

In the Footsteps of John XXIII: Pope Francis and the Embodiment of Vatican II

Written by John Borelli

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JOHN BORELLI, MAY 16 2013

From the beginning of his papacy on 13 March 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, has resembled Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, or Pope John XXIII (r. 1958-1963), more than any other pope of the past 50 years. The first resemblance is their age when elected, 76. Roncalli's advanced years were because his electors wanted a short term compromise candidate. He turned 77 less than a month after his election. He reigned less than five years before succumbing to stomach cancer, but the much beloved leader of the Church had an unquestionably enormous impact on the lives of Catholics and, as I shall suggest, the whole world. Three months after his election, he stunned the cardinals who had elected him (and everyone else too), by announcing his intention to summon an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. Only 20 such general councils had met previously, beginning in the fourth century with Nicaea. Pope John's Second Vatican Council renewed the Catholic Church and redirected Catholics, especially towards social justice and dialogue.

Pope Francis, who turns 77 in December, is indeed a man of social justice and dialogue, thoroughly formed in the principles and teachings of Pope John's Vatican II. Francis' predecessor, Benedict XVI, was already 78 when he was elected in 2005, and his predecessor, John Paul II, reigned 23 years when he died at 85. Only those 23 and older today have known a pope younger than 70. Yet, commentators judge the reign of Benedict XVI, who resigned on 28 February 2013 to become the first "pope emeritus" ever, as a continuation of the long papacy of John Paul II. Francis, rumored to have placed second behind Benedict XVI in 2005, is already seen as a change in direction and a correction of the immediate past, more like John XXIII than the others.[i]

A Change of Name, a Change for the Church

Angelo Roncalli signaled big changes ahead when he chose "John" and broke a 175 year pattern of customary names like Pius, Leo, Gregory and Benedict. Not only that, but John had not been chosen in five and a half centuries, probably because of the dubious reputation of the previous John XXIII, over whom the Council of Constance exerted its authority in 1415 by forcing him to resign, and eventually removing him from office. The deposed John XXIII was then officially deemed an anti-pope in 1947.[ii] Bergoglio broke an even larger pattern because no one had ever felt worthy or brave enough to choose Francis, a universally beloved 13th century saint, distinguished for his poverty, humility and simplicity of service to those in need. Jorge Bergoglio, the first non-European in 13 centuries, well before Francis of Assisi lived, could perhaps more easily risk taking Francis for his name than his European predecessors. Truly, he addressed that risk directly in his first appearance on the balcony of St. Peter's after the election by humbly kneeling down and asking the crowd's blessing before dispensing his own.

Unlike his ill-fated and deposed predecessor by the same name, the real Pope John XXIII's Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) followed his lead and changed Catholicism in remarkably modern and pastorally forward ways. Both who claimed the name John XXIII had created a groundbreaking opportunity for conciliar leadership by the bishops of the church, in the earlier instance by their breaking with the pope to reform the papacy itself in exerting their authority against his, and in the latter instance, in the great desire of the huge majority of bishops to follow the pope in reforming the church.

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From the first moment Pope John XXIII stated his intention to call a council (25 January 1959), he declared that he wanted it to be “an invitation to the separated communities to seek again that unity for which so many souls are longing in these days throughout the world.”[iii] In 1959, Pope John had in mind dialogue to end separation among Christians. By 1960, he added “something for Jews” to this initiative for dialogue. By 1964, and after Pope John’s death, the 2400 plus “council fathers” decided to include interreligious dialogue, especially with Muslims, in the church’s new and essential ministry of dialogue with others. Pope Francis has thoroughly embraced these new ministries.

