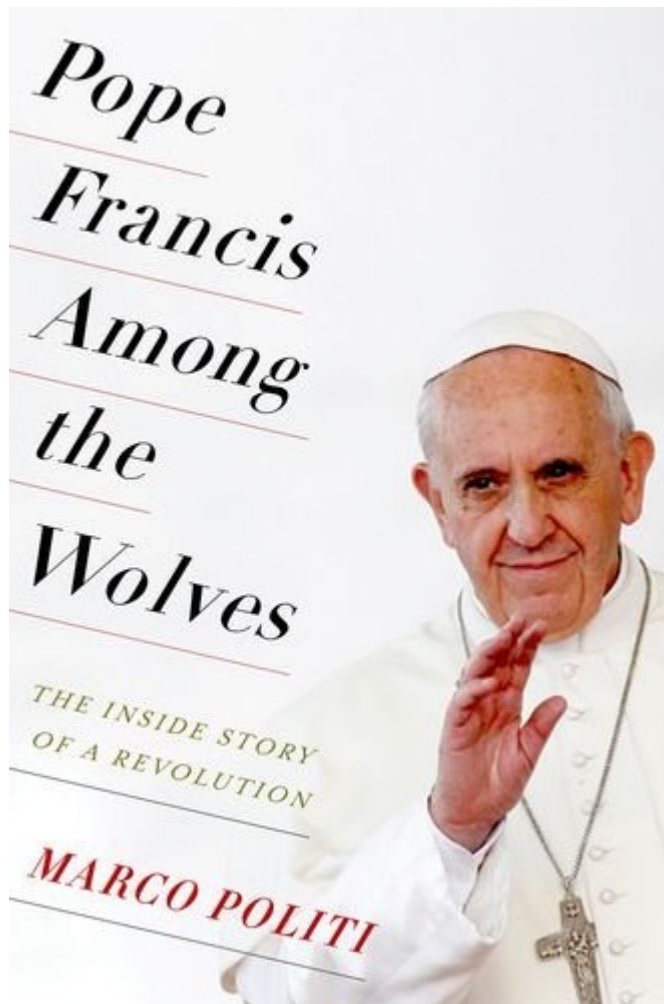


Papal politics and perils

by [Jon Sweeney](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Pope Francis among the Wolves

By Marco Politi; translated by William McCuaig
Columbia University Press

Catholic progressives love to read Marco Politi. Four years ago he published a book about Pope Benedict XVI in Italian. The narrative became a familiar one: Benedict was a theologian first and a leader second. Politi wrote speculatively about the 2005

conclave that elected Cardinal Ratzinger, and in this book he speculates about the conclave that elected Ratzinger's replacement. His account is more revealing than anything yet published in book form about what happened among the cardinals in the Sistine Chapel on those days in March 2013.

Politi is a journalist of the highest standing in Rome. His sources are usually interviews, which are impossible to check. This book is the result of access. I counted a half dozen cardinals from the 2013 conclave that Politi quotes as unnamed sources. One says, "At the moment of the decisive vote, we felt joy. The rapidity gave us a sense of relief." Others he quotes by name: "In the conclave I felt like a pen in the hand of God" (Cardinal Antonio Maria Vegliò).

Politi offers Benedict XVI a backhanded compliment: the emeritus pope's resignation made possible a golden Catholic moment. In a Politi's estimation, Benedict XVI is a "tragic figure" who saw problems, wasn't capable of facing them, and was willing to take the fall, hoping that the one who replaced him could do what he could not.

There have been popes who clearly didn't want the job. John Paul I said in 1978 to those who elected him, "May God forgive you." He died mysteriously 33 days later. There was also the medieval hermit who tried to flee when the cardinals climbed his mountain to tell him that they'd elected him (he became Celestine V and would quit a few months later). And there was Benedict XVI, who served willingly, then quit, leaving the vacuum filled by today's Pope Francis.

Politi makes a mistake when he argues for Benedict's tragic, antiheroic status. His argument rests in part on the mistaken notion that Benedict was the first and only pope to willingly step down. Still, I would love to believe that Politi's understanding of the matter reflects the resigning pope's intentions:

Benedict XVI wanted to sweep the board clear of all the entrenched positions of power in the curia. By resigning, he triggered the automatic resignation, as stipulated by canon law, of the other principle office holders of the church's central government. De facto, his decision to abdicate amounted to a sort of coup d'état, a virtual "reboot" of the Vatican.

When he writes about Jorge Mario Bergoglio before he became Pope Francis, Politi tells a now-familiar story. In Buenos Aires, the archbishop's priests called him Jorge. He didn't have a car and driver. He refused to live in the upscale, protected residence reserved for his position. On the bus or the subway it was "not unknown

for a woman seated beside him, upon seeing his black habit, to ask him: 'Padrecito, will you hear my confession?' and to receive the answer: 'Yes, of course.' Once on a bus he finally had to interrupt a man whose catalog of sins was interminable with the polite remark, 'Bueno, I get off two stops from here.'"

Bergoglio knew "every one of the eight hundred priests in his diocese. From the time he took charge of the archbishopric, he aimed to reinforce the presence of priests in the outlying shantytowns." This is the sort of man we have wanted to have as pope, and now we do. But not everyone is thrilled.

Politi emphasizes that Bergoglio had no fear whatsoever in the slums, among drug lords, or in the presence of extreme poverty. Before leaving for the 2013 conclave, Bergoglio reportedly told a lawyer friend, another of Politi's anonymous sources: "If I were elected, I'd know what to do." Politi proceeds to tell us that when Bergoglio faced the prospect of leading the worldwide church, surrounded by the Curia, bankers, soldiers, corruption, and numerous problems, initially he was afraid. But then that fear went away, almost as quickly. Politi recounts (as only an insider could—he is inside Bergoglio's head, it seems!) how the pope knelt to pray just before addressing the faithful in St. Peter's Square for the first time. Then "he stood up, and he was a different man from that moment on." The source this time was a Monsignor who was there, working for Vatican television.

This all sets the stage for Pope Francis's task: to rebuild, restyle, and reform the 1.1 billion-strong Catholic Church. He began mightily but has struggled with the same "tangle of crows and vipers" that have plagued every modern papacy. "I'm cunning," Pope Francis has said to his adversaries, according to Politi, and his goal is "the missionary transformation of the church." This includes reforming his own office, dismantling centralization, and putting a stop to most theological denunciations. In all of this he has enemies. Politi's chapter 13, "The Enemies of Francis," makes for most interesting reading.

The cardinals knew what they were getting in Bergoglio; the Roman Curia (including the lawyers and the bankers) also knew; even the Italian mafia knew. Individuals within all three contingents are now desperately wanting this papacy to come to an end. They "act and speak behind the scenes." And then there are the media figures who support the pope's enemies—for example, those who are publicly battling his denunciations of the "invisible tyranny" of financial speculation.

Politi assigns a few other chapters to hot-button issues in the Catholic Church without hiding his own opinions. On the problem of women's ordination he writes, "To face up fully to the role of women in the church constitutes a ford in the stream that the Bergoglio pontificate must cross." He also summarizes Bergoglio's leadership of the Jesuits in Argentina and Paraguay with aplomb.

On the first page of the book Politi writes: "According to legend, Saint Francis of Assisi once met a wolf, to which he addressed a mild sermon. Won over by the saint's words, the fierce animal grew gentle and submissive, lowered its head, and followed him. The adversaries of Pope Francis, however, are not so quick to yield." By the end the volume this is abundantly clear.