Pope Francis
Ituzaingó, Argentina

Though there aren?t yet hard numbers to back it up, it?s a good bet that the single most interviewed human being on the planet since March 13, 2013, has been a simple 64-year-old housewife in the Argentine city of Ituzaingó, about an hour outside Buenos Aires.

The woman is Maria Elena Bergoglio, and her older brother Jorge today is known to the world as Pope Francis. They?re the last surviving siblings of five children, and since the moment Francis stepped out onto the balcony overlooking St. Peter?s Square, Maria Elena become the go-to point of reference for insight on the new pope.

Listening to her, she seems cut from the same cloth as her now-famous sibling: Humble and unpretentious, and also completely unafraid to speak her mind.

For instance, when stories began to make the rounds about Francis having become a priest only because a young love rejected his marriage proposal, Maria Elena was there to bat it down. She insisted that her brother was only a kid at the time, and the idea of getting married was never serious. More ominously, when critics suggested that her brother had been complicit in Argentina?s military junta, Maria Elena testily pointed out that her family emigrated from Italy because their father was opposed to fascism ? the clear suggestion being that Jorge Mario Bergoglio would never betray his father?s memory by cozying up to dictators.

Over the last three weeks, Maria Elena?s modest one-story home on an obscure street has become a sort of impromptu journalistic pilgrimage destination. She says that from the morning of March 14 all the way through Holy Week, her phone started ringing at 5 am and people started knocking on her door at 6, every day, until well after dark every night.

One might think that by this stage Maria Elena is already talked out, but in an hour-long interview with *NCR* this morning, she managed to add several new points to the record:

- She confessed that heading into the conclave, she was actually cheering for another candidate to be the first Latin American pope: Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer of Brazil, whom she said she always admired because he seemed to be on the side of the poor. Why him and not her brother? ?Because I wanted him back!?
- She acknowledged that before I asked, it had never occurred to her to call Monsignor Georg Ratzinger, the only other living sibling of a pope, but she said she?d like to do it ? not so much to compare notes, but to express admiration for Benedict's courage as well as relief that it was Georg?s brother, not hers, who had to follow John Paul II.
- She said that since he?s become pope, her usually shy and reserved brother has seemed ?better able to express his feelings? in public, which she attributes to the assistance of the Holy Spirit.
- For all those wondering if her brother is strong enough to really get control of the Vatican, she says he?s plenty tough enough: ?Personally he?s got a strong character, and he?s also got a deep belief in his

convictions that?s unbreakable,? she said.

On other matters, Maria Elena discussed the two phone conversations she?s had with her brother since he became pope, her hopes for him to visit to Argentina (and to give her two minutes for a hug), and outlined the kind of people she believes he?ll bring into key positions.

Finally, Maria Elena also revealed that her brother had a strong attachment both to a dog and a parakeet while he was in the seminary, but never felt he could take care of a pet because of the demands of his jobs.

When told that there?s a children?s book supposedly written by a cat that once belonged to Benedict, and asked if perhaps the dog who went to seminary with Francis would publish his own book, she offered an answer summing up the amazement she still feels about the ?tsunami? that?s capsized her life: ?Listen, at this stage, nothing seems impossible.?

(For the record, she said she?s turned down numerous offers to do her own book, with vintage Bergoglio humility: ?I?m a housewife, for God?s sake!?)

The interview was conducted in Spanish, through an interpreter. The following are extracts from the conversation, which took place at Maria Elena?s home in Ituzaingó.

* * *

How many interviews have you done as of this morning?

I have no idea! It?s impossible to count them all. Every day since he was elected, the phone started ringing at 5:30 in the morning and people started knocking at the door at 6:00, and it never stopped until 8:00 or 9:00 at night. It?s been constant. My doctor actually suggested that I cut back, because I?m just a normal housewife with a normal, common life, and I?m not used to this kind of tsunami that?s crashed over us. It?s not that I have any specific health problem, but my doctor told me I was getting overly tired and stressed. I believe I shouldn?t cut back, however, because I feel as if I have a duty to share my brother with everyone. I feel like it?s something I have to do, even if it wears me out.

What I?m a little terrorized about is when he makes his first visit back to Argentina, because I imagine that every journalist will think he?s going to come to our house and there will be a whole army camped out here waiting for him. He?s not going to come to our house! When he comes, it?ll be a pastoral visit, not a family reunion or a vacation. I?m sure I?ll have to go to him, but wherever he is, he?ll have to give me the two minutes I deserve! All I want is two minutes to give him a hug. I?m not expecting anything more than that.

