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Old friend calls Francis a 'person of dialogue'

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today
Pope Francis

Rome — Though it's been just over a month, Francis has already acquired a reputation as the "pope of the telephone." Famously, he's called the superior general of his Jesuit order, his old newspaperman in Buenos Aires to cancel his subscription, even his shoe salesman to arrange some repairs (with no red shoes on the horizon).

Also among those the pope has rung up is an old Jesuit friend in Rome named Fr. Humberto Miguel Yáñez, who was received into the order by then-Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio back in 1975, when the future pope was provincial in Argentina, and who grew up under him as a scholastic during a time when Bergoglio was rector of the main Jesuit institute of philosophy and theology, the "Colegio Máximo" in San Miguel.

Yáñez today heads the moral theology department at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University, and he and the pope spoke on April 5, the Friday after Easter. Yáñez insists there was nothing unusual about it: "This is hardly the first time that Jorge Mario Bergoglio has called me on the telephone, or that I called him," he said.

That penchant for picking up the phone, to hear Yáñez tell it, isn't just a quirk ? it's a hallmark of the kind of man who now sits on the Throne of Peter.

"He's a person of dialogue, and I think all the various sectors of the church will be able to dialogue with him," he said.

During a round table at the Gregorian University on April 19, Yáñez spoke about his experience of the future pope. He told a classic Bergoglio story: After becoming archbishop he was invited to have dinner

at the seminary, and the rector asked if he wanted to say something to the seminarians. Bergoglio proceeded to say, "I'll wash the plates tonight." After that, Yáñez laughingly recounted, it became fashionable for faculty to clean their own dishes.

Yáñez sat down for an interview with NCR on Monday, April 22, to talk about who Bergoglio was back in the 1970s and 1980s, and what that might mean for the kind of pope he may become today.

Though it's been said that Bergoglio ran afoul of liberal Jesuits in the 1970s and 80s because of his opposition to liberation theology, Yáñez insists that's an over-simplification.

"These were years of a strong conflict between left and right, and I'd say that for the most part Bergoglio was in the middle," Yáñez said.

"He was of a more distinctly Argentinian line, both philosophically and theologically. His emphasis was on seeking points of contact with Argentinian culture, and inside that was a strong appreciation of popular religiosity."

Yáñez predicted that Francis' style ? simple, close to the people, and so on ? will continue, and said that if it can be extended to the rest of the church, it "would do a lot of good."

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He's optimistic that may prove to be the case. Over the years, he said, Bergoglio's influence gradually shaped a different culture among the bishops of Argentina, among other things pushing them to be much closer to their own priests.

"The priests who live here in Rome at the Colegio Sacerdotal Argentino tell me their bishops call them on the phone to ask how things are going, or send them e-mails," Yáñez said. "That's something you basically never saw before Bergoglio."

The interview with Yáñez took place in Italian in his office at the Gregorian University. The following is an *NCR* translation.

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People have talked about how Bergoglio lived more like a monk than an archbishop in Buenos Aires. But this wasn't some pie-in-the-sky monk; he knew what was going on, didn't he?

Absolutely. He was like a monk who was fully inserted into real life, at various levels.

When I was in Buenos Aires, one of his priests told me that the big problem with Bergoglio was that you could never lie to him! If he called to ask how things were going in the parish, it was useless to just say "everything's great," because in five minutes he'd ask a question that made it clear he knew what was really going on.

That's true, and he knew what was happening in a surprising variety of situations. I remember that shortly after he became the archbishop of Buenos Aires, he got a phone call from a man who I guess you would say belonged to the upper middle class, who was going through a crisis in his marriage. He called looking for help. Bergoglio asked him to give him a few days to find a priest who could help him. He took it upon himself personally to find a priest, who was a friend of his, who could become a point of reference for this

man. He took a personal interest not just in the poor, but other social classes too. He would also look to find a concrete solution to people's problems, based on his personal relationships.

How did you know Bergoglio?

I met him for the first time in 1975, because he received me into the company as the provincial. He was the provincial while I was in the novitiate from 1978 to 1979, and then he was the rector [of the Philosophical and Theological Faculty of San Miguel] while I was a scholastic from 1982 to 1985. It was the custom in the Jesuits at the time that the formator spoke at least twice a year with everyone who was in formation, but our practice was that we spoke more often than that.

How often did you see Bergoglio when you were a scholastic?

