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A journey to the roots of Francis' papacy

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Say "Aparecida" to the typical Brazilian, and they'll think of Mary as "Our Lady of Aparecida," the national patron, and her famed shrine roughly 150 miles southwest of Rio. It's the largest pilgrimage site in Latin America and one of the biggest in the world, last year drawing an estimated 10 million devotees.

Say "Aparecida" to journalists right now, and it would probably invoke the specter of security threats on the papal trip, since a small and crudely made explosive device was found in a public toilet by a parking lot there Sunday.

Say "Aparecida" to a Catholic insider, however, and the immediate association is instead with a lengthy document produced by the Latin American bishops there in 2007, the last time they met to ponder the state of the church.

Among the continent's Catholics, a place name often evokes an entire theological and ecclesiological vision. Say "Medellín," and insiders think of the 1968 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference and its embrace of liberation theology and the concept of "base ecclesial communities" (small groups of believers who meet together to read Scripture and to discern the signs of the times).

It's "Aparecida" in this sense, as a metaphor for the spirituality and theology expressed by that 2007 document, which best captures Francis' vision for the church. In effect, it's his Magna Carta.

That's in part because then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina, is recognized as one of the primary authors of the document.

The pope's pilgrimage to Aparecida today, therefore, in a sense takes him to a place that symbolically represents the roots of his papacy.

Four big ideas

The official theme of the 2007 gathering was "Disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our people may have life in him." How much the Aparecida document still matters to Francis is clear from the fact that he's presented a copy to every Latin American head of state he's met since becoming pope.

Its heart can be expressed in terms of four big ideas:

1. **Missionary drive**: The church has to take its message to the streets, breaking the traditionally clericalist and passive ethos of Latin American Catholicism. This missionary imperative is not just about rolling back losses to evangelicals and Pentecostals, though that's undeniably part of the background, but it's also about service to humanity and to the environment. From this point of departure, the document calls for a

grand "continental mission."

2. **The "new faces of the poor"**: Giving priority to migrants and refugees, victims of trafficking, the disappeared, HIV/AIDS sufferers, drug addicts, abused women and children, the disabled, the unemployed, street people, landless peasants, indigenous groups, miners and the "technologically illiterate." It's not a stretch to draw a straight line from this aspect of the Aparecida document and multiple aspects of Francis' papacy, such as his insistence en route to Brazil on Monday that World Youth Days should be about the elderly too, because they too are often victims of what he called a "throw-away culture."
3. **Liberation theology**: Although these words never appear in the document, the ghosts of old battles in Latin American Catholicism over the controversial movement born in the 1960s clearly haunt it. In essence, what Aparecida ratified is a now fairly settled consensus: If "liberation theology" means Marxism and a "church from below" in opposition to the hierarchy, then no; if it means being on the side of the poor, then yes. The phrase the bishops settled on was to confirm the "preferential and evangelical option for the poor," which is a slightly more formal version of Francis's now famous longing for a "poor church for the poor."
4. **Popular religion**: The document frequently invokes the importance of popular devotions in Latin American Catholicism, which is hard to overestimate -- the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, for instance, or Our Lady of Aparecida in Brazil. The document says the "soul of the Latin American peoples" is expressed in these traditions, including "love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, pardon and reconciliation," as well as "a God who is close to the poor and those who suffer." This bedrock of popular faith, it says, is a "precious treasure."

Stand back from the details, and here's what you get from the Aparecida document: A strong emphasis on getting "out of the sacristy and into the street"; a special concern for the poor; a moderate, balanced approach to ideological extremes; and a determination to take seriously the religious instincts of ordinary people.

If that seems familiar from Francis' first four and a half months, it's because he put it all down on paper six years ago. At the time, many observers wondered what the results of the document might be; as things turned out, it paved the way for a pope.

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