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Andrés Gaudán

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Is Argentina Going Overboard in Honoring Native Son Pope Francis?

by Andrés Gaudín

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Since March 13, when Jesuit Jorge Mario Cardinal Bergoglio was elected to be the Catholic Church's 266th successor to the throne of St. Peter (NotiSur, May 3, 2013), many formal changes have taken place in his native country. Streets and avenues in the principal cities have been given his name, as have several large, medium-sized, and small plazas throughout the country. Proposals were made to rename the northern city of Salta, founded by Spanish conquistadors in 1582, Papa Francisco; to mint a commemorative coin to mark his accession; and to issue a postage stamp with his image. Schools and public offices throughout the country declared holidays, and 38 bills were introduced in Congress with a wide array of unique proposals for honoring the new pope.

The city of Buenos Aires' installation of a gigantic 88 meter by 44 meter image of Pope Francis, covering the entire facade of the major government office building in the city, a Vatican flag in the city's Plaza de la República, where the national flag is normally flown, and a tour, organized by the city government, which, for US$35 per person, takes visitors to the places in the city that have some connection to the pope's childhood, youth, or adulthood round out the sudden religiosity of the Buenos Aires government. Bergoglio's election caused all this and more. And, what is worse for Catholic Church interests, it has set off a resurgence of organizations to defend the secular state.

"It got out of hand, in a totalitarian attitude that the pope surely rejects. They are stomping on the rights not only of those who practice other religions but also those of all citizens who don't agree with using state resources to support the Catholic religion," said Fernando Lozada, an activist with the Coalición Argentina por un Estado Laico (CAEL).

Critics say name changes insensitive to history

Lozada, along with others, not only complains that they have replaced the national flag and want to change the name of one of the oldest cities in the country, he says a "wave of dangerous fanaticism" has been unleashed, and he criticizes other ideas thrown out recently.

One suggests replacing Avenida Carabobo and the Carabobo metro station in the capital with the name Papa Francisco. Whoever suggested the change is surely ignoring the historic significance of the name, which refers to the June 24, 1821, battle in which Simón Bolívar defeated the troops of the Spanish crown and began the final phase in the independence of what is now Venezuela.

A second suggestion was to put the pope's name on Calle Boyacá, in one of Buenos Aires' traditional barrios, named for the Colombian territory where Bolívar issued his first revolutionary proclamation. Another was to put the name Francisco on the Pedro Cerviño institute where Bergoglio went to primary school. For Lozada, it was another "affront to history." In 1810, Cerviño, a mathematician and member of the military, was the first Spanish soldier who "had the dignity to join the independence effort."

CAEL, which at one time complained about Bergoglio to the state Instituto Nacional de Lucha contra la Discriminación (INADI), accusing him of writing the charter for the Jesuit Universidad
del Salvador, which in 1974 promoted the "fight against atheism," is demanding that separation of church and state be respected. It asks that the Catholic Church no longer be considered "a public legal entity," as it is described in the bill to reform the Código Civil now under debate in Congress.

"That category confers on [the Catholic Church] an exceptional position compared with other faiths, which are 'private legal entities' and must register as nonprofit civil societies, which gives them the same standing as soccer clubs and neighborhood associations," said the secular Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC).

Support of Catholic Church costly to state

The underlying objection by groups defending a secular society is to the Catholic Church’s position of privilege and the high cost to the state resulting from a particular reading of Article 2 of the Constitution, which says, "The Federal Government supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion." The key is in the word "support," which the church takes to mean financial support.

In compliance with that definition, the public treasury is responsible for paying the salaries of teachers in church schools and exempts them from all taxes; it pays all costs for the bishops' ad limina visits to Rome and travel expenses to synods and regional conferences; it covers the budgets of the 437 institutes of consecrated life with their 4,500 houses and apostolic works in the country.

Argentina has 122 bishops and archbishops, 1,600 seminarians, and 640 priests whose salaries are paid by the state. One example gives an idea of the magnitude of this expense: a law approved in 1979 by the last military dictatorship determined that an archbishop's monthly salary is equivalent to 80% of that of a first instance trial judge—US$8,000. Bishops do not pay taxes or make social security or other benefit contributions. The state even covers their medical expenses.

The total amount earmarked from the public coffers for support of the Catholic faith is difficult to nail down because the resources come from various areas of state finances and the data is lost in the bureaucratic maze. Agreement exists on education costs, however. In figures for 2010, the total budget of the Ministerio de Educación was some US$4 billion; various studies indicate that religious schools received about 10% of that budget.

"We are facing a massive injustice. While 6,000 children ready for first grade this year in the south of the city of Buenos Aires found no space available to begin their primary studies, some Catholic schools, such as that of the Esclavas del Sagrado Corazón that charges each student a monthly tuition of almost US$600—the entire income of a family—still receive a state subsidy," said the weekly Miradas Al Sur in its June 23 edition.

The magazine said that such subsidies are not justified from any perspective. The article quotes a poll by the state Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) in which 76.5% of respondents identified themselves as Catholic, 9% as Protestant, and 11.3% as atheist, agnostic, or not belonging to any religion. The remaining 3.2% did not respond. What is noteworthy is that 61.1% of all Catholics said that they "relate to God on their own and not through the church."

So, what are the subsidies for?

All indications are that the secular organizations' campaign will fail, as has happened many times before. The first CAEL action consisted of asking President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to not participate in the May 25 Te Deum offered to mark the country's major patriotic holiday. "That day celebrates the country's emancipation from the Spanish yoke, from the crown's sword and
the church's cross. To go to the Te Deum is as senseless as to celebrate the day in the Spanish Embassy," said Lozada. As she has usually done, the president participated in the mass.

The secular counteroffensive included a series of initiatives that, so far, have also failed and show that, although two-thirds of Catholics do not relate to God through their priests, the Catholic Church still has enormous power. The bloc of socialist deputies was unsuccessful in having a bill considered that calls for removing the image of Nuestra Señora de Luján, the patron of Argentina, from the seat of Congress. The ADC and the Asociación Civil Ateos (ACA) in the tourist city of Mar de Plata continue hoping that a resolution in the lower house of the Buenos Aires provincial legislature will be declared invalid. It calls for putting the image of the Virgin in a room in the legislature building.

A bill is still up in the air in the Buenos Aires city legislature, calling for banning the "permanent installation or exhibition of religious images or themes in all city buildings except those in hospitals and cemeteries, provided that they are in a reserved space and the multiplicity of faiths is guaranteed." In the Sala de Acuerdos in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), in the gardens or administration offices of schools, in train stations, in police stations, in military units, in hospitals, and any in public office in any of Argentina's 23 provinces, the image of the Virgin and crucifixes are ever-present, and the effects of Bergoglio's accession seem to guarantee that they will be left there forever.

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