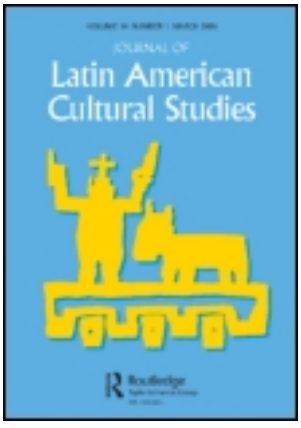

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Miranda Lida & Mariano Fabris

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Miranda Lida and Mariano Fabris

ARGENTINA AND THE POPE FROM THE END OF THE WORLD: ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

The appointment of Cardinal Bergoglio as the new pontiff of the Catholic Church has had a media impact that exceeded all expectations. The international press, in fact, had taken no notice of him before the conclave; even the best of the Vaticanologists erred in their calculations. Even so, all it took was a few gestures from Pope Francis to conquer the attention of the Catholic world, which was shaken and seduced by his transparent, warm gestures. Camera flashes and questions from analysts beset him. Who was *Jorge Mario Bergoglio? An endless number of biographical facts about the Argentine pope began to circulate that, taken separately, amounted to no more than a handful of scattered crumbs. Reading between the lines, however, reveals a man who had a meteoric ecclesiastical career, with repeated sojourns abroad that surely facilitated his designation as cardinal ('Prince of the Church') in 2002.*

Humble in gesture according to his depictions in the news media, Bergoglio was less so in his trajectory within the Catholic Church: this is not a man who eschews honors, titles, and appointments, but rather one who has on many occasions been (and will certainly go on being) very close to power, without boasting of his rank and conducting himself without ostentation or shrillness. He is quite far from Saint Francis of Assisi's spirit of innocence. The new pope's relationship to political power is more complicated than it seems at first glance – given that he maneuvers with a subtlety that is not appreciated at first glance – which could provoke some degree of disorientation in any who look for a linear political or ecclesiastical trajectory in Bergoglio.

This article will be dedicated to unpacking some aspects of Bergoglio's figure in the context of Argentine Catholicism. In the first section, we will outline the development of the relationships between Catholic Church, society, and politics in 20th-century Argentina, and then touch upon the debates that the transition to democracy in the 1980s implied for a Church that regularly found itself subject to accusations of complicity with the military dictatorship. Subsequently, we will analyze some aspects of Bergoglio's ecclesiastical career that will allow us to explain his path to becoming pope. Finally, we will offer some possible consequences for the Catholic Church and for Argentina, as well as, in a general sense, for the contemporary world.

Antecedents

A succinct review of the Catholic Church's role in 20th-century Argentine history reveals that it was no mere supporting actor. As the country moved into a new modernization in the final decades of the 19th century, it met with a Church that was willing to go along with many of the transformations that were occurring. As such, the Church saw its institutional framework secured, and it did not take long in knitting close ties with the Holy See. As Argentina was inserting itself into international trade and into the world, local Catholicism set itself to consolidating its relationship with the papacy, for which it counted even on the support of the Argentine government, which considered these ties with Vatican diplomacy to be a way of securing its presence in the Old World. Argentina's proportionally large presence in the South American College in Rome – the true seedbed for high ecclesiastical posts held by Latin American clergy in the 20th century – is indicative of these close ties to the Holy See. Many of these students, significantly, went to Rome on scholarships funded by the national government (Di Stefano and Zanatta 2000).

With these solid antecedents, untouched by the laws of lay education or civil registry of the 1880s, the Church and the Argentine government cherished, from 1900 on, the hope of having the first South American cardinal; likewise for the diplomatic pressure to make Argentina the first country in the region where an international Eucharistic Congress would take place. Both ambitions were born in the first decade of the 20th century, but only materialized in the 1930s: first with the celebration of the XXXII Congress in 1934, and later when Santiago Copello, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, was named as cardinal in 1935, even as other Latin American countries possessed a larger number of bishops and archbishops than Argentina. Copello had been one of the many seminarians who studied in Rome on a scholarship from the government. Forming ties to Rome, then, was part Argentina's strategy to insert itself into the Old World, with which it built a solid network well before the crisis of 1930.

