QUARTERLY Americas
PUBLISHED BY AMERICAS SOCIETY AND COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAS

From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

AQ FEATURE

The Francis Effect

BY Daniel H. Levine

Latin America's first pope, Argentine-born Francis I, has staked out a new inclusive appraoch, but he also reflects hopes and anxieties about the future of Catholicism in the region.

The election of Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis aroused enthusiasm—and expectations—in Latin America. As the first pope of non-European origin in nearly 1,300 years, and the first ever from Latin America, he embodies both hopes and concerns for the future of the Catholic Church in this part of the world.

The Catholic Church has long dominated cultural life in Latin America, a region that accounts for 40 percent of the world's Catholics. But although it remains the single largest church globally, over the last half century, Catholicism in Latin America has steadily lost its unquestioned monopoly to Protestant—and specifically Pentecostal—churches, which have grown at a remarkable pace. According to the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae*—the statistical yearbook of the Catholic Church—and the World Christian Database, between 1910 and 2010 the total number of Catholics in the region grew by 700 percent, just behind the population, while in the same period the total number of non-Catholic Christians (a category that includes most Protestants, including Pentecostals) grew by 5,500 percent. Those who are known as "double affiliated"—baptized Catholics who attend church elsewhere—grew by 17,000 percent. Although the rate of growth of Pentecostal churches has stabilized in recent years, the legacy of this expansion is visible throughout the region. Brazil, which has the largest Catholic population in the world, now has the second largest Pentecostal population globally, after the United States.

The Christianity that presents itself now in Latin America is decidedly plural, with multiple groups and voices competing for resources, members and access to public space in a wide range of arenas, from streets and public squares to radio, television and government offices.

The election of Pope Francis has raised hopes for a renaissance of the Catholic Church in the modern world. In his first year and a half in office, the Pope has projected a new and open public style, and underscored issues long central to the Church in Latin America, including poverty, social justice and human rights. He has also recognized and praised the Pentecostal spirituality that is increasingly visible in Latin America and Africa, and—in contrast to his predecessors and even his own previous views—welcomed its presence within the Catholic Church itself.

Will Pope Francis be able to reverse the long-term erosion of the Catholic Church's position in the region? How will his distinctive public persona—and the positions he has taken—shape public opinion not only on the matters he has stressed, such as poverty, justice, immigration, and human rights, but also controversial issues now coming to center stage, such as sexuality, including gender identity and same-sex marriage? He has pointedly asked, "Who am I to judge?" and said the Church should not interfere in the spiritual lives of gays and lesbians. How will this affect the public presence and influence of the Catholic Church in a region where many remain distinctly conservative on sexual issues? Will there be a "Francis effect" and, if so, precisely how can we identify it?

More Players, a Different Game

The presence and possible influence of Pope Francis within Latin America has to be understood in the context of what religion looks like now in the region. Contrary to the expectations of generations of social scientists, religion overall in Latin America has not declined, but has instead flourished, and waves of cultural creativity have spurred religious innovation. Greatly expanded literacy and access to mass media among highly mobile, youthful and increasingly urban populations have provided fertile ground for the emergence of new generations of homegrown leadership, especially among Protestants.

Forgive me my debts, Father: Pope Francis and Argentina's President Fernández de Kirchner exchange gifts at the Vatican. Photo: ALBERTO PIZZOLI/AFP/GETTY

Protestant churches have grown exponentially over the past 30 years, creating entirely new organizations, expanding others, and establishing a vital presence in mass media. Before, Protestant churches had to import pastors and materials from the north; today, though, Protestant churches are exporting leaders and expanding their presence elsewhere in the global south. *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), founded in Brazil in 1977, is now active throughout Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the United States.

These new forms of organization have utterly changed the public face of religion. Multiple groups and voices now compete in the public sphere, and the competition is intense, not only among denominations, but also within churches themselves, as numerous groups escape or simply sidestep hierarchical efforts at control.

