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Who Francis may be based on who Bergoglio was

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All Things Catholic

Pope Francis

Buenos Aires, Argentina — I spent this week in Argentina in search of insight into Pope Francis from the people who know him best as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the man who was their archbishop for 15 years.

For sure, the first impression here is deep national pride. Locals say there's probably never been a better-attended Holy Week in the history of Argentine Catholicism than after Francis' election.

A Via Crucis procession in Rosario, the country's third-largest city, usually draws 200,000 people, but this time it attracted 350,000; attendance at the cathedral in Buenos Aires was estimated to be two to three times greater than 2012. All across the country, church-goers reported standing-room-only crowds and long lines for confession.

The election of an Argentine pope seems to have had a soothing effect on the culture generally.

A talented young Argentinian journalist named Ines San Martin, my aide and translator this week, tells the following story.

She was on a bus in Buenos Aires when the driver and a passenger got into a shouting match, with the passenger demanding the driver's license number and threatening to call the police. Just as things seemed on the brink of falling apart, an elderly woman stood up and said: "What are you fighting about? We've got an Argentinian pope!"

Everyone smiled, including the two protagonists, and the tension just melted away.

Drilling deeper, however, it's clear that despite the insta-hagiography that always surrounds a new pope,

Bergoglio was hardly a cultural icon in Argentina before his election. He kept a low profile, and many Argentines say they're getting to know him only now along with the rest of the world.

Perhaps the most spectacular example is Hebe de Bonafini, one of the co-founders of the famed "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" whose children disappeared during Argentina's "Dirty War." Over the years she's accused Bergoglio of representing fascism, once even leaving a bucket of urine in his cathedral in protest.

Five days after his election, Bonafini published an open letter to the new pope expressing astonishment over what she'd learned: "I'm surprised to hear many of my friends explain about your commitment to the slums. Don Francis, I didn't know about your pastoral work. I only knew that the leader of the church in Argentina lived in the cathedral, the cathedral towards which we've screamed, 'You kept quiet when they took [our children] away!'"

It also seems clear that Bergoglio wasn't perfect, despite the fact that it's hard right now to find many Argentines willing to say so out loud. For instance, vocations to the priesthood have been falling in Buenos Aires on his watch, despite the fact they're up in some other dioceses. Last year the archdiocese ordained just 12 new priests, as opposed to 40-50 per year when Bergoglio took over. (For the record, people say that Bergoglio did his best to support his priests and seminarians, taking a special interest in seminary life.)

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The future pope also certainly had his critics. Some conservatives grouse that he was too committed to the social gospel and not enough to proclaiming the faith; some liberals saw him as an enemy of liberation theology and social emancipation. Others say Bergoglio could come off as fairly inscrutable and a bit "political."

More than once, I heard a version of the following quip: "I didn't know what he was really thinking. He is a Jesuit, you know!"

I've published articles and interviews along the way where this sort of material can be found at length. Pulling back from the details, I'll highlight here the three main conclusions I'll take away from this week-long swing:

A missionary church

First, there seems universal agreement that the heart of Francis' pastoral vision is a desire for a missionary church, a church that moves out into the streets to meet people where they are and to respond to their real needs, both human and spiritual. Over and over again, people who've lived and worked with Bergoglio cite some version of two of his favorite sayings:

- "A church that stays in the sacristy too long gets sick? -- the idea being that remaining in an enclosed space, constantly breathing the same recycled stale air, is bad for the church's health. The church needs to get out into the wider world in order to stay vital and alive.
- "Teachers of the faith need to get out of their cave? -- meaning that preaching to the choir is not the heart of the missionary enterprise, but rather making the faith relevant to people on the outside.

Within that missionary vision, Bergoglio always had a special preference for those on the margins of life.

His vision was for the church to reach out to those who have been tossed onto a sort of existential

garbage heap," said Federico Wals, a 32-year-old layman who served as Bergoglio's spokesperson since 2007. "He was especially concerned for those about whom society didn't seem to care, such as single mothers, the poor, the elderly, the unemployed."

Perhaps the signature pastoral innovation associated with the Bergoglio years is his emphasis on putting priests into the slums and shantytowns of Buenos Aires, known here as the *villa miseria*. He didn't just want priests visiting the slums -- he wanted them living there, sharing the lives of the people so they'll understand what the gospel means to them.

Here's the payoff from this insight.