The decade of the 1930s was, then, the apotheosis of Argentine Catholicism, which was concurrent – not coincidentally – with the general crisis of liberalism in the West (Zanatta 1996; Lida 2009). Other factors served to give relevance to the Catholic Church during that time: in particular, the downward spiral of Argentine politics during the 1930s, habitually caricatured as the 'infamous decade' owing to repeated incidences of fraud and the growing military presence. At the same time, Catholicism itself received the transformations of the period in a way that raised obstacles to keep the advances of modernity at bay. Though these obstacles were porous, the recalcitrant discourse of Catholic fundamentalism being more flexible in practice than it seemed at first glance, it still awoke profound concern among all who saw the Church's strong presence in the public arena as disruptive to the already rickety republican institutions. The Spanish Civil War and the Nazi threat looming over the globe had anti-fascist forces battening down the hatches, and placed Catholicism in the eye of the storm. A few timid voices rose up to express a 'democratic' and anti-fascist Catholicism, but they had little influence or were directly silenced in such a delicate juncture.

Toward the middle of the 1940s, with the end of the war and the political transformations that took place in Argentina – a new military coup that became messy when public opinion began to cry out for a democratic exit, in keeping with the mood of a world turning toward the post-war era – the Catholic Church began to

halfheartedly reposition itself. Instead of arguing that obligatory religious education was a question of dogma, pure and simple, it hid behind arguments with a democratic veneer: given that, the Church maintained, more than 90% of the population was Catholic, there was no way to disregard the claim. The ruling on religious education that Perón undertook in 1947 (completely unnecessary in practice, given that there had been a decree in place since 1943) looked after that demand: it was the fruit of wide Catholic sectors – though not all – banding closely together with a Peronism that they saw as the inheritor and interpreter of the Christian social doctrine. Of course, everyone saw what he or she wanted in Perón. For some, Catholicism was just one more actor, along with other corporate actors that supported Peronism; for others, though, it was the only actor sheltered from the aggressive advances of government to line up the whole of society behind it. Antithetical as the two sides may be, perhaps the most reasonable thing is to concede a certain amount of truth to each of them, knowing as we do that Catholicism is hardly ever monolithic (Caimari 1995; Zanatta 1999; Bianchi 2001).

In any case, the fall of Perón in 1955 set a new stage, one that was less predictable, more heterogeneous, more plural in a certain sense, and also more contradictory. The Catholic Church, an important actor in the process that led to his fall after the government unleashed a full frontal assault against it, made some lukewarm efforts to change with the times, but the prompt arrival of the Second Vatican Council sped the times up, along with many latent demands. Meanwhile, Catholicism exploded into all of its contradictions, showing itself to be multidimensional and strained along infinite internal lines (Touris 2000) The many fragmentations of Catholicism in the sixties harbored tendencies that would intersect with revolutionary groups of the sixties and seventies and, by contrast and at the other extreme, with the most recalcitrant ideologies imbued with anti-communism and with the doctrine of national security (Obregón 2005). Nonetheless, the mosaic was not limited to these; there were an infinite number of grays in between. Young Bergoglio was among them.

The Catholic Church in recent history

As soon as people learned of cardinal Bergoglio's election as the new pope, discussion intensified in Argentina regarding his possible ties to the military dictatorship that afflicted the country between 1976 and 1983, gaining international attention with the ruthless massacre repressing and silencing any possible dissent. The fact that the Holy See quickly issued its own pronouncement indicates that this was not a minor question.

To understand this debate one must go back several decades. The years following the military retreat in the Malvinas War framed an extremely critical moment for a Church marked by several bishops' complicity with the Armed Forces. Criticism of the repression that came even from the Vatican exposed the Argentine episcopacy's timidity. Its recent conduct was at the center of political debate, and those members with some amount of social recognition were not part of the ecclesiastical institution's hierarchical core. In view of the general criticism, not even the most fervent Catholic at the time would have imagined that a papal candidate would come out of that Church. As a result, when attempting an explanation of Bergoglio's recent election one must

consider, along with the candidate's trajectory and the particularities of Vatican politics, some changes that the Argentine church has undergone over the past decades. It is possible that the election of an Argentine pope closes a long process of readjustments that Argentine Catholicism underwent as it faced the shock that accompanied the country's return to democracy. It is true that the image of complicity with the military endured; even so, it is possible to appreciate how the social consensus evolved in terms of said image over three decades of democracy. In any case, it seems clear that the ecclesiastical institution managed to rebuild its internal unity and to project its social presence with greater autonomy from a political leadership that was strongly questioned by civil society.

