

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 7, 2013 at 8:08am

Pope Francis gets his 'oxygen' from the slums

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The Francis Chronicles

Pope Francis

Buenos Aires, Argentina — In Argentina, they say that if you want to understand the priestly soul of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then you have to know the *villas miserias*, literally "villas of misery," meaning the slums in Buenos Aires where the poorest of the poor are found.

According to Fr. Juan Isasmendi, who lives and works in one of the villas, this is where the future Pope Francis filled his lungs with the "oxygen" he needed to think about what the church ought to be.

There are roughly 20 of these slums in Buenos Aires, often just a block or so away from gleaming high-rise office towers and luxury apartment buildings. Bergoglio's pastoral revolution was to hand-pick a cadre of especially strong, dedicated priests not just to visit the villas but to live and work here, sharing the lives of the people down to the last detail.

The aim was to make the faith come alive, preaching and celebrating the sacraments while also turning the parish into a comprehensive social service center -- fighting drugs and violence, educating the young and taking care of the old, providing job training and even community radio to give the people a voice.

Those who know his mind best say Bergoglio wanted to send a message to the villas: Even if politics and the economy have forgotten about you, the church hasn't.

If that sounds abstract, here's a piece of what it means in practice.

Argentina is currently being ravaged by a wave of addiction to what's known as *paco*, a cheap drug made from the residue left behind after cocaine has been processed for sale in the United States and Europe. *Paco* is low-grade, toxic, and often mixed with junk such as sulfuric acid, kerosene, rat poison, even

crushed glass. It's incredibly addictive and destructive of the user's personality; one doctor here says it turns people into "Neanderthals"; another, the "living dead."

Because it's cheap and readily available, poor youth with no job and no future are easily tempted. In general, parishes are the only places where a real alternative seems to be on offer.

Melchora Lescano, a mother and grandmother who lives in the villas, put it this way: "For our kids, it's either the parish or it's *paco* ... that's it."

On Saturday, I spent the morning in what's called "Villa 21," the largest slum in Buenos Aires with a population of almost 50,000 people. (It's perhaps appropriate, given how anonymous the people who live here can sometimes seem, that most of the villas have numbers rather than real names.)

The beating heart of Villa 21 is the parish of the Virgin of Caacupé, named for Mary as the patroness of Paraguay, because most of the people living here are poor immigrants from that country.

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Bergoglio's option for places such as this wasn't notional, a matter of a few lines in a pastoral plan. It took flesh and blood in his penchant for walking the streets, talking to the people, leading them in worship and standing with them when times were tough.

On a dare from a friend, I stopped a woman at random and asked if she had met Bergoglio. She scuttled into her tiny shack made of tin and wood, emerging with two prized photos. One showed him as a young auxiliary bishop with her family in the early 1990s and another showed him as cardinal confirming two of her cousins.

Bergoglio's former spokesperson in Buenos Aires, Federico Wals, told me a few days ago that the future pope dreamed of a missionary church, concerned above all with people who seem to have been tossed on an "existential garbage pile." Famously, the new pope also said shortly after his election that he dreams of a "poor church for the poor."

Yet at Caacupé, at least for one Saturday morning in early April, those didn't seem like dreams at all. They seemed instead the concrete reality of how a church shaped by the vision of Pope Francis looks, smells and tastes.

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I was accompanied to the villa by María José Müller, a dynamic recent Ph.D. in communications who volunteers at the parish's community radio, and by my assistant for the week, Ines San Martin, who I'm completely convinced will one day be the dean of religious journalists in her country.

When we arrived, we bumped into a volunteer catechist named Miguel who also helps run a boys' baseball team. He was bringing the kids into the chapel before practice and was kind enough to help me chat with them for a few minutes.

When I asked if they were happy to have a pope from Argentina, the immediate answer was yes -- the only ambivalence seemed to come from a couple of kids who noted that Francis is a fan of the San Lorenzo soccer team while they cheer for a rival club.

A 10-year-old named Esteban seemed to speak for the group when he said, "He's not just an Argentinian, he's from here!" He told me he had met Bergoglio and wanted to know if he should go home to get his picture with the cardinal. I suggested he probably shouldn't miss practice.

"It's like Jesus in the Gospels where he says, 'Rejoice, because your names are written in Heaven,' " Isasmendi told me. "The people from the villas know Bergoglio, and when we had Mass to celebrate his election, they all brought their pictures with him."

Müller ticked off a staggering set of ministries run out of the Virgin of Caacupé parish:

- A recovery center for drug addicts, called the *Lugar de Cristo*;
- Two farms where recovering addicts work and live;
- Fifteen or 16 chapels around the neighborhood where priests visit for Masses and confession;
- A high school;
- A trade school, offering courses in auto repair, electronics, laundry services, computers and other practical job skills;
- A home for the elderly;
- A soup kitchen (which is in addition, she said, to the fact that everybody knows that if you're hanging around the parish at lunch time, you'll probably be invited in to eat with the priests);
- A community radio station, which broadcasts 24/7 and which teaches young people the media business;
- A community newspaper called *The Catholic*;
- Drug prevention programs, some targeted at *paco*;
- A daily center for kids living in the streets where they can get cleaned up and get a hot meal and help straightening their lives out if they want it.

Müller said she's been a practicing Catholic all her life but has never felt the passion for the faith she's discovered since getting involved in the villa.

