

Papa Bergoglio: Who Is He Like? Papa Ratti

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 26, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

In America, when someone tells about a new friend, we tend to ask, "What does she do?" My foreign friends attribute this to Americans' famous pragmatism and business sense, that we want to know what a person does. They prefer to ask, "What is she like?" Or, "Who does he know?" These questions probe personal qualities and relationships. In the last month, since Jorge Mario Bergoglio stepped on to the loggia of St. Peter's, I have been asking myself, "Who is he like?" And, while there are many differences, the answer I have come up with is Achille Ratti, known to history as Pope Pius XI.

The thought first came to me when pictures emerged of Pope Francis sitting at the back of the chapel at the Domus Sanctae Marthae where he usually celebrates Mass. Like Pius XI, Pope Francis is solidly built, more like a lineman than a wide receiver. Which is a good thing because, of course, the weight of the whole Church, if not the whole world, is now on those shoulders.

This leads to the second similarity. Neither Ratti, elected in 1922, nor Bergoglio now, seem the least bit fazed by the office that has befallen them. The tasks are many and varied and it is almost criminal to expect anyone to carry them all. In Ratti's case, he had been a cardinal for less than one year, and a bishop for less than three at the time of his election in 1922. Yet, as soon as he donned the white papal cassock, he conducted himself as if he had always been pope. (In fact, for most of his life, he was a librarian, first at the Ambrosiana in Milan and then at the Vatican.) For Bergoglio, the papacy came to him suddenly too, although he had much more experience as a bishop beforehand, and most observers, in advance of the conclave, assumed he was a bit too old for election. Still, not once has he shown any indication that he is, or thinks he is, unequal to the job.

Both Ratti and Bergoglio made a splash within minutes of their election. As we all watched, Pope Francis came out onto the loggia in a simple white cassock, without the red mozzetta that is usually worn on such an occasion. Thus, within his first hour as pope, he had decided to make a statement, or perhaps better to say, he had decided to tailor the papacy to himself rather than himself to the papacy. In 1922, the newly elected Pius XI made an even more stunning announcement: He would use the outer balcony to give his first blessing. Ever since the Risorgimento, popes had considered themselves "prisoners of the Vatican," and had only delivered their blessing using the inner balcony, which faces into St. Peter's Basilica. Ratti's decision reflected his great desire to affect a settlement with the Italian government, a desire he fulfilled with the signing of the Lateran Pacts in 1929.

Ratti had displayed in his earlier career that he was not a bomb-thrower. When Cardinal Ferrari asked him to organize religious instruction in Milan's schools in 1895, when the anti-clerical temper of the times was still pronounced, one biographer wrote of him, "He did not resort to any program that might arouse the politicians or bring disfavor from the authorities. He knew that one false step might mean disaster, especially if the movement were ever interpreted as a challenge to the anti-clerical party. Slowly and quietly, he continued the work." In short, he was prudent, a quality that also helped him secure the release of some Capuchin monks who had been arrested for hiding a fugitive during the disorders in Milan in 1898. (In fact, the Capuchins had opened their

doors to anyone who was fleeing the violence in the streets.) A Latin American friend who knows Pope Francis tells me that he, too, is no bomb-thrower, that he is always prudential, and that this characteristic has served him well as he has faced very challenging political situations in his country. "Astute," is the word my friend used to describe Francis. That said, when any vital interest of the Church was threatened during Pius' time, he was not shy about taking a stand, and I suspect Bergoglio has a similar backbone.

We saw some of Francis's backbone in his decision to celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper in a Roman prison. At some point, someone in the Vatican must have explained that thousands of tickets to the planned Mass at St. John Lateran had already been distributed. And, at that point, Francis must have said something to the effect that he was sorry, but his mind was made up. This called to mind an episode in Pius's career. He was deeply suspicious of the Nazis and towards the end of his life, his suspicions had only grown. In 1938, the Anschluss occurred and Germany annexed Austria. Vienna's Cardinal Theodor Innitzer visited Hitler and praised him in a public speech. He was summoned to Rome. His audience lasted three hours. After leaving the pope's presence, he met Bishop Hudal of the Collegio dell' Anima who asked how the audience had gone. Innitzer replied: "I went in and greeted him with *Laudetur Jesus Christus*." When I left, I said, "Thank you, Holy Father" and kissed his hands. Everything between these two greetings was said by him." Another time, when Pius was trying to restrain the more extreme Catholic elements in France, a cardinal known as one of the leaders of the extremists told Pius that he would resign his cardinal's hat at an upcoming consistory. Pius told him he could resign his red hat "right now." These episodes may suggest an authoritarian streak in Pius, and that was there to be sure, but a person vested with authority needs to exercise it, no? Mind you, one of the things that we already know about Pope Francis is that he consults before making decisions, as evidenced by his decision to form a special "kitchen cabinet" of cardinals. But, the steel in the spine, I think you can discern that even in these early days of Francis' pontificate.