Do you feel like you?ve lost a brother?

To tell the truth, it?s more like I?ve gained millions of new brothers and sisters, and I?m trying to figure out how to share my brother with all these new members of the family.

How many times have you talked to your brother since he became pope?

He phoned as soon as he was able to make a call after he was elected, and it was a very emotional conversation. It?s impossible for me to explain what I felt at that moment. After that, he?s been able to call one other time, and we talked like brother to sister. It was a normal chat, like we always have. For instance, he wanted to know what I was cooking!

Do you still call him ?Jorge,? or do you say ?Francis? or ?Holy Father??

Jorge, Jorge! As long as I know it?s still my brother calling, then I?ll call him Jorge. Maybe someday it?ll be Francis, but for now it?s just Jorge.

When you talked to him, did he seem overwhelmed?

I?m grateful that so far, Francis is still Jorge. He didn?t seem any different, and although he?s very conscious of the responsibility that he?s carrying now, he didn?t seem nervous or anxious about it.

Many people in Argentina have told me that when he was here, Cardinal Bergoglio could seem a little shy and reserved in public, and they?ve been surprised by how enthusiastic and expressive he seems as pope. Have you noticed that too?

When I saw him come out on the balcony, he seemed like the same person I had always known, the same Jorge. Of course, I didn?t have a lot of time to think about it, because as soon as his name was announced our house became a loony bin, with everyone calling us and chaos all around. When I finally had a chance to think about it, to watch him some more, I got the impression that he seems very happy, and it made me think that the Holy Spirit must be right there with him. He seems happy, whole. He was close to the people here in Argentina, but today he seems even closer and more able to express his feelings, which I suppose is the Holy Spirit helping him. I must say I?ve been very happy to see how well my brother seems to be adjusting to his new role.

Do you think he?s happy to be pope?

I?m not sure that?s the right word for it. Maybe I can put it this way: I think he?s happy, but it?s a distinct kind of happiness. It?s not what you and I mean, for instance, when we say we?re happy to have him as pope. I think he?s happy with the responsibility he?s been given, but he?s also very conscious of what a burden it is.

Are you planning to visit him in Rome?

I?m not planning a trip right now. Honestly, I?m used to not being around Jorge very much, not having him physically close to us. What I?ll miss is our weekly phone calls, if he?s not able to make them as often. We used to talk every week, really long conversations, and I?ll miss that if we can?t have them anymore.

Of course, I?m also hoping that he?ll visit here!

There?s only one other person on earth who can really understand what your brother?s going through, and that?s Benedict XVI. They?ve already spoken several times. In the same way, there?s probably only one other person who can appreciate what you?re going through, and that?s Benedict?s brother Georg. Have you thought about calling him for advice?

You know, no one?s asked me that before. It?s true, probably no one knows what my brother is feeling as much as Benedict. I?ve never thought about calling his brother, but I?m sure it would be a very interesting phone call.

If you did have that phone call, what would you want to ask him?

It?s not so much that I have anything I?d want to ask, but I would like to congratulate him for the brother he has. Benedict XVI is an extremely humble man and an extremely honest man, and it takes a lot of guts to renounce power like he did. Also, I?d like to express how grateful I am to Benedict XVI, because he did all the hard work. First of all, he had to follow John Paul II, which was almost impossible, especially because Benedict was more introverted and shy, more intellectual. I also feel sorry for Benedict because in many ways he had to do the dirty work in the church, such as starting to talk about the bad things in the church, the rotten tomatoes, such as the abuse cases.

You mention the abuse cases. How do you think your brother will respond to them?

I have no idea what he?ll actually do, but I know that he?ll do what needs to be done.

Are you glad that your brother is following Benedict and not John Paul II? Do you feel like that will make things easier for him?

Probably, yes, because John Paul II was so much in the hearts of the people. It was an extremely difficult job for anyone to follow him. I don?t think my brother will be exactly like John Paul II or Benedict XVI ? in some ways, at least in terms of personality, he?s a good mix of both of them.

Were you at home when your brother was elected?

Yes, I was at home, doing housework. When we heard that the smoke had come out white, we turned on the TV to find out who the poor guy was who had been elected pope. I had been hoping for [Cardinal Odilo Pedro] Scherer from Brazil, while my son wanted a Franciscan to be elected pope ? he didn?t really care which one, he just wanted a Franciscan.