On 22 March 2013, just nine days into his papacy, Pope Francis received the diplomatic corps accredited to the Vatican and expressed how greatly he “appreciated the presence of so many civil and religious leaders from the Islamic world” at his installation mass three days earlier. He also declared his intention “to intensify dialogue among the various religions” and that he was “thinking particularly of dialogue with Islam.”[iv] Bergoglio is the first pope in 50 years who was nowhere near the council when it met in Rome in the 1960s, but he is thoroughly steeped in the life of dialogue fostered by the Vatican II church. Keep in mind too that his model, St. Francis of Assisi, pioneered dialogue by ignoring the call of Pope Innocent III for universal support for the Fifth Crusade and literally distancing himself from the ecclesiastical authorities accompanying its army, crossing military lines and meeting several days in dialogue with Sultan Malik al-Kamil. The episode has enjoyed imaginative and scholarly revival in recent years.[v] St. Francis of Assisi is a patron saint of dialogue, and Pope John Paul II chose his city of Assisi to host the three interreligious days of prayers for peace in 1986, 1993, and 2002, the latter in response to the events of the previous September 11.

Reading Pope Francis

After Francis’ election, journalists and other enthusiasts scrambled to read the one available, published book by the new pope, *Sobre il Cielo y la Tierra*, hastily translated into English in a month’s time and published as *On Heaven and Earth*. [vi] The book is actually a co-authored dialogue with Abraham Skorka, a scientist and professor, rector of a rabbinic seminary and rabbi of a community in Buenos Aires. Recently, Rabbi Skorka told the readers of *The Tablet*, “I think he’s going to change everything that he believes needs to be changed,” and added, “He is not a person to take on this role in a passive way. He’s not a person who stays quiet when he knows that there is work to be done.”[vii]

Such was the way John XXIII acted too, beloved still by Catholics who recall those heady days of Vatican II and its aftermath. He was the first pope to address an encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, [viii] to “all men of good will.” It followed six months after the Cuban Missile Crisis and the near miss of global nuclear war. “Peace on Earth,” promulgated on 11 April 1963, just 50 years ago, addressed human relations, relations among states, and world peace from the fundamental teaching of human dignity—a philosophical principle that appealed to atheists and a theological principle acknowledged by believers. The encyclical followed a revolutionary approach to world peace and served also as the good pope’s last will and testament. He died just six weeks later, but his encyclical on peace was well received in the Soviet Union and the United States. Pope John’s impact was irreversible on the papacy, the Catholic Church, and the world.

His council, Vatican II, produced sixteen documents, some as equally revolutionary as the encyclical for Catholics, other Christians, and certainly Jews, Muslims and many others. Dialogue with others, believers, agnostics, and atheists, was now on the agenda of the Catholic Church, and it was to be integrated into the lives of Catholics. Word is that Pope Francis spent an hour after his installation in private conversation with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos, the head of Eastern Orthodoxy. First it was unprecedented that the Greek Orthodox Patriarch would attend the installation of a pope.[ix] If they did speak in dialogue for an hour, then they had much to review on managing a far-flung and large communion of Christians. But, perhaps they also raised the idea of celebrating together, next January 5, the 50th anniversary of the historic embrace between Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, Pope John’s successor, on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem. Francis has already shown that he likes such big public gestures to encourage good will.

Stories and testimonies of his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires have circulated quickly since his election. One in

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particular mentioned how he knelt down at a huge public event and received a blessing from Luis Palau, an Evangelical preacher and television celebrity.[x] That is normally something Catholic bishops do not do, but Francis has the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II. He has the spirit of Catholic-Jewish dialogue as evidenced throughout his book and the testimony of Jewish leaders. He has the spirit of interreligious dialogue, not only by his own remarks but also from the testimony of others.

The lack of demonstrations is also good testimony, for instance, when he chose to wash the feet of two Muslims on Holy Thursday, the day when Christians celebrate Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at their last meal together before his death. Christians also commemorate the Eucharistic liturgy on that day. The first extraordinary fact about this incident is that he washed the feet of women, which no pope in memory has done. Not only this, he chose to wash the feet of women and Muslims that day among the twelve prisoners at the Casal del Marmo detention center, not the usual place popes have spent Holy Thursday. Had his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, washed the feet of Muslims, especially touching a Muslim woman's foot, at a major public liturgy, there could have been violent demonstrations and protests because his negative references to Muhammad and Islam in a 2006 speech in Germany were not easily forgotten by Muslims around the world. Pope Francis comes with a good reputation, especially from the Jews, Muslims, and other Christians in Argentina. And, on Good Friday, the day after the washing of the feet, the press reported that Pope Francis praised the "friendship of so many Muslim brothers." [xi]

