

THE OUTSIDER



Pope Francis and His Battle
to Reform the Church

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Introduction

On the evening of March 13, 2013, I stood in St. Peter's Square on a drizzly evening with thousands of others looking up at the balcony on the facade of the Renaissance-era basilica.

We were waiting, with bated breath, to hear who had been elected as the new pope. The white smoke had gone up, and the news was imminent.

Cardinal Jean Louis-Tauran, the Church's foremost expert on interreligious dialogue and weighed down with Parkinson's disease, walked out onto the balcony of the basilica to declare "Habemus papam" (We have a pope). The cardinals, he said, had chosen Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the 266th successor of St. Peter.

The reaction around me in the crowd was one of surprise. "Who is he?" I heard people saying. I was also stunned. Although I knew that Cardinal Bergoglio, the archbishop of Buenos Aires, was the unofficial runner-up of the 2005 conclave, most journalists had written him off on the grounds of age. He was seventy-six and past the retirement age of a bishop. A Jesuit, who had never lived or worked in Rome, and rarely traveled outside his diocese, he was a complete outsider.

But given the crisis facing the Church, perhaps I should have seen this coming. Hours before, a colleague from *The Tablet* and I had shared lunch with Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, a longtime friend of Bergoglio.

Over spaghetti Amatriciana and a glass of Montepulciano, the late English cardinal hinted to us that the next pope might come from Latin America. I responded by offering up the names of various candidates from that part of the world, but he didn't think any of them stood much of a chance. I didn't mention Bergoglio.

The truth is that for much of the world, the election of Pope Francis, the first Roman pontiff from Latin America, the first Jesuit, and the first to call himself after St. Francis of Assisi, caught most people unaware.

In this book I seek to understand what followed since that evening on March 13, 2013, when the pope made his first tentative steps onto the balcony, offering a nervy half-smile and a wave.

"Buonasera," he greeted the crowd, as if he was the new parish priest introducing himself for the first time, but also looking disarmingly like the actor Michel Piccoli, who played the pope who runs away after his election in the film *Habemus Papam*, directed by Nanni Moretti.

From that moment, I could see this was going to be a different sort of pontificate, one that would start to move away from the institutional, monarchical model of the papacy and seek to apply the simplicity of the gospel to the role. He was the outsider pope who would associate the papacy with the outsiders of this world: the poor, the discarded, the forgotten.

Jorge Bergoglio was not elected pope with a manifesto or a grand plan. The first pope from the Global South had arrived in Rome for the 2013 conclave with a return ticket to Buenos Aires and a small bag. He had no network of Rome-based establishment contacts to push his candidacy, and he never expected to be elected. The pope was armed only with the tool that had guided

him into the chair of St. Peter: a rocklike faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In these pages, I offer my reading of the Francis pontificate, a papacy that rejects ideologies but comes with a mandate to evangelize and to remain open to God's surprises.

My book seeks to tell the big story of this pontificate. It is one that examines why a prophetic and bold pope, widely considered to be the Catholic Church's best asset in helping repair its battered credibility, has been the subject of vicious and sustained opposition.

The unprecedented, vitriolic attacks to which Francis has been subjected reveal the pivotal tension that has emerged during this papacy, and it is one that has its roots in the gospel.

I argue that the resistance against the man, whom Catholics believe to be the vicar of Christ on earth, comes from modern-day "scribes and Pharisees," those who attacked and criticized Jesus for his radical life and message.

Like Jesus, Francis has managed to outrage and anger senior figures in the religious establishment; like Jesus, the pope has won himself loyal followers but also aroused equally strong opposing forces; and, like Jesus, he faces misunderstanding and unfair accusations.

But this pope stubbornly refuses to follow the logic of the world or to turn back the clock to a mythical golden era in the Church's past. He wants a papacy modeled less on the power structures of a modern-day King Herod and closer to the tender vulnerability of the Christ child.

The first Latin American pope has tried to better connect the office of the Roman pontiff to the model of a servant-leader, to open the windows of the Church establishment and its structures to the gentle breeze of the Gospel, which moved across the waters of Lake Galilee.

Much has been written about the polyhedric personality of Francis, a complex figure who, one of his friends told me, is

difficult to understand from a single perspective. He is the pope of mercy who will excoriate clerics for personal ambition; he's a leader who improvises in public and a disciplined administrator who manages a dizzying workload. He says, "Who am I to judge?" but with the instincts of an old Jesuit superior who expects obedience.

This book is not a biography of the pope but an attempt to understand the pontificate, something that I have been able to watch and report on closely over the last five years. Throughout this time, I have met the pope on several occasions, traveled with him around the world, and observed him up close in a whole array of different contexts.

His papacy is not the personal crusade of one individual, but an attempt to set the groundwork for ongoing renewal and reform of the Church in the twenty-first century. Francis was not elected, as some have erroneously argued, to reform the Roman Curia—the Church's civil service—but with a much broader mission, and his efforts must be read against the horizon of reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the historic gathering of bishops that set out the mission for the contemporary Church.

The council sought to move the Church away from a fortress mentality, instead calling forth missionary disciples, ready to evangelize the world and enter into dialogue with contemporary culture.