I arrived in Argentina under the assumption that what we've seen from Francis so far is mostly a matter of style, and that the real substance of his papacy is yet to come.

That is, things like spurning the papal limo, living in the Casa Santa Marta, and going to a youth prison for Holy Thursday struck me as preliminaries to the real heavy lifting -- filling key Vatican positions, or responding to the child sexual abuse crisis and threats to religious freedom in various parts of the world.

People who know the pope best, however, insist that his opening act is a whole program of governance in miniature.

Bishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano of Gualeguaychú, Argentina, a close friend of Bergoglio who worked under him as an auxiliary in Buenos Aires for six years, told me that these gestures of humility and simplicity haven't just been about the pope's own personality.

"They're actually an expression of his magisterium," Lozano said Thursday afternoon, speaking at the headquarters of the Argentine bishops' conference.

"He's sending a message to other cardinals, bishops and priests that this is what we need to do -- to reach out to people, not being content to wait for them to come to us," Lozano said. "More broadly, he's sending the same message to all Catholics everywhere."

In other words, Lozano insisted, these gestures aren't just a charm offensive but an expression of a whole pastoral plan, offering a clear signal about where the new pope intends to carry the church.

Not a conservative

Second, most early profiles of Francis describe him as a theological and political conservative, largely based on two points of his biography: that he resisted some expressions of liberation theology as a Jesuit provincial in the 1970s, and that he's had a rocky relationship with the center-left government of Argentine President Cristina Kirchner, especially over the issue of gay marriage.

While both things are true, people who know the lay of the land here insist there's little meaningful sense in which Bergoglio could be described as a "conservative," at least as measured by the standards of the church. They make three points:

- Bergoglio is one of the least ideological people you'll ever meet, more interested in concrete situations than in grand political theories.
- The most serious opposition to Bergoglio from within the Catholic fold in Argentina consistently came from the right, not the left.
- Despite a checkered personal history with the Kirchner family, Bergoglio had good relations with

other members of Argentina's current government, and is open to dialogue with all political forces.

Guillermo Villarreal, for instance, is a veteran journalist who covered Bergoglio for the Catholic Information Agency of Argentina, a church-sponsored news service.

He told me that during the six years that Bergoglio served as president of the bishops' conference, from 2005 to 2011, he had an impressive record in being able to broker consensus, losing only one vote over that span -- a disagreement in 2009 and 2010 over how hard a line to take against Argentina's gay marriage bill.

According to Villarreal, Archbishop Héctor Rubén Aguer of La Plata, Argentina, was the leader of the hawks, while Bergoglio supported a less confrontational line. The issue wasn't whether to sign off on gay marriage, but how incendiary the rhetoric against it ought to be, and whether the church could signal support for other measures to protect the civil rights of same-sex couples.

Given that history, Villarreal said, most Catholics in Argentina wouldn't think of Bergoglio as representing the right wing of the country's bishops.

Alicia Oliveira, a former judge and critic of Argentina's military regime during the 1970s, says that for more traditionalist circles in Argentina, Bergoglio always seemed "very light, very leftist," so much so that she believes conservative elements in the country's hierarchy may have mobilized to block his election to the papacy eight years ago. (Not so much this time, she believes, but only because he wasn't mentioned nearly as prominently as a candidate.)

Mariano de Vedia, who covers religion and politics for *La Nación*, added another piece to the picture.

The only other Jesuit prelate in the country, he explained, is retired Bishop Joaquín Piña Batlle of Puerto Iguazú. Back in 2006, Governor Carlos Rovira of the Misiones province where the diocese is located was seeking to jury-rig the provincial constitution in order to stay in power indefinitely.

Piña became the leader of a local movement called the United Front for Dignity, which fielded candidates for a constitutional assembly to block Rovira's ambitions. It was seen as a progressive pro-democracy uprising, basically a left-of-center enterprise.

According to de Vedia, it's widely believed that Piña was operating with the behind-the-scenes blessing of his fellow Jesuit Bergoglio -- another reason, he said, that people in the know would not regard Bergoglio as a "conservative."

Perhaps the most interesting read on where Bergoglio stands came from Juan Carr, a renowned social activist in Argentina and a 2012 Nobel Peace Prize nominee.

In Latin American Catholicism, he told me April 3, "I've noticed a growing split between a church completely focused on the spiritual side, and a church that's completely 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."

What does all this mean going forward?