You know, I heard people talking about how the new pope would be taken to the ?Room of Tears? after his election, and I always thought that was sort of ridiculous. What?s the pope got to cry about? But when I realized it was my brother, it seemed obvious to me why he needs that room. There?s a whole square full of people screaming *Viva il Papa*! before they even know who it is. You?d have to have a heart of stone not to cry a little bit before you step out to face all those crazy people screaming for you.

Why were you hoping for Scherer?

I?ve always liked him. He?s for the poor. It wasn?t based on any really deep analysis, but it always seemed to me that in his pastoral work he chose the poor.

Why weren?t you cheering for your brother?

Because I wanted him to come back! I didn?t want him to stay there.

Were you more scared back in 2005?

Yes, back then he was really afraid he wouldn?t come back, because everyone was talking about Cardinal Bergoglio as a possible successor to John Paul II. I guess it?s true that whoever goes into the conclave as pope comes out a cardinal.

You weren?t scared this time?

No, not at all. The day before he left for Rome, he called me and we had the same conversation we always have when he?s leaving for a while: ?Have nice trip, and I?ll see you when you get back. We?ll talk as soon as you

return.? Neither of us had any feeling that he wasn?t going to return. When we hung up, he said, ?I?ll see you later.?

Here?s what a lot of people want to know. They say the pope's simplicity and humility and closeness to the people are all good things, but they?re wondering if he?s tough enough to lead ? if he has the strength to make the hard decisions you have to make as pope. Is your brother tough enough?

Oh, yes ? yes, yes, yes. Personally he?s got a strong character, and he?s also got a deep belief in his convictions that?s unbreakable. Nobody is going to be able to force him to compromise on what he believes in.

Can you give me an example of a point during his life where that toughness was especially clear?

Not really, because it?s a permanent feature of who he is. There?s not one determining moment. If you want an example, I suppose the best one would be his option for the poor. Many times that made his life difficult here in Argentina, both in terms of his relationship with the government and also with some business people who wanted him to shut up about it. He always chose the poor people, no matter what, and frankly in this country it can cost you to speak out in favor of the poor.

You know your brother better than anyone else. Is there anything you?ve seen or heard from his as pope that?s surprised you.

No, I haven?t been surprised by anything ? except, of course, that he was elected in the first place. Basically, I?m happy that he still seems like Jorge, and is still offering the same small gestures he used to offer when he was here as the cardinal, like choosing to go to the young people for the Mass on Holy Thursday. He?s teaching and delivering his pastoral messages the way he was taught to do it, which is by example. It?s not about talking the talk, but about walking the walk.

Two hundred years from now, how do you think people will remember your brother as pope?

As a humble pope, a pope of love, especially love for the poor and for the truth. I also think he?ll be remembered as a very firm pope who did what had to be done.

Is there anything you?re expecting him to do that he hasn?t done yet?

No, because I haven?t really thought about it. It?s not up to me to decide what he should do.

Is there someone in Argentina you think he?ll ask to come to Rome to help him?

He might do that, but if he does he won?t discuss it with anyone first. He?ll just pick up the phone and say, ?Get over here right now!? He?ll form his team according to what he needs and what he believes the church needs, but he won?t talk about it with everyone first, he?ll just do it.

You mentioned the team your brother has to put together. What kind of people do you think he?ll want on his team?

People who think like him, who feel like him, and who act like he acts.

Are people like that easy to find?

Yes, there are a lot of people like him. We?re too used to focusing on the bad things, but if we actually start looking around for good people, you?d find lots of them.

(At this stage in the interview, the family cat strolled over.) By the way, does your brother like cats, as Benedict does?

Honestly, I don?t have any idea. He always knew he couldn?t have a pet, because he never knew where he was going to be living and that he wouldn?t have time to take care of it. He never seemed to want a pet. I know that when he was in the seminary they had a dog, and he loved that dog, but I never heard him saying he wished he could have one.

When he was younger, wasn?t he also fond of a parakeet?

Yes, when he was in the novitiate, they had a parakeet and Jorge loved it. He taught it to say some things ? knowing him, it probably wasn?t a prayer but some sort of insult! He loved animals, but he always knew he?d never be in a position to take care of one.

There?s a children?s book supposedly written by Pope Benedict?s cat. Maybe one day there?ll be a book from the dog that went to seminary with Pope Francis.

Listen, at this stage, nothing seems impossible!

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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