

Pastor Francis

by [Lawrence S. Cunningham](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue



In Review



FRANCIS

A New World Pope

*"A gaze of faith is the ferment of a
socially responsible gaze."*

— Jorge Mario Bergoglio

Buenos Aires, 2013

Michel Cool

Francis

By Michel Cool
Eerdmans



Pope Francis

By the Staff of the Wall Street Journal
WSJ Ebook/Harper Media

Last spring, while the world waited for the successor to Pope Benedict XVI to be announced, a researcher for National Public Radio called me to ask why popes change their name when assuming the papacy. I explained that the custom started in the sixth century when the chosen candidate bore the unfortunate name of Mercury. Since the bishop of Rome could hardly bear the name of a pagan god, the new pope took the name John.

In the course of our chat, I said in passing that it was odd that no pope ever took the name Francis. Perhaps new popes worry that they cannot live up to the model of Il Poverello.

Later that same day, Jorge Bergoglio was elected pope and took the name Francis. When asked to comment on that choice by another news outlet, I could not but recall the old Latin saw: *nomen omen*. Did Pope Francis indeed have in mind the Poor Man of Assisi (who was not even ordained to the priesthood)? Or was he thinking of Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary, or perhaps, Francis de Sales, the pastoral bishop and spiritual writer? Rather quickly the new pope made it clear that he had Francis of Assisi in mind.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote that what St. Benedict stored, St. Francis scattered. It was a prophetic phrase. The extroverted Francis succeeded the more monastically inclined scholar- prelate Benedict, thus imperfectly replicating church history.

The biographical facts about the new pope are easily stipulated. Born in 1936 to Italian immigrant parents in Buenos Aires, Bergoglio first planned to become a chemist. After an intense religious experience at the age of 17 (and a bout of tuberculosis that cost him a lung when he was 20), he entered the novitiate of the Jesuits at 22. He studied in Chile and Germany and was ordained to the priesthood 11 years later. In 1973, after a few years in parish work, he was named provincial superior of the Jesuits in Argentina.

His years as provincial coincided with the years (1976–1983) of the ghastly “Dirty War” in Argentina, and although he did not side with the radical Jesuits in those years, he evidently never colluded with the army generals either—which cannot be said of many of the church’s hierarchy.

Bergoglio, however, was not in harmony with the activist slant of the Jesuits of the day and found himself for well over a decade relegated to backwater assignments as a parish priest, teacher and convent chaplain. Then John Paul II named him an auxiliary bishop in 1992, and in 1998 he became archbishop of Buenos Aires and a cardinal in 2001.

As archbishop and as pope Bergoglio has opted for a simple life and made clear his love for the poor. It is easy to render him as a caricature: the simple fool for Christ in contrast to the learned and cultured Mozart-playing Benedict. A closer look at his Argentine life tends to blur that cartoonish view, which was created by the media.

Bergoglio's Jesuit education taught him a deep love of literature (he lists Borges and Dostoevsky as his favorite writers), a thorough training in theology (including a German doctorate, with a thesis on Romano Guardini), a passion for soccer, and an easily expressed appreciation of Argentinian popular culture. While in Buenos Aires he cowrote a book with a prominent rabbi.

By all accounts he was an able administrator with a particular interest in sending priests to serve the poor quarters of his diocese. One could argue that his much touted simplicity of life was a shrewd form of prophetic criticism directed at ills in the church. Commenting on a Gospel parable, he once said that while the Good Shepherd left the 99 to seek the one, the church, by contrast, keeps the one penned up and forgets the 99.

It is far too early to know how Francis will shape the papacy, and the books quickly published about him are mostly cobbled together by relying on Wikipedia, a bit of well trod-Vatican gossip, the standard story about the many problems facing the papacy, and anecdotes about Francis riding the bus and refusing to live in the papal apartments. These two books are no exception.

Hastily translated from the French, Michel Cool's slapdash volume has a short section of biography, a résumé of ten problems facing the papacy, and a very brief collection of some of the pope's spoken and written words. It suffers from not saying much about Francis's career in Argentina.