The Argentine Church that emerged from the dictatorship and that made up the institutional framework within which the new pope's ascendant career progressed was strained by a series of ideas that were deeply entrenched in the collective memory. Perhaps the most important of these placed the Church within a complex game of power that conditioned and restricted the independence of democratic authorities.

At the same time, and in spite of the prevalent idea that, in time, ecclesiastical institutions would lose some of their presence and influence in the nation's public life, a more detailed analysis sheds some doubt on optimistic claims of a progressive advancement toward secularization – most recent theories suggest, in fact, that no process of secularization is linear and cumulative. Indeed, the election of an Argentine pope calls any speculation in that direction into question. It is useful to keep in mind the position Bergoglio took in the debate over equal marriage rights, approved in 2010, which allowed same-sex marriage. The then-archbishop of Buenos Aires interpreted the legislation being discussed as nothing less than 'an attempt to destroy God's plan' (Felitti 2011). We can speculate that the abortion debate has suffered a harsh setback with Bergoglio's election as Pope, just as it is worth inquiring whether Argentina will be able to approve any legislation in that direction during Francis's pontificate. The answer seems almost tautological.

While it is true that after the long night of dictatorship a hegemonic anti-corporate discourse was constructed that placed a set of republican and democratic values above any other identity (Aboy Carlés 2001), behind this ambitious reformulation of Argentine political culture there remained a space for negotiation and accords (Fabris 2012). These were part of a culture that was fighting against its own disappearance, and they presented themselves as the fastest route to consolidate each actor's position within the political framework, as well as the least costly means of overcoming their conflicts.

A clear example of the survival of this politico-religious web that allowed the ecclesiastical institution to rebuild and adapt to the new political scene can be found in the debate over the divorce law. Even in the 1980s, Argentina did not account for the possibility of marital rehabilitation in its legislation. In that case, pressure from the Church – on more receptive political leaders – was enough to abort any efforts. When the question was first being debated in 1984, the Church hierarchy reacted quickly and put its most conservative side forward, deploying a wide variety of practices aimed at putting pressure on legislators. Letters, meetings with political leaders, petitions, public documents, and even a march in front of the seat of government did not stop the divorce law from partially passing in August of 1986. But the survival of the close ties uniting politics and religion was enough to delay its

definitive passage until after the visit of John Paul II in April 1987, just as the bishops demanded (Fabris 2008).

The (then) pope's visit in the second week of April, 1987, was the Church's opportunity to rebuild a worn-out image of unity – affected by strong internal discrepancies arising from the question of divorce and from the positions that each bishop took regarding the revision of recent history – and to organize an intense mobilization to receive the high pontiff. The perspectives for the Church suddenly seemed more favorable, an impression that was ultimately confirmed that same month of April. Days after John Paul's visit, the anti-corporate discourse, which so affected the ecclesiastical institution, received an almost fatal blow when its primary mouthpiece, president Raúl Alfonsín, negotiated with the military to close judicial proceedings that had been opened regarding the violation of human rights (Fabris 2009).

In 1989, the first post-dictatorship government came to its end. While Argentina was going through a fatal economic crisis, the Church emerged with its image revitalized. It is true that it would not return to the preferential position Argentine political culture had reserved for it up until 1983. But it had managed to survive the interrogation of its former political prominence and to contain its own internal disagreements, and this retreat allowed the Church to nurse its wounds and project a greater social presence. It would be difficult to understand Bergoglio's ascendance to the papacy without considering this period so full of challenges, and without keeping in mind the successful reconstruction of an image of the Church that, even while it appeared to distance itself from the State, was committing itself to respond to a wide range of social problems, in a clear phase of growth even in the middle of an economic crisis – the expansion of Caritas in the 1980s is proof of this. Ultimately this is what the image of Bergoglio, the 'Pope from the end of the world', conveyed in the media can be condensed into: a bishop with an austere demeanor, critical of political power and committed in the fight against poverty, drug addiction and human trafficking.