In this context of increasing heterogeneity within Christianity, the Catholic Church is losing influence. Although statistics on religious practice and church affiliation are controversial and often not very reliable, there is general agreement on the trends, which show the Catholic Church's steady

decline since the 1970s. Previously believed to account for around 90 percent of the population, it is now down to two-thirds or three-quarters in most countries in the region, and has dropped below half in Central America and Uruguay (long the most secularized nation in Latin America). And although the Catholic Church continues to grow in absolute numbers, it generally lags behind population growth.

While polling regularly shows that the Catholic Church remains one of the most trusted institutions in the region, it no longer stands alone as representative of "religion." These changes are unlikely to be reversed overnight by anyone, not even the pope.

The pope also faces opposition, or at best foot-dragging, within the Catholic Church. Conservative bishops are pushing to enhance their control before the tide changes further, prioritizing funding for more conservative schools and programs, for example, or removing priests from key positions. There is also disaffection from powerful conservative groups like Opus Dei, whose Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne of Lima, Peru, has been openly skeptical of the pope's openness toward liberation theology, calling it "naïve." All this underscores the dynamic and competitive quality of the religious arena in Latin America today.

But competition isn't all there is to the story. With increased religious diversity, there has been considerable ecumenical work, including alliances on issues that range from Indigenous rights to the environment, housing, immigration, gangs and violence, the region's vast and horrific prison system, and, of course, sexuality in all its forms. These alliances predate Francis' election to the papacy, but have been reinforced by his openness. It is now not uncommon to see alliances between churches and political groups (especially on the left) that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago.

A Pope of the People in Style and Substance

The short answer to whether there is a "Francis effect" in Latin America is that it's too early to tell.

But it's possible to make some reasonable projections about the near future. The pope is clearly popular. A March 2014 Gallup poll showed that 70 percent of Latin Americans (and 82 percent of Catholics) believe he will bring positive changes to the Catholic Church. Smaller but still noteworthy numbers affirmed that "Pope Francis has inspired me to feel closer to the Catholic Church" (59 percent of all Latin Americans and 73 percent of Catholics). Not surprisingly, the numbers are highest in his home country of Argentina (87 percent of all Argentines and 93 percent of Catholics believe he "brings hope to the poor of the world"), trailing off to just over half in Central America, where the Protestant surge has been most notable.

The new pope's most clear impact has been as a result of his style and public presence—both critical elements in how the Church is received. From the beginning of his papacy, he has adopted a public style of humility, avoiding displays of wealth and power, and stressing openness and acceptance more than adherence to rules, discipline and institutional loyalty. As one Latin American Jesuit told me, "This pope emphasizes important things, like God, mercy and the poor: he doesn't just talk about the Church."

In the 18 months since his election, Pope Francis has done much to change the image of the Catholic Church and to reshape how the Vatican presents itself. He has insisted on the right and duty of the

Church to be present in core public debates and is notably adept at using the media to mobilize opinion. This is a logical extension of his former role as president of the Argentine Conference of Catholic Bishops, where he worked to refashion the public image of the Catholic Church after the end of military rule, involving it in debates on public policy and emphasizing its identification—both in position and lifestyle—with ordinary people, and particularly with the poor and vulnerable.

This new public presence is reinforced by steps the pope has taken to reform the Vatican itself, specifically to address clerical sexual abuse and ongoing financial scandals. He has reworked Vatican finances to increase transparency and accountability, removed some notable traditionalists from key positions and, last but not least, he has reached out to victims of sexual abuse and promised an end to cover-ups. He may not change formal Vatican positions on homosexual behavior, same-sex marriage, divorce, contraception, abortion, and the like; but unlike many prelates, he appears ready to admit errors and is reluctant to condemn and exclude.

He speaks regularly about mercy and "mercying" as central tasks for the Church, and stresses the importance of being present among those in need. His published statements, including widely publicized interviews and his November 2013 Apostolic Exhortation on "The Joy of the Gospel," make this point in countless ways. He insists on the role and the duty of the Catholic Church to be an active voice in public debates; not to dictate outcomes, but to view them in the light of mercy, justice and love.

He reminds clergy and the faithful that the confessional is not a "torture chamber," but rather an encounter with God's mercy, and rejects efforts to use exclusion from communion as a means of political pressure. "The eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak," he said in the November Apostolic Exhortation.