According to Fr. Pedro Brunori, an Opus Dei priest who served for ten years as director of the Vatican Information Service and who's now back in Argentina as a hospital and university chaplain, it's likely that the most significant opposition to Francis over time will come from the Catholic right rather than the

left.

Some conservatives, Brunori predicted in an April 2 interview, may well see the "simplification" of Catholic life under Francis as "eliminating something of the essence of the church."

A strong governor

While people in other parts of the Catholic world may be wondering if Francis can get control of the bureaucracy in Rome and bring it to heel, that doesn't seem to be a major concern of anyone who watched him work in Argentina.

As Maria Elena Bergoglio, the pope's 64-year-old sister told me on April 3, her brother is "plenty tough enough" to lead.

Three characteristics of his administrative style stand out.

First, there's little filter between Bergoglio and the people involved in the decisions he has to make. Those who've watched him work say that when he's facing a tough choice, he'll pick up the phone himself and collect information from various quarters, usually without letting any particular person know who else he's consulting. He'll listen carefully, think and pray about it, and then come to his own conclusion.

Bergoglio's penchant for collecting and analyzing information on his own means that he's less dependent on aides and intermediaries than many CEOs in other walks of life. Wals said that in Buenos Aires, Bergoglio was basically "his own right hand."

Among other things, that may suggest the breathless anticipation in Rome over who Francis picks as the next Secretary of State may be slightly exaggerated -- this may well turn out to be a pope who's his own "prime minister."

Second, he's a man comfortable exercising authority. Lozano said that during the twice-monthly meetings Bergoglio held with his six auxiliary bishops in Buenos Aires, he would always go around the table and solicit advice, and he took it to heart. When it came time to decide, however, things weren't put up for a vote -- Bergoglio made the call, and never seemed anxious or overwrought about it.

Third, Bergoglio may be a peace-loving man of the people, but he's no naïf about the use of power to make his vision stick.

Wals, for instance, noted that the new pope's very first episcopal appointment was the choice of 65-year-old Mario Aurelio Poli of Santa Rosa as his successor in Buenos Aires. That move came on March 28, just 15 days after Francis was elected -- among other things, a sign that the wheels may grind more quickly under this pope.

Further, Poli is another former Bergoglio auxiliary, and Wals said the appointment is clear sign of "continuity" with the pope's broad pastoral outlook.

In the same way, Bergoglio also didn't shrink from holding people accountable. Villarreal, for instance, said he's familiar with at least one instance in which a priest wasn't toeing the line, and after giving him a chance to straighten out, Bergoglio didn't blink about sending him packing.

Given all that, what sort of reform might one expect from Francis?

In our conversation Thursday evening, Lozano laid out a reform agenda for his friend -- not in the sense of pressuring him, but rather by way of explaining what one might expect given the kind of leader he knows Francis to be.

Lozano said that any structural reform Francis may execute will be in service to his concern with promoting a missionary church. It won't be reform merely for the sake of efficiency, but to "clear away obstacles to carrying the gospel to the world." Lozano then ticked off five such challenges:

- "The use of money," meaning not just balancing the Vatican's budget, but making sure it's clear where institutions such as the Vatican Bank get their money and what's done with those funds.

(On that score, Wals predicted Francis may actually close the Vatican Bank based on his history in Buenos Aires. When Bergoglio took over in the late 1990s, Wals said, the archdiocese was a part owner of several local banks. Bergoglio quickly sold those shares and put the church's money into private banks as a normal client.)

- "A purification of heart, especially among those closest to the pope," to fight the temptations of clericalism and careerism.
- Making sure the various departments of the Vatican are of service to bishops' conferences and local churches, to some extent reversing what Lozano described as a "very strong centralization" in recent years. He cited the handling of annulment cases and the translation of liturgical texts as matters that could be better handled at lower levels.
- "Continuing the process of transparency" with regard to cases of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy.

(Francis seemed to begin that Friday by telling German Archbishop Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to pursue "protective measures for minors, help for those who suffered violence in the past, [and] the necessary produces regarding the guilty parties," as well as prompting bishops' conferences "to formulate and enact the necessary directives in this field which is so important for the witness of the church and its credibility.")

- Promoting the New Evangelization by "better understanding contemporary culture," especially the way the process of globalization is unfolding differently in various parts of the world.
- A "better inculturation" of the language the church uses and the pastoral strategies it employs.

"These are all things I've talked about with him over the years, and that we've discussed among the bishops," Lozano said. "If he calls me, I'll give him the full list!"

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