A multifaceted pope

Jesuit, Argentine, Latin American, son of Italian immigrants from the Piemont, fan of a popular soccer team, prelate committed to ministering in the slums and shantytowns (*villas*), habitual user of public transportation: the new Argentine pope's most colorful traits have taken up endless newspaper pages. It would be fitting to remind the reader that beyond the new pontiff's affable façade, there is a man who has climbed the ladder in the Argentine Catholic Church at high speed, particularly after he joined the secular clergy. His appointment as bishop in 1992, a ceremony in which then-Archbishop Antonio Quarracino participated, marked the beginning of a meteoric career: assistant archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1997; archbishop of the same diocese in 1998; cardinal in 2001; president of the Argentine Episcopal Conference for two successive terms; member of important commissions in the Vatican curia; prominent figure of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in recent years. All these titles and honors are even more remarkable considering they belong to a Jesuit who, in principle, should shun them. Of course, Bergoglio was always characterized as shouldering each new role with a show of humility, in a spirit of service, the only valid argument for which the Society of Jesus would allow his passage into the diocesan clergy. Starting March

13, he let it be known that he preferred to be called, with humility, the 'Bishop of Rome' rather than Pope. Be that as it may, we cannot omit mention of the year 1992 as a point of inflection in his ecclesiastical career. In the Society of Jesus, he had quickly reached the ceiling: he obtained the post of Provincial Superior at less than forty years old, in 1973, and after his tenure was over he devoted himself to teaching and research, without holding positions of any great public exposure, at least until he was named bishop. Thus, when the Church's role in the military dictatorship began to be discussed in the 1980s, Bergoglio's voice was a far from weighty one. Nonetheless, his role in the dictatorship was already a cause for discussion, fundamentally, among Catholic militants affected by the repression. This aspect took on greater relevance as Bergoglio began to ascend through positions in the Church.[1]

A man who in a mere twenty years passed through all the positions the Church bestows upon its most valued sons could scarcely be identified as someone who is detached from power. He had in his favor (until the last conclave) the fact that he enjoyed a certain independence: Jesuit in the secular clergy; bishop among the Jesuits; close to the more conservative of the slum priests, without having participated in the more radical tendencies of Liberation Theology; cardinal of the Vatican curia, but far from the party infighting that corrupts it; friend of some members of FASTA,[2] which could be taken as politically compromising, but never a full member of the organization. We can add to this list his prestige among the theologians and intellectuals owing to his extensive education, which he completed in Germany at the end of the eighties. Politically speaking, he wove together an infinite number of contacts from diverse groups, without belonging organically to any of them, giving him a wide margin of autonomy when it came time to make decisions.

In regard to his theological positioning, on the other hand, Bergoglio brings together an inheritance from the Medellín and Puebla documents of CELAM, with echoes of the Argentine theologian Lucio Gera, who has had great influence in the Vatican since the seventies. He is, then, in a moderate line, far from the more radical leanings of Liberation Theology, whose Marxist derivations were harshly questioned by Joseph Ratzinger. Moderate in the theological arena – but not dogmatic – and placed in due course above the fray of Vatican factions, Bergoglio found himself perfectly positioned during the most recent conclave, garnering a total of 90 votes out of 115, a number that exceeded the minimum needed.

This independence becomes politically significant when the person who possesses it knows how to maneuver among the various factions. Only an able politician is capable of moving in such terrain with enough skill to reach the goal. We must admit, then, that Bergoglio is a politician who is simultaneously skilled and discreet, contradictory as that may seem, one whose pulse does not race when the time comes to make important decisions. Conservative but not intolerant, traditionalist but not fundamentalist, Bergoglio has the characteristics to initiate the changes expected of him.

Perspectives

To project today, in the heat of events, what possible consequences Bergoglio's election as the new pope will have could be risky. Be that as it may, we can venture a few hypotheses.

It is clear that the Catholic Church is seeking with this appointment to offer a renewed image that could very well be summed up in the word humility, just as the news media have tirelessly repeated. From this perspective, Bergoglio would not be a product of this same Church marred by scandals and polemics, but rather an outsider who comes from 'the end of the world' to cleanse the institution of its sins. Uncontaminated, he would be the chosen one to bring the Church closer to the needy, to renounce riches and, definitively, to inaugurate a new era.

