



## A Papal Paradox Pope Francis and Liberation Theology

To the casual observer human nature can be an entertaining enterprise that never ceases to enlighten, surprise or baffle. Since the death of Pius XII in 1958, the accession of each new pope to the *Seat of Peter* has been met with variegated hopes of anticipation, delight and frustration to a diversity of world Catholics. The election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio to the papacy has been no exception.

### A Shakespearean Refrain

In his play *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare asked the rhetorical question: *what's in a name?* Contrary to his answer about the sweet-smelling rose, Pope Francis ascribed great significance to his choice of a papal name. This relatively perfunctory exercise festooned the early days of his papacy with a frenetic speculation about its true meaning. Millions of people saturated the airways and the social media with such rabid enthusiasm that it turned the selection of the first completely new name in many centuries into a near carnival atmosphere.

The new pontiff's celebrated love of the poor immediately pointed to the *Little Poor Man*, the beloved and widely popular St. Francis of Assisi. More sophisticated pundits guessed that Pope Francis had combined Assisi with the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier, who was a great evangelizer.

Pope Francis quickly ended the speculation by stating that the obvious choice had been correct. He affirmed that his selection had been the inspired work of the Holy Spirit. During the final ballot, Cardinal Bergoglio said he had thought of *wars ... and Francis is the man of peace, and that is how the name entered my heart, Francis of Assisi, for me he is the man of poverty ... the man who loves and protects others.* Moments before his election, a fellow Cardinal urged him not to *forget about the poor!*

St. Francis was born in the Umbrian town of Assisi to a wealthy family in 1181. He lived for the sybaritic

pleasures of love and military adventure. Warfare quickly lost its attraction after his capture during a war with neighboring town, Perugia. As a prisoner he had a *conversion experience* that prompted him to renounce his former life of hedonistic amusements to live the Gospel of Christ by serving the poor. He gladly shed his finery for rags while embracing *Lady Poverty* as his beloved spouse.

### House Repair

Jorge Mario Bergoglio is one of five sons, born to an Italian railroad worker who immigrated to Argentina. Despite the political strife, economic unrest and military violence in Argentina during his youth, he steadfastly followed Christ while establishing non-violence as one of the pillars of his pastoral ministry. His personal biography reflects a pure-hearted, simple man with a natural humility that radiated the presence of God within his soul.

As a priest his story reads as that of a humble pastor in one of the world's largest archdioceses who talked with common folk and lived a simple Christian life. Even as a Church leader, Cardinal Bergoglio emulated his papal namesake by forsaking the glamour and comfort of the Archbishop's residence, choosing to live in a small apartment, cook his own food and take the bus to work everyday.

His choice of *Francis* also symbolizes the tug-of-war between Christian teachings and the empty values of the secular world. His papal selection has raised hopes that he will continue devoting his energies to living a simple life and caring passionately about the marginalized and the downtrodden. For a Church in constant inner and external turmoil, Pope Francis promises to be the perfect antidote. The name *Assisi* is also a challenge to both him and the Church to work on its renewal. This could be the time when Christ says once again, *Francis, go and repair my house, which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.*

## Media Parlor Games

Pope Francis's name has an even wider significance for his papacy. His life story has been colored with so many variations that it has created a palette of parlor games among the media and the faithful as to which direction his thinking would lead the Church.

Pundits and commentators who see the Church only through a political prism are convinced that his boundless love for the poor makes him a Marxist or at least a socialist. Some of the pope's detractors have tried repeatedly to link him with Argentina's *Dirty Wars*, which were punctuated with *disappeared* adults and kidnapped children decades ago. Other liberal groups were upset because of his failure to remake the Church into the *image and likeness of man*.

Because of his orthodoxy, conservative Catholics know that those expecting Pope Francis to bless abortion, allow gay priests to marry, and ordain women can only expect to be bitterly disappointed. However, given the pope's pre-eminent love of the poor, there is one elephantine issue that will not leave the room: the role of *liberation theology* in the theological forum.