Under the previous pope, Benedict XVI, the office for interreligious dialogue in the Vatican had diminished in importance. There is even good evidence that he wanted to suppress it.[xii] In the book with Rabbi Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, the future Pope Francis says, God "respects the culture of all peoples." He later says about dialogue that it "is born from a respectful attitude toward the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say" and also, "we can make room in our heart for their point of view, their opinion and their proposals." [xiii] With Francis, there seems to be a new spirit alive in those offices in the Vatican responsible for dialogue. We can expect a renewed emphasis on dialogue as central to Catholic identity, which was defined by Vatican II fifty years ago. It will be a dialogue that not only listens and seeks mutual understanding, but also a dialogue oriented towards alleviating the problems of poverty, distribution of wealth, and other threats to peace.

Humility, Poverty and Promoting Social Justice

John XXIII arose from humble origins in a village near Bergamo, Italy, and never forgot his origins. He secretly got his chauffeur to slip him away from the Vatican and move around Rome for a surprise visit with a dear friend in the hospital. Pope John seemed to interact best in private conversations and giving encouragement with simplicity and humility in contrast to the high pageantry surrounding the papacy. Pope Francis shows the same preferences. The day after his election, he insisted on paying his bill in person at the *pension* where he had stayed before joining the other cardinals at the *Domus Sanctae Marthae* for the conclave. He makes his own calls. Rabbi Skorka mentioned two since the election. The receptionist at the Jesuit headquarters reported how stunned he was when the caller identified himself as "Francis, Pope Francis." [xiv] The new pope has not yet taken up residence in the palace but remains at *Sanctae Marthae* for the present. Most likely, he will want to meet everyone who works in the palace first and greet them as equals. He does not stand on ceremony, prefers a simple style of liturgy, and has tongue tied conservative apologists thus far. Above all, his choice of "Francis" for his name and the stories known about him living a less than princely life of a bishop indicate that he is personally dedicated to the social justice teaching of the Catholic Church. Indeed, he told representatives of nuns from all over the world, "Theoretical poverty doesn't do anything." [xv]

Church historians place the beginning of modern Catholic social teaching with the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on the rights of labor by Pope Leo XIII, which drew attention to the negative effects of poverty and injustice from industrialization and urbanization.[xvi] The body of social teaching grew and expanded through the twentieth century. The final document of Vatican II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), was and remains the strongest and most authoritative endorsement of Catholic teaching on social justice.[xvii] This teaching is often called the Church's "best kept secret." [xviii] It will be less so under Pope Francis.

Pope Francis is also the first Jesuit ever elected pope. From their founding in the 16th century, Jesuits have

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committed themselves to serving the mission of the church. Nowadays, that means full and complete commitment to dialogue and to social justice. All the signs are positive that Pope Francis will be a shining example and beacon of hope for those who measure their lives by these two principles: dialogue and social justice.

In his book with Rabbi Skorpa, the future Pope Francis remembers when he was five or six and accompanying his grandmother when two Salvation Army women passed by. He asked her if they were nuns. “No,” she replied, “they are Protestants, but they are good.” Though he was raised in a country inextricably linked with Catholicism and was propagandized that all Protestants were going to hell, Bergoglio, later as archbishop of the capital city, praised his grandmother’s “wisdom of true religion.” She recognized that “they were good women who did good things,” despite “the Puritan formation” provided to Catholics to feel exclusively superior to all other Christians.[xix] There is much to like about Pope Francis, especially if he continues on the present course implementing the initiatives of Vatican II.

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John Borelli has served as Special Assistant for Interreligious Initiatives to President John J. DeGioia of Georgetown University since 2004. Prior to that, he was on the staff of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for sixteen years promoting ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. He received his doctorate in history of religions and theology from Fordham University in 1976, and held full-time academic teaching positions in New York, first at Fordham and then at the College of Mount St. Vincent, before moving to Washington in 1987. He was a consultant to the Vatican for seventeen years.