"They told me that once you enter Caacupé, you'll never really leave," she said, "and it's completely true."

To be clear, the work here may be rewarding, but it's no pleasure cruise. The former pastor of the parish, a charismatic priest named Fr. Jose "Pepe" di Paola, had to be transferred out by Bergoglio because of persistent death threats related to his efforts to break the grip of the drug gangs that often represent the church's main rival in these neighborhoods.

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Isasmendi told me Bergoglio didn't just "approve" this activity or support it. He said the future pope was intimately involved at the level of detail, including decisions about which priests were picked for the role that Isasmendi laughingly described as forming Bergoglio's "infantry" in the villas.

"When Bergoglio called me to send me to this parish, I told him about my life, my family, what I'm good at, and so on," Isasmendi said. "He told me he wanted to send me to the Virgin of Caacupé to work with Fr. Pepe. I started talking about something different, just to buy myself some time to think. Bergoglio answered my questions, but he kept coming back to, 'OK, yeah, but are you going to Caacupé?' He did that three times in about 20 minutes, always saying that I need you there.

"At the end, I said, 'Let's just pretend I have 20 days to think about it, and then I'll come back and tell you yes because it's obvious I can't say no.' He laughed, and that's how it happened."

Isasmendi said Bergoglio was the same way with all his priests.

"I had a priest friend who was working at a parish, and Bergoglio wanted to send him to another one. My friend tried to argue, saying, 'I want to stay here, my work is here.' Bergoglio told him no, I'm still going to send you because you're thinking about next year and I'm thinking about your next 40 years as a priest. He sometimes asked you to do things that at the beginning you didn't like, but then you learned to love them because he wasn't authoritarian or demagogic about it. He was like a father, trying to guide us in a good way."

I asked if the story also illustrates another point, that when Bergoglio makes up his mind, he won't be talked out of it.

"Oh God, yes," Isasmendi laughed. "He can be incredibly bull-headed ... this is a very important point."

In truth, Isasmendi said, Bergoglio not only made a wise choice sending him to the villas, but a politically astute one, too. Otherwise, he said, he probably would have gravitated to the foreign missions. This way, Bergoglio got to keep him in the archdiocese.

In fact, Isasmendi said, Bergoglio was so well informed about the lives of his priests that it sometimes made him hard to deal with.

"You couldn't just feed him a line of crap because he'd see right through it," he said. "You couldn't just say, 'Everything's fine, the parish is going great,' because before long he'd ask a pointed question that made it crystal clear he know perfectly well what was going on. You couldn't get anything past him, and if you tried, he didn't buy it."

At the same time, he said, Bergoglio "was very good with his priests, very merciful."

"He was never rigid about the small and stupid stuff," Isasmendi said, "because he was interested in something deeper."

Isasmendi is now 32, having served at the parish of the Virgin of Caacupé since his ordination in 2008. He told me Bergoglio "risked a lot" to change the nature of priestly formation in Buenos Aires.

"He was always concerned that future priests stay close to the lives of real people, not so much that they be concerned about the church as a structure," he said. "It wasn't easy, because many times formation programs encourage priests to separate themselves from other people, but that's not the kind of priest Bergoglio wanted."

What was his reaction to his cardinal being made pope?

"When Bergoglio was elected and took the name Francis," Isasmendi said, "my first thought was that God is giving his blessing to what we're doing in Buenos Aires!"

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Bishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano of Gualeguaychú, a close friend of Bergoglio who worked under him as an auxiliary in Buenos Aires for six years, says that the cornerstone of the new pope's vision is his desire for

a "missionary church, one that moves out of the sacristy and into the streets."

According to Isasmendi, that wasn't just talk. It was the lived experience of how Bergoglio related to the villas.

"I'd say that over the 15 years he's been walking down the streets here, at least half of the people have met him at some time and have a picture with him, meaning at least 25,000 people in this villa alone," he said.

"He came for all the big festivals and he did all the confirmations," he said. "One time, we had almost 400 people to be confirmed, and he did them all personally on one day. It took three and a half hours, maybe four, and he did it all."

"When he would visit here, he'd take the bus and then he'd just come walking around the corner like a normal guy," Isasmendi said.

"For us, it was the most natural thing in the world. He'd sit around and drink mate (an Argentinian tea), talking with people about whatever was going on. He'd start talking to the doorman or somebody about a book he was reading, and I could leave him there and go do something else, because Bergoglio was totally comfortable."

I asked if Bergoglio had been so concerned with the slums because of the drugs, the gangs, or some other specific problem.

"The biggest problem we face is marginalization of the people," he said. "Drugs are a symptom, violence is a symptom, but marginalization is the disease. Our people feel marginalized by a social system that's forgotten about them and isn't interested in them."

"Marginalization is the mother of our problems, and unfortunately she has many children," he said.

"Basically, what society is telling these people is, 'We don't want you to exist.' The work we're doing here is to try to tell them instead, 'It's good that you exist.' "

That, he said, was the vision Jorge Mario Bergoglio had for the church in Buenos Aires, and it takes on flesh in places such as the Virgin of Caacupé parish. Now that he's Francis, perhaps this "Pope of the Villa" can spread that vision well beyond the borders of Buenos Aires, helping it take flesh all over the world.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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