The editors of the *Wall Street Journal* had the advantage of using onsite reporting from Francis's native land. Their far more interesting book includes some good pages on Bergoglio and the "Dirty War," his contentious relationship with the current president of Argentina, and a passable reflection on his early education and his development as a Jesuit, enhanced by some interviews with his former colleagues, both clerical and lay. The strengths of this book make us yearn for something even more substantial written by someone with an intimate knowledge of Argentina and the Argentinian church.

While many commentators on the new pope focus on problems internal to the Catholic Church, Francis is emphatic in his desire to keep the church from constantly looking inward. He wants to reach out to the entire world with the Good News. He is acutely aware that this can best be done by using both words and deeds.

In Francis's recently issued encyclical *Lumen Fidei*—which was begun by Benedict as an accompaniment to his letters on hope and charity—Francis notes that many people regard religious faith as “an illusory light, preventing mankind from boldly setting out on the quest for knowledge.” He understands that “our culture has lost a sense of God's tangible presence and activity in our world.”

Lumen Fidei is a passionate defense of the vigor of religious faith to help us know and to love the living God revealed in scripture. From the vantage point of the papacy, it is the primary task of the pope, as the visible head of the church, to both serve the needs of the church and speak to the larger world

Francis used many moments in his opening days as pope to underscore his fundamental role as bishop of Rome. It is evidently his intention to exercise his office as a kind of template for the bishops of the world to imitate. In that sense, his ministry as archbishop of Buenos Aires is being continued, with the added responsibility of being the center of Catholic unity. By emphasizing his role as a pastor he subtly demythologizes some of the pretensions of the papacy that have agglutinated to the office from historical pressures brought on by the Counter-Reformation's exaltation of the papal office.

If we think of Francis's understanding of the papacy in those terms, his pastoral style becomes more intelligible. He wants to live simply, preach evangelically, touch the poor and marginalized directly and focus his energies on the disaffected because he wants all the bishops in communion with him to do the same. By example he exercises his preaching office for the larger good of the church.

At the same time, as the visible head of the Catholic Church, he faces a myriad of issues with which he must attend and contend. Cool devotes a whole chapter to those problems and challenges, as do the WSJ editors. If Benedict was preoccupied with the secularization of Europe, as one would expect a German intellectual to be, Francis, by instinct and background, is acutely aware of the challenges facing the church in the non-European world.

In his homilies in Rio at the World Youth Day, he took account of the challenges presented by the charismatically fueled rise of evangelicals as well as by the yawning gap between the very rich and the desperately poor. He understands the tensions between the official patriotic church in China and the church faithful to Rome. Any prelate even dimly aware of exigent realities understands that the

Vatican machinery needs to reform. He is intelligent enough to realize that however powerful his own charisma, papal charm will not make these problems disappear.

The unfortunate tendency of slotting people into conservative or liberal pigeonholes shows up in both books, even though more than once Francis has resisted such labels. He frequently notes that the church cannot be reduced to good deeds—it would then simply become an NGO. His own stance starts with a sense of being fully grasped by Christian faith. The logic of Christ, he argues, flows into love. If he has taken St. Francis as his model in loving all of creation and the poor in particular, his training has been in the Jesuit insistence that everything is to be done “for the greater love of God.”

Public reactions to the recent lengthy interview given by Pope Francis to *America* magazine, published in September, followed predictable lines. The progressives were elated by Francis’s words about gays and women; traditionalists were bemused by them. Both parties focused on this or that papal observation.

But taken as a whole, his remarks reveal a person not easily slotted into a box. Anyone who reads the interview carefully will hear a voice that adheres faithfully to the Catholic faith but who insists that Christian pastoral ministry must not, in his words, insist on a “disconnected multitude of doctrines.” He wants the church to insist on the primacy of Christ, from which “other doctrinal or ethical teachings flow.” Francis puts it this way: “The proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.” What Francis believes is no more audacious than what St. Augustine said centuries ago: “Love God and do what you will.”

Francis has been a pope for about half a year, in which time he has captured the good will and even the love of many. It is far too early to know how he will tackle the challenges facing the Catholic Church in particular and Christianity in general. These two books give us only a halting start in locating him. But they do help us see something that the pope noted in his recent encyclical: to be a person of faith is to “take a stand.” We are beginning to see what stand this pope has taken.