A strong spine does not need to parade itself around, still less to express itself in any kind of exclusionary sensibility of the kind we associate with Jansenism, a specific heresy in time, but a general curse of the religious sensibility in every age. A generosity of spirit is the antidote to Jansenistic tendencies. We saw this in Pope Francis when he announced to the audience for the press that instead of giving his benediction in words, mindful that many of the assembled were not Catholics, and respecting their consciences, he would give his blessing in silence. Hard-nosed journalists, with deep skepticism towards the hierarchy, were moved to the very core of their beings by this gesture from Papa Bergoglio. The incident, too, has a kind of premonition during the pontificate of Pius XI. In planning the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, which he established in 1936, Pius' great collaborator Father Gemelli suggested the only Catholics would be given membership in the new Academy. Pius responded: "As a matter of fact, the Academy should have many non-Catholics, non-Christians and Jews. What is important is that they should be scientists of the highest level and men of moral integrity."

The mention of the Jews is another noteworthy similarity between Papa Ratti and Papa Bergoglio. It was Papa Ratti who, in the face of rising anti-Semitism declared, "Spiritually, we are all Semites." In another allocution he said, "In no way whatsoever can a Catholic Christian become an anti-Semite." As for Papa Bergoglio, I am unfamiliar with Argentina, and have never been there, but one of my most trusted Latin American sources said that anti-Semitism remains a real problem among many Argentine clergy and that as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, then-Cardinal Bergoglio went out of his way to cultivate good relations with Argentina's Jews.

Perhaps their greatest similarity, and the one most likely to come to naught in certain circles, is the way both men have called to humility. When he presided at the canonization of St. Bernadette Soubirous, Pius said: "The new saint shows us something that the world refuses and despises: the hidden life, the humble life, renunciation and dedication, which is one of the great lessons given to us by the Savior. "Take my example because I am soft and humble of heart," said Christ. The gospel can be summed up in this one sentence, in this essential lesson. This is the goal of the Christian life and the sense of the teachings of the Savior. The sense of humility that He brought into the world was entirely unknown to the pagan era?After nineteen centuries, St. Bernadette shows

the same great example and lesson to a world ruled by pride that despises humility.? Has not Pope Francis been saying similar words to us in these daily homilies and in his talks at General Audiences? Has not Pope Francis been asking us to join him in following Jesus, even when He leads us where we do not want to go, but confident because we are following Him? And, unlike Pius, who rather enjoyed the pomp and ceremony of the papal court, which was then far more rigid than what Francis inherited, our new pope is dispensing with all paraphernalia he can to show us what humility is all about.

Ratti and Bergoglio were different men and they lived in different times. The persecutions of the Church that Ratti faced were extreme and far-flung, horrific in Mexico and Spain, but the French government under Herriot did its best to trim the Church's reach too, and then the rise of Bolshevism in Russia and Nazism in Germany brought more persecutions for the Church. Francis faces nothing like that. But, he does face a world that has increasingly grown forgetful of God, and even when reminded of Him, jealous of its own prerogatives. You see this on the left and you see this on the right. In the end, both popes pose the question to the Catholics of their day that the Master posed to the first disciples: Will you follow?

I have noticed a certain skepticism in some Catholic commentators, a "Let's wait and see attitude" towards Pope Francis, as if we expect the new pope to measure up to our expectations. I think this is the key problem of our age, this desire for the pope to meet our standards, adopt our proposals, see the world as we see it. Pope Francis is, instead, calling us to conversion, to see the world through the lens of the Gospel, and not just the Gospel as this person or that person understands it, but as the Church has understood it. The Church's understanding of the Gospel develops, to be sure, but there is something distasteful in this desire to see the new pope conform to some preconceived ideological agenda. It misses the moment, the moment to see how we can open our hearts to the Master in new ways, the moment to be excited about where the new pope will lead the Church no matter what direction he goes. We are beginning a chapter and some people want to know the ending too soon. The sense of expectancy evaporates if we try and force Francis into our hopes and desires. I hope he will listen to those hopes and desires in ways his predecessors did not. But, I hope too, those of us who express those hopes and desires will not be so proud as to think we have nothing to learn from him and that it is his job to learn from us. More deeply, I hope we have not lost the deep awareness that we are all of us called to conversion every day. I think the new pope grasps this. I think Papa Ratti grasped this. It is obvious that the Master grasped this. Will we follow? Not "What will he do?" Will we follow? That is the question we should be asking.

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