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Nobel nominee aims to 'Bergoglioize' Latin America

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Buenos Aires, Argentina ? When torrential rains and flooding hit Argentina yesterday, leaving more than 50 people dead and thousands homeless, the ?Solidarity Network? founded by a veterinarian, social entrepreneur and Catholic layman named Juan Carr sprang into action.

On Wednesday, the movement positioned a large red truck in downtown Buenos Aires to collect food, clothes and other supplies for the flood victims, with a hand-painted banner reading: ?You are not alone ? the entire country embraces you!?

The truck was stationed outside the Cathedral of Buenos Aires, reflecting the fact that the former occupant of the cathedral, now known to the world as Pope Francis, was a major supporter both of Carr and of the concern for the poor he espouses.

To be clear, the Solidarity Network is no fly-by-night operation. The movement has 800 volunteers and 38 offices up and down the country, and Carr was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. He functions like a humanitarian exchange broker, connecting people who want to serve with people who need the help.

A deeply faithful Catholic, Carr broke away from organizing flood relief for a brief interview with NCR Wednesday afternoon. The exchange took place in Spanish, through an interpreter, and the following are extracts.

For the record, Carr said the outpouring of support for the flood victims had been extraordinary, which he attributed in part to strong national pride in the election of an Argentine pope and his own reputation for outreach to people in need. Carr called it the "pope effect."

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What's your relationship with the pope?

The Solidarity Network is a lay, secular initiative, but I'm a Catholic. I was raised in a kind of Catholicism that was very spiritual on one side, praying and going to Mass and the sacraments, but on the other side it was also very socially minded, interested in helping the poor and meeting the concrete needs of the people. Here in Argentina, for this generation, Bergoglio has been the one who brought these two dimensions of the faith together – the spiritual and the social. I'm from the diocese of San Isidro, not Buenos Aires, but even from a distance I knew that Bergoglio was important, not just for his social commitment but also in the political arena.

What's unique about Bergoglio?

During my years as a member of the Catholic church, I've noticed a growing split between a church completely focused on the spiritual side and a church that's committed to the social issues, but without addressing the devotional needs of the people. Bergoglio is a rare figure who transcends that divide, embracing both.

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He first appeared here in Argentina in the 1970s, and throughout the 80s and 90s up to day today, he's promoted the idea that the spiritual and the social components of the church have to go together. That was something new, because in Latin American Catholicism people tend to emphasize one or the other.

Can you talk about a special experience you've had of Bergoglio?

The most important for me was when I was invited to present the biography of Bergoglio, titled *El Jesuita*, here in Buenos Aires. That night, I said that I was honored to present Jorge Bergoglio to the audience, someone I believe will one day be a saint. The next day, Bergoglio called me to thank me for what I said about him. I told him I'd like to trade in the speech to get him to help me achieve zero hunger in Latin America, because that's really my obsession. He agreed immediately: "Of course," he said. A couple of months later he becomes the pope!

What are you hoping he'll do?

Right away, what I'd like to do is to hold a meeting in Rio de Janeiro this summer, at the same time the pope is there and with his support, to create a sort of "Social Foreign Ministry" for the poor. I want to bring together everyone in Latin America who's working to curb poverty, so we can start working together. It could be an amazing network of people who are extremely committed in all the different countries.

Beyond this summer, what do you hope this pope can achieve?

My main goal now is to "Bergoglioize" Latin America! We need to turn the message of this Jesuit, his

ideas and his work, into a broad Latin American message. We need to figure out how to take what he did here in Buenos Aires and put it into practice in every single Latin American country.

This is a unique moment, because we look around and see that one of our own has reached the very pinnacle of power in the world. It's a chance to spread his vision everywhere, because people here are inspired and excited about seeing one of us in that position.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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