

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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### *Pope Francis and the Challenges Facing the Roman Catholic Church*

The conclave to choose the new Bishop of Rome, also known as the pope, is complete. The 115 cardinals in the conclave chose Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the 266<sup>th</sup> pontiff of the Church and the first non-European pope in 1,200 years. He chose the name Francis, after Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscan order—the first pope known as Francis. Pope Francis is also the first pope chosen from Latin America and he is also the first Jesuit ever chosen as pope. In many ways, the choice of Francis is significant. For example, his choice represents a new reality: The center of Christianity is shifting from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere, and Latin America is the home of over 200+ million Catholics, far exceeding the number of Catholics in Europe. Who is Pope Francis and what are the challenges facing the Roman Catholic Church?

- First of all, who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio? Because he is from Latin America, 76-year old Pope Francis represents a cultural bridge between two worlds: He is the son of Italian immigrants who settled in Argentina, where he became a leader in the Church, becoming the archbishop of Buenos Aires. Born in 1936 in Buenos Aires, his father was an Italian railroad worker and his mother a homemaker. Ordained as a priest in 1969 (becoming archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998 and a cardinal since 2001), he rose within the Argentinian Catholic hierarchy during one of the most controversial periods of modern Argentina, that of the harsh right-wing dictatorships that resulted in over 30,000 dissidents “disappearing.” The Church lost a great deal of credibility in Argentina during this period (1976-1983) because it seemed to quietly support and/or failed to criticize the repressive and violent measures of the Argentinian government (called by many the “Dirty War”). His role in the Church during this period remains somewhat controversial. Nonetheless, he is known for his remarkable humility and passion for the poor. But he is also a fierce critic of abortion, homosexuality and gay marriage, the ordination of women into the priesthood and liberation theology. For example, in 2010, when the current Argentinian government of de Kirchner legalized same-sex marriage, Bergoglio railed against it as a “war against God.” He also challenged the law that permitted same-sex couples to adopt children, saying it “would deprive children of the human growth that God wanted them to have by a father and a mother.” In that sense, he represents continuity with previously conservative popes, including his predecessor, Benedict XVI. He does, however, represent a much more passionate focus on issues of social justice, especially the needs of the poor and the effects on them from globalization and what he calls “the demonic effects of the imperialism of money.” Anthony Faiola of the *Washington Post* characterizes Pope Francis as “a flashback to an old-school view of the Catholic leaders as humble, soft-spoken critics who walked among their flock and led by example—though he has also used the Internet as a tool to reach lapsed Catholics.” He takes the bus, cooks his own meals and lives a rather austere lifestyle. He has already eschewed some of the extravagances normally associated with being the pope. We shall see if this continues. He

has also served on several important Vatican commissions and in 2005 is believed to have been the “runner-up” choice of many during the conclave that chose Benedict XVI.

- Second, what are the challenges Pope Francis faces? They are significant and they are formidable.
  1. Pope Francis and his church face a world where secularism and competing faiths, especially Islam and Pentecostal Christianity, are depleting the numbers of Catholics worldwide. For example, a secular, naturalistic worldview pervades much of Europe and for many on that continent, Catholicism is irrelevant. In some parts of Europe, the great cathedrals that dot the gorgeous landscape are more museums than functioning churches. In Latin America, Pentecostal Christianity is surging, usually at the expense of the more traditional Roman Catholicism. This is especially true in Brazil, Venezuela and other smaller nations of this region (Argentina is probably the most secular and European of the Latin American nations).
  2. The Church is also facing several very real challenges that can only be characterized as a crisis of authority. The widespread sexual abuse crisis, most of it involving pedophilia, has seriously undermined the church’s moral authority, especially in the West (the United States and Europe). There has been extensive cover-up of these abuses and a rather alarming number of important church leaders have been involved. Lawsuits and out-of-court settlements have cost the church financially but these scandals have also cost the Church in terms of in prestige and credibility. This crisis of authority is perhaps the greatest crisis that Pope Francis faces.
  3. Recent reports and studies have uncovered a serious management crisis within the Vatican Bank. The Vatican Bank is under significant pressure from international regulators and watchdogs to step up its compliance with anti-money laundering rules. Some of the charges even include money-laundering of mafia money by the Vatican bank. This is something Pope Francis will need to deal with immediately.
  4. Almost everyone agrees that Pope Francis will need to reform the Roman Curia, the Catholic Church’s bureaucracy that runs the Vatican. In recent years, the Curia has become a court of intrigues. It is one of the most nontransparent governing bodies in the world. All of the administrative offices of the Holy See comprise the Curia. Through the various document leaks, including those leaked by the pope’s butler (all now known as the “Vatileaks scandal”), we now know that the Curia is characterized by bitter infighting and wasteful spending. We will know the direction Pope Francis wants to go with all this when he announces his choice for secretary of state—the second most powerful Vatican official and the one who will oversee the Curia.
  5. Pope Francis will likewise face the ongoing challenges that result from a growing and, in some places, an acute shortage of priests. Connected with this is the growing strength of women in the church and the demand that they be ordained into the priesthood. There is absolutely no evidence that Pope Francis will agree to this, but the pressure is growing and it is relentless.

Pope Francis heads a church that to some extent is dysfunctional and, in some places, in utter disarray. The crisis of confidence is real and he must address it quickly and forcefully. However, we who represent Protestant evangelicalism must also remember that those of the Roman Catholic faith represent one of the few allies evangelicals have had, especially on social and cultural issues. For example, we have joined with Catholics in protesting against abortion, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, and in battles with secularism, relativism and even Islam. Therefore, in this struggle for the heart, soul and mind of culture, it matters to us where Roman Catholicism is going. Pope Francis faces formidable challenges and we should be praying for him.

See news reports in the *Washington Post* by Jason Horowitz and Anthony Faiola (13 and 14 March 2013) and in the *New York Times* by Rachel Donadio (13 March 2013).