## The Lens of the Poor

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the late 1960s as a theology of revolutionary change. It asserted that poverty and economic oppression stemmed from a dependency on capitalism. The *liberationists* believed that the religious establishment reflected a bias toward the wealthy and the capitalist classes. They contended that the Church needed a theology that viewed the world through the lens of the poor.

Liberation theology originated from Pope John XXIII's challenge to the Church to defend the oppressed and the poor. However, as with their Bolshevik forebears, socialist revolution was their only solution. Hundreds of Latin American priests bought the message that Christianity *inescapably obliges us to join in the revolutionary process for urgent radical change of existing structures and to reject formally the capitalistic system*.

As a theology it is a toxic mixture of religion and politics, aimed at energizing the poor of Latin America with an explosive new combination of class conflict and armed revolution. More Machiavellian than Christian, it views life and suffering through a Marxist prism that sees violence as a short-term solution to age-old social problems. In place of Christianity's

troublesome God, the *liberationists* bow to atheist Karl Marx, who serves as the atavistic inspiration for a *theology without God*.

This new theology received a strong boost in 1968 at the Second Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellin, Colombia when the participants agreed to use the Bible as a justification for advancing their revolutionary version of social justice in the Catholic world. In doing so, they secularized the Gospels while treating the poor like a *tattered idol*. In effect their politicized Gospels offered the poor an earthly salvation without a Redeemer or a cross. The *liberationists* baptized their social gospel in the symbolic waters of secular humanism, while casting aside divine revelation for the love for the poor and the oppressed.

## A Theology of Liberation

The term *liberation theology* was not coined until 1971, when Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez published his provocative book *A Theology of Liberation*. According to this book, liberation theology places a high premium on German philosopher Immanuel Kant's principle that man's autonomous will and reason make any theology of God irrelevant to the newly enlightened world. And like many of the movements of the last two centuries, it traces its violent ancestry back to the French Revolution of 1789.

Father Gutierrez's complementary *preferential option for the poor* has become the crown jewel of liberation theology. It considers Jesus not as a personal Savior, but more as a *Liberator* of the poor from their oppression and poverty. It was one of Gutierrez's disciples, Leonardo Boff, who raised the poor to the level of a sacrament. To him the poor were God's favorite children and had a special place with Him in Heaven.

Despite its widespread popularity in the Church, the *preferential option for the poor* is little more than a Marxist slogan that mocks the idea of moral equality found in the New Testament. The Gospel truth is still that the Church teaches belief and not poverty is the road to salvation. Nowhere is it implied that the poor, who Jesus said *will always be with us*, deserve any favoritism. *Love thy neighbor* transcends creed, class, color and culture. Gutierrez's theology is the *ultimate share the wealth* scheme, which is contrary to Acts 10:34-36, which states that God *shows no partiality*. Charity cannot be legislated or mandated, lest it become confiscation, which is worthy of no spiritual

reward, and a direct violation of the Seventh Commandment.

Liberation theology particularly resonates with authors Paul Van Buren (*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, 1963) and Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*, 1965), who believed that modern Christians must adopt a more secular understanding of existence. Consequently the secular world should dictate the content of moral lessons, not any religion or church. Their secular savior, secular mission, and secular world are little more than a short step to the *God-is-dead* theology of the later 1960s.

### A Mosaic of the Poor

Liberation theology poses an even greater threat to the Church because it has the potential to unsettle the long history of Catholicism in Latin America, where more than half of the Church's members live. The *liberationists* hold the Church up to scorn for its assumed compliance with the *evil power structure* of society. They still question Cardinal Bergoglio's somewhat cloudy role during the country's anti-Communist terror three decades ago.