Every day. We didn't have conversations every day, but I'd see him when I came in the door and so on. These two formal meetings every year were to arrive at a sort of balance sheet on how we were doing, but beyond that there were all sorts of daily questions and problems that came up, in terms of our pastoral work, our contact with the poor, and so on, and we'd talk about them all the time.

Did you ever think he could be pope?

I didn't even think about him becoming a bishop! It would have just been impossible. Before March 13, I honestly never thought about it. I'm a little astonished to see how well he's doing it. I knew he was capable, but truly I could never have imagined it.

What was your dominant impression of him at that time?

I saw him as a spiritual father, a man who knew how to form us very well. He gave us freedom, but there were also very clear expectations about coherence in our lives, about apostolic and ministerial commitment, and so on. I recall those times with great satisfaction.

I also remember that he worked a lot with the young people who came to the college. Since he was elected pope, they've all written and talked about it. By now they've all become married and had kids, but they remember being with him back then. At the time, the College of San Miguel was a point of reference in their lives. There was a spirit of openness, of being able to bring others along and to dialogue about things, and I think the great majority of young people in that neighborhood had some contact with the college when they were kids and teenagers and young adults. They all knew Bergoglio.

There's an impression that Bergoglio wasn't well-liked among the more progressive Jesuits in the 1970s and 1980s. What was the reality?

I'd say that was true of some progressive currents, not all. Concretely, we're talking about those currents most linked to a certain version of the theology of liberation, because in reality there are lots of different theologies of liberation. For example, at San Miguel there's [Jesuit Fr.] Juan Carlos Scannone, who represents a distinctly Argentinian version of liberation theology, and he was close to Bergoglio and they worked together. He's a philosopher but also a theologian, and he's well known to Gutierrez, Sobrino, and others in Latin American theology. I don't think there were ever any problems between him and Bergoglio.

These were years of a strong conflict between left and right, and I'd say that for the most part Bergoglio was in the middle. As I said on Friday, he was of a more distinctly Argentinian line, both philosophically and theologically. His emphasis was on seeking points of contact with Argentinian culture, and inside that was a strong appreciation of popular religiosity. That was something the previous generation of priests,

and above all the bishops, looked on with a certain suspicion.

Why?

They considered it a little superficial, and of course there are elements you can't just take at face value. But Bergoglio and his generation appreciated it, in the sense that it was a strong reality present among the people and you could work with it. You shouldn't just discard it, but build on it, purify it, and evangelize it. His idea was to focus on the positive elements of this popular religiosity, because it represents an authentic faith among the simple people. He reminded me of that in his first Angelus address, when he referred to a simple elderly woman who had real insight into the faith ? even if she never went to the Gregorian!

At that time, I think he was a little misunderstood.

By whom?

By a left that was closer to Marxism.

Also among the Jesuits of Argentina?

Among some, yes. There was a certain progressive way of thinking that had problems with him. He wanted to bring back certain elements of our formation that had been left aside after the Second Vatican Council, not for the sake of being pre-conciliar, but because he thought they reflected our reality.

For example?

For instance, he gave us a fixed schedule. When I entered the novitiate, there was no such thing. As rector, he ordered that we should have a schedule. At the time, things like that seemed like going back to the past. Obviously, this isn't the most important thing in the world, and you can discuss whether it was a good idea. That's the sort of thing we're talking about ? a certain order, a certain discipline. He also insisted on integrating manual labor into our formation, which struck me as a realistic way of living poverty.

I'm surprised that would be a problem for those attached to the theology of liberation ?

I'm not talking just about liberation theology, but for all those for whom such things could be interpreted as a step backwards.

Some say that after Bergoglio finished his term as rector, he was sent into exile by progressive Jesuits who didn't like him. Is that how it was?

That's an interpretation.

Is it a correct interpretation?

I don't know. Shortly after he stepped down as rector, he asked permission to seek a doctorate in theology. He went to Germany for a few months, both to learn German and to get some background on Romano Guardini, who was the author he intended to study. Then he came back to Argentina, and lived at Salvador and continued to teach at San Miguel, giving classes in pastoral theology. That lasted a few years, and then he was transferred to Cordoba. Those are the facts, and how you interpret them is something else.

How do you interpret them?

There's no doubt that in the years after he left, the style of formation was different than what it had been under Bergoglio. The new superiors felt it had been a little too conservative, and it needed to be renewed.

