



IN THE NEWS

from *www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com*

FEATURED: OCTOBER 2013

Pope Francis

Introduction

When Roman Catholic cardinals elected Argentinian Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the new pontiff in March 2013, more than one billion Roman Catholics worldwide embraced him as Pope Francis I. Over the first months of his tenure, Pope Francis has shown himself to be a compassionate pastor and savvy communicator who easily mingles with crowds and has rock-star popularity with young people.¹ The new pope even has a Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/Pontifex>).

Francis has made headlines with liberal-sounding statements about homosexuality, abortion, and papal infallibility, among other topics. Roman Catholics have been debating the future course of the Roman Catholic Church, based on early trends in the new pope's actions and statements. What might these trends mean for Catholics but also for people outside the Catholic Church? Why should Protestants care?

Why Should Protestants Care What the Pope Says?

Historically, many Protestants have had a negative view of the Pope. This conflict had its beginnings with the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe, when violence marked the struggle for religious dominance and political power between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant reformers.

The Pope and Peter's Authority

In Roman Catholicism, the pope's authority comes directly from the apostle Peter. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (16:18–19).

Still today, in some quarters of the world, hostility and violence continue to mar relationships between Roman Catholics and Protestants, especially where long-standing political and economic inequalities parallel religious conflict, as they have in Ireland. In the United States, Protestant prejudice against Roman Catholicism came to light during the nineteenth century, with Protestant marginalization of Italian and Irish Catholic immigrants, and it surfaced again during the presidential campaign and office of John F. Kennedy (the first Roman Catholic president) in the mid-twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, many American Protestants continue to harbor suspicion of "popery," a derogatory reference to Roman Catholic practices, belief systems, and papal authority.

In the News studies are free to all registered users of The Thoughtful Christian. Copyright © 2013 www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com.

Following are several reasons why Protestants should care what the pope says:

1. *The pope is a world leader in a global community.* When the pope speaks or acts, the world's news organizations report on it, bloggers and columnists comment on it, and people discuss it. The pope stands among the policy makers, both secular and sacred, who contribute to global dialogue and action (or in some cases, inaction).

2. *The pope heads the world's largest religious body.* As the current successor to St. Peter as Bishop of Rome, the pope is pastor to a flock of over a billion Roman Catholics (representing one-seventh of the world's population), a cohesive religious body larger than any other in the world.

3. *The pope is the most visible representative of Christianity.* Protestants are Christians, members of "the church universal," or the "catholic church" with a small *c*. If we honor our roots among the first disciples of Jesus, Protestants must acknowledge kinship with Roman Catholics. As the most visible and recognizable representative of the Christian faith (Catholic or Protestant), the pope is the face that many non-Christians identify with Christianity.

Papal Authority and Jesuit Discernment

People expect the pope to . . . well . . . pontificate. Pope Francis has so far evaded strict classification as a modernist or traditionalist. While the new pope has shocked the world with liberal-sounding and open-minded comments, he has maintained

Roman Catholicism by the Numbers

The Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project reports that 74 percent of the United States is Christian: 23 percent are Roman Catholic and 51 percent are Protestant (<http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>). Worldwide, 2.2 billion people are Christians (32 percent of the world's population), with half (about 1.1 billion) representing Roman Catholicism (<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-christians/>).

a conservative line in other matters.² When asked about papal infallibility, he states that "infallibility" refers to the combined faith of the faithful. In making decisions, Francis "thinks with the church," meaning the whole people, not just the hierarchy.³ At the same time, Francis has not overturned Catholic doctrines and says that his leadership style is not populist. Is the pope a slippery character, or is his audience simply unaccustomed to witnessing papal discernment in process?

Pope Francis, who is a Jesuit, follows the Ignatian spiritual practice of "discernment," a process of prayerful, open-ended thinking. The Jesuits (Society of Jesus or "SJ") were founded in the sixteenth century by Ignatius of Loyola, a former soldier who became an academic and founder of the Jesuits. The Jesuit order combines the military model (styling themselves as soldiers for Christ) in their mission work, the academic values of higher education, and the spiritual disciplines of contemplation and prayer.