The role of the news media becomes fundamental in conveying this new image. In Argentina the situation can border on the ridiculous. Francis's life has been turned into a reality show: it is enough to turn on the television or go to the main news outlets in order to find a detailed list of the Pope's daily activities, meet his childhood friends, see the places he used to frequent and even the person who sold him his newspaper. It can go to extremes, as one news channel did when it included, among his acts of humility, his stumble in the Vatican's Clementine Hall. One need go no further than today, March 22, 2013: the front page of the influential newspaper *La Nación* in Buenos Aires published an eloquent photo as evidence of this new brand: after mass, Francis is sitting in the back of church, behind all of the faithful. The message is clear: rather than occupying center stage, he places himself at the level of the common man.

In any case, beyond these resources aimed at renovating the Church's image, we have serious doubts about the success of this business as long as it is not accompanied by something more than gestures. Francis's election comes out of the inner workings of a complex apparatus whose movements are not easy to decipher, an apparatus that will likely find it difficult to respond with alacrity to the yearnings and hopes being placed upon the new pope. These hopes, certainly, are in excessive abundance, and it is likewise easy to discern a certain risk there.

There would seem to be more certainties in the fact that this appointment will have a strong impact on Argentine political life. The bond that was forming between the religious and political spheres based on a progressive distinction of spaces will only survive with difficulty in the new setting. It does not seem hasty to predict a dispute over the 'appropriation' of the Pope, as his election once again situates religion as a privileged source of political legitimacy. Surely, politicians will learn from the past and will self-impose a limit on that 'appropriation'. They will understand that the legitimacy provided by the Church achieves better results the more it disguises its political content. Thus it is possible to venture that it will not be long before some politician emerges – whether from the ruling party or the opposition – ready to borrow the current Pope's leadership style.

Even so, to speak of 'appropriation' can also have its limits. What politicians wish to do with the pope is one thing; it is quite another what Francis will allow them to do with him. Thus, one can venture that a pope as political as Bergoglio will place firm limits on any attempt at 'appropriation'. The fact that he has not responded to President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's request that he intervene in the Falklands-Malvinas dispute is indicative. Above all else, Bergoglio is the captain of Saint Peter's ship, and it stands to reason that, like a head of state, he cannot stand for that kind of meddling in other states' affairs. At the same time, we should mention his prudent decision to put off all trips to Argentina until after the next elections, in October of

2013. He does not wish to be accused of interfering in political affairs. In any case, it is enough to remember many of his anti-Kirchner homilies from years gone by to suspect that his word, amplified by radio, television, and print media, will have some repercussions anyway.

Translated by Megan McDowell

Notes

1 In 1986, Emilio Mignone, father of a disappeared Catholic militant, linked Bergoglio to the kidnapping of two priests, Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jálics. See: *Iglesia y dictadura*. Ediciones del Pensamiento Nacional, Buenos Aires, 174. Later, the journalist Horacio Verbitsky delved more deeply into the accusation: *Doble juego. La Argentina católica y militar*, Sudamericana Buenos Aires, 2006, 71–8.

2 Fraternidad de Agrupaciones Santo Tomás de Aquino (Brotherhood of Saint Thomas de Aquinas Associations). A fundamentalist group founded in Argentina in 1962 (just when the Second Vatican Council was beginning) by Brother Aníbal Fosbery, who had pre-conciliar leanings.

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Miranda Lida holds a Ph.D. in history from Universidad Torcuato Di Tella (2003) and has been a researcher at CONICET since 2006 as well as professor of contemporary history at Universidad Católica Argentina. Her research focuses on the history of Catholicism in Argentina, Europe and the Americas. Among her publications are the books *La rotativa de Dios. Prensa católica y sociedad: El Pueblo (1900–1960)* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012) and, co-edited with Diego Mauro, *Catolicismo y sociedad de masas en Argentina 1900–1950* (Rosario: Prohistoria, 2009) as well as, co-edited with Mariano Garabedian and Sandra Szir, *Prensa argentina siglo XIX: imágenes, textos y contextos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Teseo - Biblioteca Nacional, 2009).

Mariano Fabris holds a doctorate in history from Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata (UNMdP, 2011). He is post-doctoral fellow at CONICET and assistant professor of social history at UNMdP, specializing in the history of Argentine Catholicism since the return to democracy in 1983. Among his publications are the books *Iglesia y democracia: avatares de la jerarquía católica en la Argentina post autoritaria, 1983–1989* (Rosario: Prohistoria, 2012) and, co-edited with Roberto Tortorella, *Democracia en reconstrucción. Mosaico histórico de los años ochenta* (Mar del Plata: Eudem, 2011).