The reforms of the council were vigorously embraced in Francis's home continent, Latin America, and within that context the pope ascended to the chair of St. Peter. His wish is to implement Vatican II fully.

In 2015 my family and I moved to Rome so that I could become *The Tablet's* permanently accredited Vatican correspondent. This meant uprooting ourselves for some years from the familiar, comfortable order of London and embracing the beautiful chaos of the Eternal City.

For Francis, a bit of a mess is no bad thing. He prefers plates to fly in disagreement within the Church than for a false sense of calm to take over along with that static, nauseous denial about problems that must be faced.

I have witnessed the changes he has introduced on a daily basis. Under his pontificate, a debate has opened up; discussions previously considered closed have restarted, and a renewed way of being the Church is coming into fruition. Rather than a papacy where edicts are issued from on high and the people blindly obey, this pope wants a Church where people, priests, and bishops “walk together” in facing problems.

And the difficulties are plentiful.

While this pope has won admirers from around the world, powerful groups from both inside and outside of the Church are furious with him. All popes face criticisms and difficulties. The internal resistance that Francis is encountering has parallels with the opposition faced by other reforming popes, such as Paul VI, who was charged with steering the Church through the conclusion of Vatican II and the implementation of its reforms.

But everyone agrees, whether they are on the so-called conservative or liberal end of the spectrum, that the open opposition against this pontificate has not been seen in centuries, if ever. A timeline of the opposition to him in this book details more than one hundred instances where Francis has faced hostility or attempts to undermine his authority. Not all of the incidents can be recorded, but taken together they show how the worldly and clerical establishments, whether from Donald Trump and Fox News, to conservative cardinals and an influential Catholic media network, have been engaged in guerrilla warfare against this pontificate.

They are driven by a prevailing sense that the Church led by a bishop from Buenos Aires is opposed to their interests, and the opposition has only ramped up with time.

Opponents of Francis don't like an informal style they see as “un-papal.” Some of them oppose his critiques of capitalism,

his call to protect the environment, his opening of the door to the divorced and remarried to receive communion, or his steely determination to replace an obsession with institutional security and doctrinal purity with an emphasis on evangelization as the top priority.

One of the pope's pet peeves is the phrase "It's always been done this way." He repeatedly criticizes Catholics who place rigid adherence to a rules-based version of faith ahead of seeing Christ in the poor and the suffering. For those who like an unchanging palette of black and white on their religion menu, Francis's willingness to embrace the gray of life is troubling.

In August 2018 the opposition against him bubbled to the surface in the shape of an audacious, half-cocked coup against his papacy. It came through a former Vatican ambassador to Washington, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, who used the pope's trip to Ireland as the moment to release a dossier calling on Francis to resign for allegedly mishandling sexual misconduct claims against a senior cardinal.

His *j'accuse* against the pope, released through select conservative Catholic media networks, was a long diatribe against allies of Francis as well as gays in the Church.

In his testimony, Viganò tried to pin onto Francis past failings of the Vatican in regard to sexual abuse. His testimony caused significant damage to the pope in the United States, while placing relations between Rome and America under strain.

The opponents are also seeking to use Benedict XVI to undermine Francis, by placing the two popes in disagreement over how to handle the sexual abuse crisis.

In Rome and in parts of the United States, the pope is faced with numerous high-ranking Church officials who are either openly in revolt against his papacy or spend their time whispering and plotting against him.

Away from the Vatican bubble, some in the Church have entered into alliances with political figures, such as Steve Bannon,

President Donald Trump's former chief strategist, and Matteo Salvini, Italy's deputy prime minister, to try and thwart the pope.

Francis, who has repeatedly urged the world to build bridges rather than walls, to push for dialogue and unity instead of division, has become a prime target for supporters of the Trumpian, populist politics gaining traction across Europe.

Channeling the spirit of his namesake St. Francis of Assisi, who appealed for peace during the Muslim-Christian conflicts of the thirteenth century, Francis has made interfaith dialogue a key priority, and he has become a respected voice across the Muslim and Arab worlds for refusing to link the faith of Islam to terrorism.

This is the pope who increasingly focuses east—to China, Japan, and Korea, where he sees the future of the Church emerging. He tries to encourage those “small flocks” in places such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Myanmar, where the Church punches above its weight in terms of service through its schools, hospitals, and parishes.

He desires to support the peripheries, the places where the Church is working with vulnerable, marginalized, and forgotten people. He brought twelve Syrian refugees back to the Vatican on his papal plane after a trip to Lesbos; he's opened up the Sistine Chapel to the homeless, and has hosted lunches for thousands of homeless and underprivileged people inside the Vatican's marbled rooms.

These are much more than headline-grabbing moves by a pope intent on bringing about a “poor Church for the poor”: they go to the heart of how Christians in the twenty-first century should act, and how they can live out the gospel. The legacy of these actions is that whoever comes after Francis will find it hard to clock back without seeming to undermine a predecessor, something all popes seek to avoid.

With this pontificate the curtains have been drawn back, the windows of the Church have been opened, and fresh air is blowing

in. One of the pope's close advisers, Honduran cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, put it to me this way: "The Church does not have a reverse gear." The battle inside the Catholic Church of the early twenty-first century is whether anti-Francis conservatives can get their hand on the gearshift.