His response to the issue of migrants, and in particular undocumented immigrants in the U.S., resonates strongly in Latin America. He has strongly condemned racist and xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants, and called for unaccompanied children coming into the U.S. from Central America to be "welcomed and protected." On the island of Lampedusa, Italy, he memorialized the African migrants who drowned attempting to reach Italy by boat. The memorial mass used an overturned dinghy as an altar and an abandoned oar as a staff.

In religious discourse, the term for this kind of presence is pastoral—being present among the faithful and sharing both the good and the bad of their lives. It is expressed above all in the pope's insistence on simplicity and on striving for a church that does not only work for the poor, but that is itself poor.

Although he does not come out of the liberation theology tradition, he has been more open to it than his predecessors. He welcomed Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the movement's major figures, to the Vatican. He has also reached out to other leaders in liberation theology, like the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, on issues of the environment. Previously, Boff was formally silenced by then-Cardinal Ratzinger—later Pope Benedict XVI—and ultimately left the priesthood. Most recently he restored Miguel D'Escoto, a priest removed by Pope John Paul II (and former foreign minister of Nicaragua's Sandinista government) to priestly function. He has also moved to internationalize the Vatican's government, the Roman Curia, giving greater voice to figures from outside Italy and Europe. In naming a council of prelates (with a majority from the global south) to

advise him directly, he presented an alternative to the traditional Roman Curia. These and other initiatives make sense as part of a broad effort to energize the Catholic Church and position it to compete more effectively in Latin America. Taken together, they present a sharp contrast to the Euro-centrism, the stress on discipline and loyalty, and the effort to resist the inroads of globalization on Catholic culture that characterized his immediate predecessor, Benedict XVI.

The "Francis Effect": An Opportunity

The Catholic Church in Latin America exists in a very different world from the one in which most of its leaders were raised and educated. It is a world where people are mobile and educated, with access to mass media, and possess the confidence to demand rights, make their own religious choices, and create new kinds of spiritual engagement. They are open to global influences of all kinds, from consumer goods and cultural icons to changing norms about behavior, including sexuality and gender.

The question before the Catholic Church now is how best to operate in this environment. The pope's two predecessors emphasized the need to rebuild church unity and discipline. Benedict in particular centered attention on the damaging effects of globalization and growing secularism.

And while John Paul II gave considerable attention to Latin America, making 25 trips to the region, visiting each country at least once, Benedict visited the region only once. His overall focus was on the need to reinforce church discipline, to resist a culture of "relativism and death," and to reconquer Europe.

The strategy failed. Efforts to rope in dissident Catholic groups were not successful, numbers continued to drop, and the succession of leaks and scandals in the Vatican continued apace.

The election of Pope Francis demonstrated a recognition of the need for something new. His impact on perceptions of the Catholic Church has been so extensive that at times it's hard to believe he's only been in office for a year and a half. His shift in style and positioning on social issues has captured global attention and approval.

But it will take much longer to change the position and operating style of an institution as vast, complex and decentralized as the Catholic Church. He will have to find a way to reform the Vatican's unwieldy and historically opaque bureaucracy, and to make the reforms—some of which he's already implemented—stick. Nevertheless, he has made a strong beginning, perhaps the strongest of any pope since John XXIII and his Second Vatican Council.

By changing how the Church presents itself—by being open, welcoming and adaptable, by altering the tone and position on issues ranging from inequality to sexuality, and by fostering organizational flexibility and giving greater weight to voices from the global south—Pope Francis has set in motion a process that gives the Catholic Church an opportunity to enter the currents of change now under way. This is a vision deeply rooted in the Second Vatican Council, which recognized that the Church is not a perfect and unchanging organization.

How that process plays out in his home region, however, will be critical. In order to both meet the competition from increasingly robust Protestant churches and to address the decline in its own adherents, the Catholic Church will have to abandon its defensive attitudes against modernity. The

truth is, this is not just a good way to go, it is the only way to go if it wants to stop the bleeding and remain an essential part of changing societies. Changes of this kind do not happen overnight. But they are an indispensable part of any effort to construct an effective and meaningful presence in the twenty-first century and beyond.

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