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Is Pope Francis ecumenical, evangelical, or both?

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Pope Francis

Perhaps the only exercise more interesting than reading Catholic responses to the election of Pope Francis is reading the reactions of prominent U.S. and Argentine evangelicals.

Although the Vatican has enthusiastically promoted the new pope's historic outreach to the Eastern Rite and Orthodox churches this week, it turns out that some of Francis' deepest spiritual friendships may be among those in Latin American evangelical circles.

In the days since the new pope's election, the popular evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* has been charting the reactions of several leading evangelical men.

The magazine recently featured an interview with Luis Palau, an influential evangelist who, at the age of 20, emigrated from his native Argentina and later founded a ministry in Oregon. Now 78, Palau has considered Francis a close friend for years.

"With the evangelical community, it was a very big day when we realized that he really was open, that he has great respect for Bible-believing Christians, and that he basically sides with them," Palau told the magazine about Francis. "So the leaders of the evangelical church in Argentina have a high regard for him, simply because of his personal lifestyle, his respect, his reaching out and spending time with them privately."

Apparently their respect runs so deep that, according to another *Christianity Today* article, at least one evangelical scholar, Cecil Robeck, professor of church history and ecumenics at Fuller Theological Seminary, says "his Argentine friends have described Francis as a Bible-oriented man who holds to literal interpretation of much of the Bible, so he'll likely affirm much evangelical theology."

Palau says though the new pope's "bias for the poor is rightly being pushed heavily," the evangelist remembers the Francis' concern for young people. "Every time we talked about the state of Christianity in the world, he would bring up secularization and the distancing of the church from the young generation," he said.

Indeed, Pope Francis' concern for secularization became immediately apparent in his first homily to the cardinals gathered in the Sistine Chapel, where his reflection carried echoes of an evangelical tone:

We can walk as much we want, we can build many things, but if we do not confess Jesus Christ, nothing will avail. We will become a pitiful NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of Christ. When one does not walk, one stalls. ... When one does not profess Jesus Christ -- I recall the phrase of Leon Bloy -- "Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil." When one does not profess Jesus Christ, one professes the worldliness of the devil.

"Although he's gentle, he has strong moral convictions and he stands by them even if he has to confront the government. And he's done it before," Palau says, alluding perhaps to then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio's public showdown with President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner over the issue of marriage equality.

Palau says he wasn't surprised when Francis asked for the tens of thousands on the piazza to pray for him. "Anybody who knows him, [knows that] he always would say, 'Please pray for me.' He really meant it. He said it always."

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Juan Pablo Bongarrá, president of the Argentine Bible Society, wasn't stunned either. "Whenever you talk to him, the conversation ends with a request: 'Pastor, pray for me,'" Bongarrá told *Christianity Today*.

Bongarrá recalled a moment when then-Cardinal Bergoglio attended a worship meeting organized by Buenos Aires' charismatic pastors. "He mounted the platform and called for pastors to pray for him," Bongarrá said. "He knelt in front of nearly 6,000 people, and [Protestant leaders] laid hands and prayed."

Bongarrá told *Christianity Today* that his last meeting with Bergoglio was a pre-Christmas luncheon to discuss "how to fight against the secularization of society."

"We [evangelicals] have had a good relationship with him for many years," Bongarrá said. "We think that a new time is coming for the Catholic Church, because our brother wants to promote evangelism."

Other leading evangelicals agree that the future is bright with Francis at the helm.

"His election has been an answer to our prayers," Norberto Saracco, rector of Buenos Aires' FIET seminary and co-leader of the capital city's Council of Pastors.

According to *Christianity Today*, "relations between evangelicals and Catholics are much better in Argentina than in other Latin American nation. Bergoglio has played a central role in Argentina's

CRECES (Renewal Communion of Catholics and Evangelicals in the Holy Spirit) movement over the past 10 years, and has strongly supported the Bible society."

David Ruiz, associate director of the World Evangelical Alliance's Mission Commission, shares similar hope Catholics and evangelicals will form a powerful united front.

"It is not a secret that the global paradigm shift taking place in Christianity is becoming more and more evident in Latin America," Ruiz said. "After spending some time looking for an identity, both Catholics and evangelicals are particularly well positioned to take an unparalleled role in global evangelization."

Of course, one cannot blame Francis for reaching out to Latin American evangelicals. As church attendance in the Argentine Roman Catholic church has dwindled, the evangelical population has swelled. Perhaps he perceives John Paul II's new evangelization at work in these Christian communities. Evangelicals, like the members of the Communion and Liberation movement I reported on last week, view evangelization as their strongest weapon in combating what they understand to be the evils of secularism.

Though many continue to be moved by Pope Francis' passion for the poor, sick, imprisoned and addicted, his apparent intimacy with the evangelical community certainly adds to concerns that his warm embrace will stop short of Catholic women who are called by God to ordained ministry and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Catholics who wish to be treated with dignity and equality by their church.

If Palau is correct that Francis "basically sides" with evangelicals, this certainly lends credence to John Allen's assertion that on the issue of same-sex marriage, the new pope "has a robustly negative position." If there truly is hope that evangelicals and Catholics will unite in the common goal of global evangelization, both traditions will have to be of one mind on their theological understanding of LGBT people and their stance LGBT rights.

On the issue of women's ordination, though some evangelical churches do have female pastors, many evangelical women with ministerial aspirations are relegated to the roles of youth pastor or pastor's wife. In practice, evangelicals tend to be quite patriarchal, with the majority holding fast to the belief that men are always the religious head of the marriage and family. It would be difficult enough convince conservative Catholics to agree with women's ordination; adding evangelicals to the mix would only steepen the climb toward this kind of progress.

(It should also be noted that the Orthodox and Eastern Rite churches, which Francis has worked ardently to welcome over the last week, have placed a strict ban the ordination of women and view homosexuality as a violation of God's ordinance of the laws of nature.)

To be fair to the new pope, by inviting Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and Jains to his inaugural Mass, Francis is light-years ahead of most evangelicals, who would be less inclined to reach out to non-Christians. And the hopeful media reports that Francis once dialogued with a gay Argentine and that he may wash the feet of some incarcerated young people at the Holy Thursday liturgy certainly suggests his worldview may be more inclusive than that of his predecessors.

It is still too early to ascertain what exactly is motivating Francis' almost-manic acts of outreach and his urge to promote his friendship with all believers (and non-believers, for that matter). But as the reports in *Christianity Today* suggest, it will be interesting to observe whether Francis and the evangelicals are just friends or more like kindred spirits.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied

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