

## Pope Francis

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 14, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

In the days and weeks ahead, we will find out more about Pope Francis. We will find his writings, all of which will be translated into many languages very soon. We will listen to interviews with people who know him, who have worked with him. We will watch him as he begins to flesh out his own papacy. But, today, we should not rush past the amazing human aspect of [yesterday?s events](#). [1]

Ever since Benedict announced his surprise resignation, it has felt less like Lent and more like Advent. It has been a time of expectancy. As in Advent, when we know it will conclude with the birth of the Savior, we knew this sede vacante period would conclude with a new pope. But, just as Israel expected a different kind of Savior from the one she received, most of the world, and most of the commentators, myself included, were surprised by the selection of Cardinal Bergoglio as the new pope. There is a very Catholic sensibility here: Grace is often surprising in the ways it manifests itself and the selection of this man reminds us of that fact.

Before we saw the man, we heard the name: Francis. When some clerics talk about the New Evangelization, the focus is on using twitter. But, as I have tried to argue, the New Evangelization must be about something deeper, a more radical fidelity to the Gospel and the various claims it makes upon us. St. Francis is the model, and not only because he is, after the Blessed Mother, the most beloved of Catholic saints. He is the model because Christ shines forth in His Church when we are close to the poor because Christ is found amongst the poor.

The fact that Bergoglio hails from Latin America is important. Yes, Argentina is distinctive, but all the bishops of Latin America have been wrestling with a vital question these past fifty years: What does it mean to exercise a preferential option for the poor? When first posed, some theologians developed what became known as liberation theology, and it is clear that Bergoglio was not an adherent of that school. Good for him. The problem with most liberation theologies was not that they availed themselves of Marxist analysis of social structures. The problem was that its understanding of the human person was crimped. Like the neo-cons in the U.S., they reduced the mystery of man to a very manageable issue, to be addressed in economic terms, as if salvation from debt was enough when the Christian wishes to be saved from eternal death. It is ironic that both liberation theologians and neo-con theologians make the same mistake, albeit from different angles.

Yet, the question remains: What does it mean to exercise a preferential option for the poor? This cannot be mere words on a page or a pulpit. First and foremost, this exercise must be embodied in our lives, and it is evident from what we know that the new pope has lived an austere life and shunned many of the creature comforts that traditionally attached to his office. Secondly, it must be embodied in our ministries: Man does not live on bread alone, but he needs to be fed nonetheless. Thirdly, the Church must decry those social structures that keep people hungry and homeless, and not just social structures but social attitudes. It is not enough to convert the economy if we do not convert our hearts. [Our friends at Millennial](#) [2] have some quotes from the new pope that show he takes the preferential option for the poor seriously, and that he understands a capitalist system that creates spiritual poverty that is coincident with its manufacture of material wealth is an insult to human dignity. A pope who has condemned the ?demonic effects of the imperialism of money? is a pope after my own heart.

When the new pope emerged on the balcony, he was wearing the simple white cassock of his new office. There

was no ermine-lined red mozzetta, no fancy stole. (He put on a stole to impart the blessing and then, immediately, took it off again.) I am told that Bergoglio's election has caused heartburn amongst those who think restoring the traditional Latin Mass is the way to evangelize the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Good. I hope he dispenses with the fancy dress to which Benedict was drawn. Simplicity is the order of the day.

Then, Francis spoke. His words were obviously spontaneous and yet he did not seem overwhelmed at the prospect of standing on the loggia speaking to the city and to the world. He did not refer to himself as pope but as Bishop of Rome. It remains to be seen how he conceives his new office, but as Archbishop Quinn reminded the world in his talk at Stanford last week, the pope is the Bishop of Rome not the Bishop of the world. A bit of decentralization would be a good thing, if not exactly reversing a trend that has been going on for 150 years or more, at least curtailing it.

Francis led the assembled throngs in the Our Father and Hail Mary and the Gloria, prayers any child would know. This showed a pastoral sensibility, an inclusiveness that we hope to see more of. The most touching moment of the night came when he explained that before he blessed the people, he asked them to bless him with their prayers. He bowed his head and the crowd went stone silent. It is a remarkable thing to see 100,000 cheering people suddenly go silent. In our noisy, distracted culture, I hope this will become a regular feature of his appearances, a kind of pastoral, global mute button, that we might hear the inner yearnings of our restless hearts, restless we know, for the Lord.

The new pope follows two great teaching pontificates. He himself is clearly a learned man. But, I had the impression that he intends to lead more by his example than by his teachings in the years ahead. This is a good thing. Popes John Paul II and Benedict left us a lot to chew on theologically. We need fewer documents and more visits to a soup kitchen. We need a pope who asks us, who challenges us, what did you do for the poor today? Did you go amongst them to find Christ?

This morning he went to the Basilica of Saint Mary Major. I know there is a kind of sophisticated Catholic who scoffs at Marian devotion. I am not one of them. Indeed, it is in Mary that we find the beginnings of an answer to the preferential option to the poor question I posed above. In surrendering ourselves to Christ ? not to ambition, not to acquisitiveness, not to consumer comforts ? in embracing and following the great ?fiat? of the Virgin in all its receptivity and openness to grace, it is there, in the ?fiat? that we find the inspiration to sing the Magnificat with the Virgin, a prayer that far outstrips any revolutionary plan of social reorganization in its thoroughness and its vitality. He shall send the rich away empty. He will fill the hungry with good things. He will scatter the proud in their conceit. He will remind Israel of his promises of mercy. Anyone who thinks traditional Marian devotion is a cultural leftover of earlier times needs to pray the Magnificat on their knees and ask themselves how they have lived out its clarion call to overturn the worldliness of the world.

Today, we pray for this man, our new Holy Father, who has assumed a large burden on behalf of the universal Church. We must hope that he has the chops to reform a curia that will do everything it can to remain unscattered in its conceit. Certainly, he has a mandate from his brother cardinals to make changes. We live in a world that has grown forgetful of God in the West, encumbered as we are by our own affluence. It is in the global South where the Gospel's good news to the poor can still be heard. Our new pope must encourage us all to move forward together as Catholics, caring for one another and, through prayer, fashioning a great brotherhood, as he said yesterday standing on the loggia. And, a bit surprised, we all move forward together, first on our knees, and then on our feet. It is an exciting time to be a Catholic Christian and it is my hope that some of the excitement of faith will be reignited by this so obviously humble and simple man, Francis.

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/node/47486>

[2] <http://millennialjournal.com/2013/03/13/pope-francis-i-cardinal-jorge-bergoglio-stands-with-the-poor-quotes-on-justice/>