

Argentina's Pope Francis heralds a new era for Latin America

by [Rick Hampson](#)

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(RNS) South America, a continent known to many Americans largely for roiling politics, economic turmoil and good beaches, now finds itself in possession of the global image trifecta: a World Cup (in 2014), a Summer Olympics (2016) and a new pope (Francis).

When the College of Cardinals decided to go to the Western Hemisphere for a successor to Pope Benedict XVI, they didn't choose the archbishops of Boston or New York or a cardinal from Quebec. They tapped the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio.

Experts say it has to help the reputation and morale of a region that has languished in relative obscurity, except when depicted as a fount of drugs (Colombia), deforestation (Brazil) and demagoguery (Hugo Chavez of Venezuela).

"Without question, the emotional response to the pope coming from South America really gives the region a visibility and attention on the global scale that reflects where it's gone politically, economically and socially," said Harley Shaiken, chairman of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

This was not lost on South Americans. They cheered, cried and honked their car horns in cities and towns across the continent, according to The Associated Press. "Incredible!" cried Martha Ruiz, 60, of Buenos Aires, who got the news while waiting at that city's cathedral.

"All of Latin America is dropping to its knees to pray, to thank God for this extraordinary gift that he has given us," said Archbishop Diego Padron of the Venezuelan city of Cumana.

Taken with the soccer tournament and the summer games -- both in Brazil -- the papal selection "creates a moment when the world's attention catches up to the reality of where the region is," Shaiken said.

That reality includes the fact that Brazil has the world's sixth-largest economy and is fast headed toward No. 5; that Chile also, after some hard times, is prospering; and that Argentina, once home to one of the region's most autocratic and repressive political systems, is a functioning democracy.

For the Catholic Church, the Bergoglio pick is a long-awaited acknowledgment from Rome that Latin America's 425 million Catholics represent 40 percent of the global church, even though the region accounted for just 17 percent of the cardinal-electors in the papal conclave.

Also, the death this month of Chavez, Venezuela's president, removes a figure who, despite his popularity among many of the poor and those on the political left, was widely regarded by many capitalists in the developed world as an enemy.

(Venezuela's acting president, Nicolas Maduro, said Chavez should be credited with lobbying Jesus to help name a Latin American pope: "We know that our 'commander' rose to the heights and is face to face with Christ. He must've influenced somehow to convene a South American pope. Some new hand arrived and Christ said, 'Well, it is the time for South America,'" he said Wednesday.)

The net result will be a higher profile for a region that Americans have tended to disregard even though -- or perhaps because -- it's in their own backyard, according to Marc Chernick, director of the master's program in Latin American studies at Georgetown University.

"Most Americans don't think twice about South America, besides that's where a lot of drugs and crime come from," said Ted Piccone, a Latin American relations specialist at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington.

The papal selection, the cup and the games, he said, "are a reminder that this is a much more complex and rich region than that. ... It's evidence that Latin America is a rising force on the world stage."