At the heart of Jesuit teaching is the belief that God is intimately active in the world and in every human life. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* outline a process of prayerful discernment, through which humans seek for God's guidance in their everyday lives and find inspiration to better serve God in the world.⁴ The Jesuit community is well known for its commitment to spiritual direction (helping others prayerfully discern God's guidance in their lives), support of advanced education, and missionary efforts to make a difference in the world.

That Pope Francis cannot be classified easily as liberal or conservative may strike some observers as evasive, indicative of a tactic more worthy of a politician than a pope, but the pope's approach to decision making may merely reflect the Jesuit process of discernment, the practice of thinking and rethinking until the right course of action comes clear. "I am always wary of . . . the first thing that comes to my mind . . . the wisdom of discernment redeems the necessary ambiguity of life and helps us find the most appropriate means, which

do not always coincide with what looks great and strong,” the pope said.⁵ “The Jesuit always thinks, again and again, looking at the horizon toward which he must go, with Christ at the center.”⁶

Pope Francis describes another facet of Jesuit leadership as “magnanimity,” an attitude of forgiveness and benevolence instead of strict authoritarianism. Indeed, Francis has gone so far as to say that he does not intend, in every case, to impose church doctrine at the expense of “losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.”⁷ The pope has said that he wants to make changes in Roman Catholic hierarchies and in so doing allow for renewal of the church.⁸ Though Francis is not breaking with the Roman Catholic Church, as did the Protestant reformers, he is questioning the efficacy of rigid adherence to doctrines that threaten to turn people away from the gospel. After a World Youth Day rally in Rio de Janeiro, Pope Francis said, “I want to see the church get closer to the people. I want to get rid of clericalism, the mundane, this closing ourselves off within ourselves, in our parishes, schools or structures.”⁹

How likely is it that Francis will make good on his statements about reform and renewal, and what are the implications for the Roman Catholic Church, world politics, and Christianity? Depending on your point of view, the new pope is a breath of fresh air, a threat, or a disappointment; this range of assessments is par for the course for most world leaders who are new to their office, when expectations run high. Only time will tell what changes the pope can manage to effect.

The rest of this discussion will look at some specific issues facing the Catholic Church and the pope’s response to them, so far.

Sexual Abuse Scandal

Over the last few years, the revelation of hundreds of cases of child sexual abuse by priests has submerged the Roman Catholic Church in scandal. The enormity of the scandal indicates that the church hierarchy has been looking the other way

for years. While the Roman Catholic Church has paid out millions of dollars in settlements to victims, the church as an institution has failed to minister to the victims, discipline the offenders, or put strict laws into place to prevent further molestation. The church’s apparent attempts at a cover-up has undermined the church’s moral authority and people’s trust in their church leadership.

Former Pope Benedict never addressed the issue publicly until after he had stepped down from office, and he denies any attempt to cover up the abuse.¹⁰ Many Roman Catholics have high hopes that Pope Francis will do something constructive toward healing victims of past abuses (which would involve admitting the crimes), disciplining offenders, and preventing further abuse. But so far, victims and their advocates have been disappointed.

At a World Youth Day rally in July, an ideal setting for addressing the sexual abuse issue, Francis made only an oblique reference to victims’ suffering, blaming it on a “lack of consistency of Christians and ministers of the Gospel.”¹¹ He has done nothing to punish perpetrators, and with the exception of imposing stricter rules on the constituency of the Vatican itself, he has not put legislation in place.

Focus on Poverty and Injustice

Pope Francis has made it very clear that a large part of his papal agenda is to advocate for the poor of the world. He took the name “Francis” in honor of the St. Francis of Assisi, a thirteenth-century friar who left a life of wealth and privilege to live in poverty and devoted his life to ministry to the poor.¹² As a cardinal in Argentina, then Cardinal Bergoglio (Francis) showed his allegiance with the poor by living modestly and riding public transportation. As pope, he lives in a guest residence rather than in the papal palace, mingles with crowds of people, and condemns the world’s preoccupation with wealth and status that tyrannize the poor.¹³ But has the pope always been an activist against injustice?