[i] I have left off this list of popes since John XXIII, Paul VI (r. 1963-1978) and John Paul I, who reigned only a month in 1978 and did not survive long enough to have “a papacy.” Paul VI is a complicated figure, who brought Vatican II to a successful conclusion and began its implementation. Many were disappointed at his death that he had not gone far enough with the new initiatives. Before 1963, no one had chosen “Paul” for a papal name since the 17th century.

[ii] In 1947, the *Annuario Pontificio*, the annual listing of all popes, current bishops and most anyone who has anything to do officially with the Vatican, for the first time identified John XXIII, who resigned in 1415, as an antipope. Thus, when Angelo Roncalli chose “John” for his name in 1958, he became John XXIII and not John XXIV. See also, John W. O’Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) 24-25.

[iii] John Borelli, “Vatican II: Preparing the Catholic Church for Dialogue.” *Origins. CNS Documentary Service*, 42, 11 (August 2, 2012): 162-174. The best single volume on Vatican II is John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

[iv] Pope Francis’ address to the diplomatic corps is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130322_corpo-diplomatico_en.html.

[v] *In the Spirit of Francis and the Sultan* by George Dardess and Marvin L. Krier Mich (Orbis Books, 2001); “In the Footprints of Francis and the Sultan: A Model for Peacemaking,” Free Resource Material: www.FranciscanMedia.org/francissultan.

[vi] *Sobre el cielo y la tierra* (Editorial Sudamericana, 2010), *On Heaven and Earth* (Image, 2013).

[vii] The Tablet Interview, “Jews now have a good partner in the Vatican,” *The Tablet* (20 April 2013) 6-7.

[viii] *Pacem In Terris* is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html.

[ix] See “The Extraordinary Historical Significance of His All-Holiness’ Presence at Pope Francis’ Installation as Bishop of Rome” at <http://listserv.goarch.org/scripts/wa.exe?A2=ind1303&L=ARCHDIOCESE&P=R13610&1=ARC>

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[x] Melissa Steffan, "Luis Palau: Why It Matters that Pope Francis Drinks Mate with Evangelicals, *Christianity Today*, 14 March 2013; available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march-web-only/luis-palau-pope-francis-drinks-mate-evangelicals-bergoglio.html>. He also mentions this or a similar incident, it is not clear, in *On Heaven and Earth*, p. 220, and how a local magazine reacted with the headline, "The Archbishop commits the sin of apostasy."

[xi] For example, see Nicole Winfield, "Pope extends hand of friendship to 'Muslim brothers and sisters' during Good Friday rite," *Associated Press*, 29 March 2013; available from

<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/03/29/pope-extends-hand-friendship-to-muslim-brothers-and-sisters-during-good-friday/#ixzz2TTSFpkc8>.

[xii] I have reviewed this situation in several places: "Of a different order," *The Tablet* (August 21, 2010): 9-10; "Prevention is better than cure," *The Tablet* (February 28, 2009): 14-15; "Judgment at Regensburg," *New Theology Review* 20, 3 (August 2007): 44-54; and "A Necessary Dialogue," *America* (February 5, 2007): 10-13.

[xiii] *On Heaven and Earth* (Image, 2013), xiv.

[xiv] Joshua J. McElwee, "Pope shocks Jesuits with unexpected phone call," *National Catholic Reporter*, 15 March 2013; available from <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-shocks-jesuits-unexpected-phone-call>.

[xv] "Careerists Make a Great Loss to the Church," *Vatican Information Service*, 8 May 2013; available from http://www.vis.va/vissolr/index.php?vi=it&dl=62d95244-d130-5fc1-88a1-518a440a2d1d&dl_t=text/xml&dl_a=y&ul=1&ev=1.

[xvi] *Rerum Novarum* is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html.

[xvii] The "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" is available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[xviii] See Thomas Massaro, S.J., *Living Justice* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), p. 9.

[xix] *On Heaven and Earth*, pp. 72-3.

About the author:

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