In place of the institutional Church of hierarchies and dioceses, the *liberationists* want a *popular church, a mosaic of poor peoples who have been especially blessed by God*. Their Leninist/Marxist structure is reflected in their proposals for a *popular church where the people are organized into small communities under lay leaders, who in turn take their instructions from pastoral workers, clerical or lay*. Their pastoral workers teach the people how to interpret the Bible in light of their own personal experiences, including their *divine right* to revolt against any form of oppression.

The left continues to blame the Church's consistent opposition to liberation theology on Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, whom they disparagingly called the *doctrinaire czar*. As the head of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Cardinal Ratzinger emphatically condemned *liberation theology* as a *novel interpretation of both the content of faith and of Christian existence, which seriously departs from the faith of the Church*.

What they fail to mention is that Benedict was echoing the sentiments of his predecessor, when he called liberation theology a *singular heresy*. While on a visit to Nicaragua in 1983, John Paul II personally chided priests who had joined the Sandinista government in order to liberate it from the faith.

Despite some serious misgivings, many on the left think that Pope Francis will eventually come around to their side on liberation theology because of his great love for the poor. Others point out that he has always been uncomfortable with liberation theology and can speak on behalf of the poor without supporting the real fundamental changes that are present within this revolutionary theology.

### A Church for the Poor

The left is aware that the pope's native region is very much on his mind. While a Cardinal, he stressed to the Latin American bishops in 2007 just how much misery existed in what he called *the most unequal part of the world*. He denounced *the unjust distribution of goods* that had created a *situation of social sin*. While outlining the shortcomings of an ambiguous *unregulated capitalism* and of the International Monetary Fund, the pope urged *those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life to be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment*.

In the early hours of his papacy, Pope Francis spoke of *a church for the poor*. This was his clarion call of help for the 70 percent of Catholics who live in poor countries. This candid statement raises more questions than it answered. Many saw this as an indication that the Church's highly controversial *preferential option for the poor* would become a new order.

Consequently the left reasons that since the preferential option for the poor is all about helping the oppressed, the pope will employ their liberation theology as part of his general reform of the Church. Newspapers like the *New York Times* write affectionately of the new pope's *affinity for liberation theology*.

This all begs the questions: will politics trump theology during his reign? Will the pope bend to the political exigencies of the modern world or live the Gospels as he has always done? These questions speak loudly to the paradoxical nature of his papacy.

### A Theology without Christ

Despite what the *Times* thinks, those who are closest to the pope know that he is not a Marxist. While it is difficult to find direct evidence of his condemnation of liberation theology, his supporters, who oppose liberation theology, consider him their

champion. It is the spiritual presence of Karl Marx and the implicit threat of human violence that alarm him. He is politically savvy enough to know that Marxist theory and strategy fuel liberation theology, but he will never accept their putting the teachings of Jesus Christ in such a materialistic bind that they become vestigial and unviable. He has always believed that it was better to speak on the poor's behalf without supporting the structural and doctrinal changes liberation theology advocates.

As an activist theology, liberation theology seeks only the materialism of the world as its goal while ignoring God's Kingdom. As a theology, it seeks to free lives as well as souls. But this liberation is not just from oppressive government but from faith and ultimately Christian morality. This is the basis of Pope Francis's consistent opposition. He believes that a theology without Christ or Christian morality at its forefront is the work of the devil and therefore an evil to be vigorously opposed.

To his credit Pope Francis never joined his fellow Latin American Jesuits who supported liberation theology.

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In fact he admonished them to *stay out of political issues and certainly not take up the liberationist theology*. According to Jesuit Father Alejandro, Cardinal Bergoglio *could not support the struggle for justice through arms, through violence, because it's against what we're doing as Christians*.

The lesson lost on the Jesuit *liberationists* was the fact that Pope Francis's position segues perfectly with those of both of his immediate predecessors, John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, whom they opposed. While Pope Francis may be a paradoxical figure who bears many complex attitudes to his papal stage, one thing is certain: he will always choose the side of Christ and his Church.

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