Critics have brought to light evidence that during the 1970's Argentine "Dirty War," when Jorge Bergoglio (as Francis was then known) was a newly appointed leader of the Jesuits in Argentina, he betrayed to the military junta some Jesuit priests who were working with the poor in the slums. Documents show that the future pope may have notified the military authorities, who imprisoned and tortured two Jesuit priests on suspicion of collaboration with Marxist revolutionaries. Other reports indicate that Bergoglio had knowledge of the "disappearance" (kidnapping and execution) of revolutionaries and sanctioned incidents of resettling their children with "good families."¹⁴ Pope Francis has avoided addressing these allegations directly, but he did admit that in his early days as a Jesuit leader in Argentina, he made "authoritarian decisions" that created "problems," and that is why he takes more time to discern before making decisions today.¹⁵

Critics concede that Francis was very young at the time of the Argentine Dirty War, just four years out of seminary, and he did not yet know how to stand up to the corruption and cruelty all around him. Now that Francis is a mature and seasoned leader in a position of much greater power and authority, perhaps he will be able to make good on his promises to aid the poor and advocate for the reversal of unjust power structures.

Sexuality and Gender

Pope Francis has made headlines for his statements about the church's obsession with homosexuality, abortion, and other issues of gender and sexuality. The pope said that the church's greater mission is to become "a home for all," and when asked about homosexuality, he astonished reporters with the comment, "Who am I to judge?"¹⁶

Observers have been quick to point out that Francis' comments seem to open a conversation that his predecessors have kept firmly closed, and yet at the same time, he has not overtly questioned Roman Catholic doctrine on these issues. What he has done

is prioritize a more welcoming and accepting attitude over a focus on exclusion. While this approach is indeed a huge evolution in papal attitudes toward controversial issues of gay rights, abortion, and other matters, nothing has truly changed. Still, the pope's remarks about the church's obsessive focus on certain controversial issues and his call for viewing a much bigger picture of Christian concern is refreshing and may have reverberations in the Protestant dialogue on these issues as well.

Ordination of Women

Another hot issue between conservative and liberal Catholics is the ordination of women to the priesthood. Pope Francis, who on several other issues has come across as open-minded and affirming, surprised liberal Catholics by saying that "the door is closed" to ordination of women,¹⁷ and in September 2013, he excommunicated an Australian priest who supported the ordination of women and gays.¹⁸ While Francis affirms that women have important roles in the church, he says that the priesthood is not one of them.

Robert McClory, Professor Emeritus of Journalism at Northwestern University, points out that the pope's statement seems final but that it might actually signal the possibility of future change in policy. McClory writes, "Was that a ringing endorsement of the male-only priesthood or simply a recognition of the way things are at present in the church? Was it a betrayal of the hopes of the millions . . . or the only thing he could say without arousing the combined fury of one side or the other?" McClory has no illusions that the ordination of women will happen in Francis' lifetime, but he points out that Francis mentioned a "closed door," not a brick wall. "Anyone can open the door with the right key," McClory says. "And in the tradition of Catholicism, who holds the keys?"¹⁹

Conclusion

With his controversial statements on issues of sexuality and gender, his ambiguity and seeming

avoidance on taking a course of action on the sexual abuse scandal, his disappointing (for liberals) stance on the ordination of women, and marred track record on standing for justice, Pope Francis has provided a great deal of room for dialogue and discussion of the future of the Catholic Church and possibilities for its impact on the world and Christendom. On the one hand, the new pope has made shockingly unexpected and open comments about issues that once were rigidly off-limits, while on the other hand, he has toed the doctrinal line. Like any world leader and religious leader, he must walk a precarious line between liberal and conservative, reform and tradition. Pope Francis said he learned from mistakes he made as a very young Jesuit leader in Argentina.²⁰ His lifelong practice of Ignatian discernment, coupled with his capacity for critical thinking and pastoral care, auger an unpredictable but careful course in months and years to come. Francis is a complex pope in a complex world.

Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Dias, "Like a Rock Star, Pope Francis Calls For 'Disorder' in Rio," July 26, 2013, <http://swampland.time.com/2013/07/26/like-a-rock-star-pope-francis-calls-for-disorder-in-rio/#ixzz2gZgDlpjm>.
2. Erasmus blog, "Beyond Liberal or Conservative," *The Economist*, Sept. 20, 2013, www.economist.com/blogs/Erasmus/2013/09/papal-interview.
3. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, "A Big Heart, Open to God," *America: The National Catholic Review*, Sept. 30, 2013, <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.
4. <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/what-is-ignatian-spirituality/>.
5. David Gibson, "Analysis: Pope Francis Stuns the Church, but Will It Have a Lasting Effect?" *Religion News Service*, Sept. 19, 2013, <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/09/19/analysis-pope-francis-stuns-church-will-lasting-effect/>.
6. Spadaro, "A Big Heart, Open to God."
7. Ibid.
8. Michael Brendan Dougherty, "Why Pope Francis May

Be a Catholic Nightmare," March 13, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2013/03/pope_francis_to_lead_the_catholic_church_cardinal_bergoglio_s_election_as.html.

9. Dias, "Like a Rock Star."
10. "Ex-Pope Benedict Denies Covering Up Sexual Abuse by Roman Catholic Priests," <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/24/ex-pope-benedict-denies-cover-up>.
11. John L. Allen Jr., "Francis First to Mention Abuse Scandals on Brazil Trip," <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-first-mention-abuse-scandals-brazil-trip>.
12. Thomas Fox, "Pope Speaks Again on World Poverty," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 7, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-speaks-again-world-poverty>.
13. Philip Pullella, "Pope Francis Condemns Obsession with Wealth," *The Daily Star*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-16/217340-pope-blasts-cult-of-money-that-tyrannizes-poor.ashx#axzz2gm8eRl3J>.
14. Lizzy Davies and Jonathan Watts, "Pope Francis's Critics in Argentina Say Document Suggests He Betrayed Priests," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/17/pope-francis-first-sunday-prayer>.
15. Spadaro, "A Big Heart, Open to God."
16. "Pope Francis: Gays, Abortion Too Much of Catholic Church's Obsession," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/19/pope-francis-gay_n_3954776.html.
17. Robert McClory, "Pope Francis and Women's Ordination," *National Catholic Reporter*, Sept. 16, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-and-womens-ordination>.
18. Abby Ohlheiser, "Pope Francis Excommunicated a Priest Who Supports Women's Ordination," Sept. 24, 2013, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2013/09/pope-francis-excommunicated-priest-who-supports-womens-ordination/69827/>.
19. McClory, "Pope Francis and Women's Ordination."
20. David Gibson, "Analysis."

Marianne Blickenstaff teaches biblical studies at Belmont University in Nashville.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Should Protestants care about what the pope says and does? Why or why not?
2. As a Jesuit, Pope Francis is trained in the spiritual discipline of discernment, asking God for guidance while “thinking and rethinking” decisions. What advantages and disadvantages does this approach have for leadership in a complex world? How do other leaders approach decision making? What is the decision-making process for our own congregations?
3. What steps should the pope take in response to child sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests? How does this scandal bring awareness of child sexual abuse in Protestant congregations and in the secular world? What can we do to address the problem constructively and decisively?
4. Does the pope’s alleged complicity with government corruption in Argentina in the 1970s have bearing on his advocacy for the poor today? What are the implications of his past decisions for his credibility today? To what extent should we judge leaders on their past actions and mistakes?
5. When asked about the issue of homosexuality, the pope said, “Who am I to judge?” What are the implications of this remark? Do you think the church is overly obsessed with issues of sexuality?
6. Do you think the Roman Catholic Church eventually will allow the ordination of women? Why or why not? Though many Protestant denominations ordain women to ministry, what inequalities remain? How does the church’s stance toward women’s leadership affect women’s status in the world?
7. If you could give the new pope a checklist, what course of action would you advise him to take over the next several years?