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New pope and geopolitics of secrecy

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Pope Francis

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Now that the initial shock of Buenos Aires Cardinal Bergoglio's election and the thrill of having a Latin American pope who is both cordial and friendly are over, it?s time for some reflection.

Despite their value, the media also have the power to distract us, to lull our minds and keep us from allowing needed critical questions to surface. In the days leading up to the papal election, many in Brazil and around the world were ?hijacked? by live broadcasts from Rome. Of course the historic events witnessed in these days are not everyday occurrences! But what interests are leading the huge telecommunication industry to transmit every detail of the election of a new pope? Who gains by the millions of dollars spent on the uninterrupted coverage until the white smoke appears? On which side do these interests stand? What Vatican interests make it so willing to offer facilities for these transmissions? These questions, which may not interest the wider public, continue to be significant for groups concerned over the growth of consciousness among ourselves and all of humanity.

In large measure, the telecommunication industry is responsible for maintaining the secrecy surrounding Vatican electoral policies. Secrecy, oaths, and the consequent sanctions when they are not respected are an integral part of the industry. They create an impact and make headlines. But this isn?t about a centuries-old tradition that will have no real impact on the rest of the world. Rather, these are behaviors that end up derailing the pursuit of dialogue among groups, or excluding some groups from the necessary dialogue.

There is no criticism of this perverse system, which continues to invoke the Holy Spirit in order to maintain ultraconservative positions clothed in the pretext of religiosity and docile submission. Official coverage allots no space for dissonant voices to be heard (even at the risk of being stoned). Once in a while, light criticism is allowed to surface, but it is quickly drowned out by the ?status quo? imposed by the prevailing ideology

They repeat that Pope Francis uses public transportation, that he is close to the poor, that he cooks his own meals and that the name he has chosen as pope shows his similarity to the great saint of Assisi. He was immediately tagged as a simple man, cordial and friendly. The Catholic press says nothing about many people's suspicions regarding his role during Argentina?s recent military dictatorship, or about his current political stands against gay marriage and the legalization of abortion. Neither do they mention his well-known criticism of liberation theology or his distain for feminist theology.

The image of a kindly and modest figure just elected by a group of cardinals assisted by the Holy Spirit veils the reality of a man who in fact embodies numerous contradictions. More recently the Brazilian newspapers (*Folha de Sao Paulo, Estado de Sao Paulo*) have offered differing profiles of the new pope that give us a more realistic idea of who he is.

In this light it becomes clear that his election was, beyond doubt, part of a geopolitical offensive involving competing interests and a balance of forces within the Catholic world. An article by Julio C. Gambina published via Internet March 13 in *Argenpress*, as well as information coming in from alternative groups in Nicaragua, Venezuela, Brazil and especially Argentina have confirmed my suspicions. The See of Peter and the Vatican State are positioning their pieces in the world game of chess in order to empower political projects championed by the North and its allies in the South. In a certain sense, the South is being co-opted by the North. A Church leader who comes from the South will help balance the forces in the world chess game, which have been displaced a good deal in recent years by left-leaning governments in Latin America and by the struggles of many movements -- among them Latin America's feminist movements, whose demands annoy the Vatican.

If something new is happening politically in the South, there?s nothing better than a Pope from the South, a Latin American, to confront this new political movement and preserve intact the traditions of family and property. Such an affirmation undoubtedly dumps cold water on this election's charm and on the thrill of seeing the multitude in the St Peter?s square breaking into applause and joyful cheers when the figure of Pope Francis appears. Many will say this criticism dampens the beauty of such an emotional event as the election of a pope. Perhaps, but I believe this critique is necessary.

The highly touted commitment to evangelization as a Church priority seems instead to be a commitment to a hierarchical order in a world where the elites reign and the people applaud in great plazas, where they pray and sing and bubble over with high spirits, invoking divine blessings upon the heads of their new political-religious leaders.

The same doctrine, with little variation, continues to be preached. There is no reflection, no awakening of consciousness, no invitation to critical thinking. What is invoked, instead, is a set of quasi-magical teachings. On the one hand, we have a society awash with great spectacles that captivate us and urge us to accept -- with a dose of romanticism -- the restraints imposed by the contemporary system of order/disorder, and on the other a system of paternalistic handouts that is equated with evangelization.

To go out into the streets and give food to the poor and pray with prisoners is somewhat humanitarian, but it does not solve the problem of social exclusion that afflicts many of the world?s countries.

To write about ?the geopolitics of secrecy? in a moment of media euphoria amounts to spoiling the party for the buyers and sellers in the Temple, content with stalls filled with Rosaries, scapulars, bottles of holy water and the large and small statues of many saints. The problem is that if we break the secret and pull the plug on the allure of white smoke, we deflate the suspense of a secret conclave that denies the Catholic people access to the information to which we have a right?and lay bare those purple-clothed bodies with their sordid histories.

To break open this secrecy is to give the lie to the political and religious system that governs the Roman Catholic Church. It is to tear off the masks upholding it, and in this way to open our hearts to real independence and responsibility for us all. Power games are filled with cunning and deception, but there is also good faith. We are capable of being impressed with a public gesture of affection and friendliness without asking ourselves about this person's real life story. We don?t ask ourselves about his past actions, his present behavior or his future stratagems. The moment the amiable figure dressed in white appeared was enough to impress us. We can be deeply touched by the new pope?s warm greeting, ?Buona sera? (?Good evening?), and then go to bed like well-behaved children blessed by a kind daddy. We are no longer orphans--since being fatherless in a

patriarchal society is intolerable, even for a few days.

We are complicit in upholding these shadowy powers, which charm and oppress us at the same time. We ourselves?especially those of us who have more insight into these political and religious processes?are responsible for the delusions these powers foist on the lives of millions of people, especially those communicated through the religious media. We ourselves can become so enthralled that we forget the power games, the unseen manipulation and the cultivated theatrics so crucial for these occasions.

We cannot make predictions about the future direction of the Roman Catholic Church?s governance. But at first glance it seems that we can?t hope for great change in its current structures or policies. Significant change will come if Catholic Christian communities take concrete action in deciding the direction in which Christianity will move. If, that is, based on their own life needs, they are capable of saying how the Gospel of Jesus can be expressed and lived in our lives today.

The geopolitics of secrecy has huge interests to defend. It is part of a global power project in which the forces of order are seen as being threatened by the social and cultural revolutions underway in today?s world. To uphold the secret is to justify the belief that in history there are powers superior to the life-force--and that they are more decisive than the progress being made in our collective struggles for dignity, bread, justice and mercy in the midst of the many troubles and reversals that assault us along the way.

I end this short reflection with the hope that we will not allow the light of freedom living within us to go out, that we will continue to drink from the fountains of our dreams of dignity and clarity, without being much impressed by these seemingly novel occurrences. After all, it?s just one more Pope who has signed his name to an institution that, despite its history of ups and downs, deserves to be transformed and re-imagined for these times. Change can always occur, and we need to be open to the small signs of hope that continually pop up all around us, even in our world's most anachronistic institutions.

Translated by Mary Judith Ress, Santiago, Chile, March 16, 2013

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