Was the transfer to Cordoba seen as a punishment?

No, but perhaps it was understood as a way of distancing him because of the changes in the style of formation. For Jesuits, a transfer can't be understood as a punishment. We're ready to go in any moment. I was transferred a few years ago to the Gregorian, and I didn't think of it as a punishment. If they tell me to go somewhere else tomorrow, I'll go happily, because that's our style.

Is the bottom line that he was seen as more conservative than some, but not an extremist?

More than that, I'd say he's an original figure, and sometimes it's easy to misunderstand him by relying on the paradigms and categories that we're used to. He's got an original personality that doesn't lend itself to these distinctions. He's not an ideological figure.

How did your phone call with the pope come about?

First of all, this is hardly the first time that Jorge Mario Bergoglio has called me on the telephone or that I called him. It's just that now it's a little more difficult for me to do it! What happened is that I sent him a note at Easter time, sending along my best wishes not only for Easter but for his new responsibility. He responded by calling me on my private line in my room in the Jesuit community at the Gregorian, but in those days I was out of town. I later learned he'd called several times and thought maybe I had changed numbers, so he called the general number and then everyone knew the pope had called.

He left a note asking me to call him at the Casa Santa Marta, and the first time I tried they said he was busy, which of course I understood. The second time they told me he was taking a nap, which I frankly found a little strange knowing his rhythms, but okay. Then he called me again the Friday after Easter, and said, 'Finally I get through to you!'

We talked a little bit, a very normal conversation among friends. It was simply the continuation of the relationship we've always had, and for me the nice thing was to realize that he wants to continue to have that relationship. To be honest, I didn't even know what to call him. When I wrote the note, I addressed it to 'Your Holiness Pope Francis,' but then I used the same language I always had.

When he called you, did he call himself 'Jorge'?

Yes, 'Jorge.' He's called several of my friends in Argentina, too. He called one of them to wish him a happy birthday, for instance. He was also very good with a friend of mine who got sick not long ago. He called him during his illness, and when he died, he called to greet the community and his family.

When you talked to him, did he offer you a job in the Vatican?

No! First of all, I don't need one, and he knows it. That's not the kind of thing we talked about.

What kind of pope do you think he'll be?

It's hard to respond to that. What I think is that what we've seen so far will continue, and probably it will go deeper. It'll be interesting to see if his style extends itself to the rest of the church, because I think that

would do a lot of good.

For instance, you can see the influence of his style among the other bishops in Argentina ? simpler, closer to the people, less concerned with matters of structure. These are also bishops, by and large, who are close to their priests. The priests who live here in Rome at the Colegio Sacerdotal Argentino tell me that their bishops call them on the phone to ask how things are going, or send them e-mails. That's something you basically never saw before Bergoglio, that a bishop would take such a personal interest in his priests.

There's a story about Bergoglio from shortly after he became a bishop, when one of the priests had to go into the hospital for an operation. He spent the whole night at the hospital, concerned about the priest's health. That really struck the rest of the clergy, because they'd never seen an archbishop who spent the whole night in the hospital with one of them.

Everybody's talking about a reform of the Roman Curia under this pope. You knew him as a superior at a lower level ? what's his approach to governance?

He's a man of governance, that's for sure. He's a very talented administrator. For instance, when he took over as provincial, our province had a huge debt. This was the era of hyper-inflation in Argentina. Things were bad enough that the province risked losing its patrimony. The debt was in part to expenses related to the [Jesuit-sponsored] University of Salvador. He got the finances in order, and left it in a very sound condition.

How'd he do it?

Honestly, I don't know exactly. I know that he had to sell off some pieces of real estate that belonged to the Jesuits. Also, the university was passed to lay administration during his term. Some were unhappy with that, but it's clear it was a very difficult situation and something had to be done. He's a man capable of making decisions. He also had to deal with a difficult economic situation after he became the archbishop of Buenos Aires, and he was able to put that in order too.

Is it still strange for you to see your old friend dressed all in white?

Of course, I still can't believe it.

Are you worried that the expectations for him may be too high?

Yes, I'm aware of how high the expectations are. That said, I believe he'll lead a good pontificate. He's well-adapted to face the most difficult situations facing the church today. Above all, he's a person of dialogue, and I think all the various sectors of the church will be able to dialogue with him.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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