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Pope Francis Uses Latin America Tour to Demand "Real Change, Structural Change"

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Pope Francis’ visit to the three poorest, most Catholic, and most culturally and ethnically indigenous countries in South America lasted just six days but had a major impact and provoked a lengthy media debate, especially regarding a message he delivered July 10 at the World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia.

"A specter is haunting America," political analyst Luis Bruschtein, speaking on Argentine public television and paraphrasing the famous intro of Karl Marx’s 1848 Communist Manifesto, said of the papal tour. "With his words he opened an enormous space to move forward in the construction of an anti-capitalist discourse," Bruschtein said of the speech in Bolivia. "It was extraordinarily important because he introduced into the public imagination the idea that capitalism is an inhumane, unjust, and predatory system that ought to be overcome through a structural change and that people, therefore, shouldn’t fear the word revolution."

On the other end of the political spectrum, in conservative newspapers like Argentina’s La Nación, the pope’s speech raised alarm bells. "[The pope’s] diatribes against the market economy are simplistic and don’t help in the fight against poverty," Italian academic Loris Zanatta wrote. Rarely has a speech provoked such a conflict of ideas.

The pope arrived in South America on July 6, stopping first in Ecuador and later traveling to Bolivia and Paraguay, where his tour ended on July 12. In Ecuador, 79% of the population are Catholic and 40% are pure indigenous. In Bolivia, 77% of the people are Catholic and 62% belong to an indigenous group. And in Paraguay, where 89% of the population are Catholic and only 1.7% are indigenous, more than 90% are mestizo. Amerindian culture, furthermore, holds great sway there, so much so that Guarani is an official language, on an equal standing with Spanish. It is spoken by the entire country and has become, alongside Spanish and Portuguese, one of the official languages of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) trade bloc.

Land, lodging, and labor
The pope drew huge crowds in all three countries. But what many consider to be the most significant part of the tour was his participation in the World Meeting of Popular Movements. Bolivian President Evo Morales spoke first. "Throughout much of history, the Church was used as an instrument of domination," the host-nation leader said. "Today we welcome a chief representative of the Church who comes to support the liberation of the peoples."

Francis then took the podium and delivered a 57-minute speech, the longest of his trip, before an audience representing 40 different countries. After tracing a critical outline of the situation facing Latin America and "humanity as a whole," Francis called on campesinos, indigenous people, and workers to fight for the "three L's"—land, lodging, and labor—and to organize themselves so as to place the economy at the service of people. "Do we realize that something is wrong in a world where
there are so many farm workers without land, so many families without a home, so many laborers without rights, so many persons whose dignity is not respected?" he said.

"We want change," the pope went on to say. "Real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable: farm workers find it intolerable, laborers find it intolerable, communities find it intolerable, peoples find it intolerable. The earth itself—our sister, Mother Earth, as Saint Francis would say—also finds it intolerable."

Acknowledging that there are no "recipes" to solve the problems, he called on people, nevertheless, to take action. He also offered recommendations for how to bring about change, suggesting, first off, that people "put the economy at the service of peoples" and oppose the "economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules, rather than service." He said the economy "should not be a mechanism for accumulating goods, but rather the proper administration of our common home."

Creating an alternative economy, he added, "is not only desirable and necessary, but also possible. ... It is no utopia or chimera. It is an extremely realistic prospect. We can achieve it."

"Don’t lose heart"

Later in the speech, the pope said, "No actual or established power has the right to deprive peoples of the full exercise of their sovereignty." He also lamented the existence of "new forms of colonialism which seriously prejudice the possibility of peace and justice" and "take on different faces" such as free trade agreements and the imposition of austerity measures that "always tighten the belt of workers and the poor."

Echoing accusations previously leveled by Presidents Morales, Rafael Correa (Ecuador), and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina)—though without mentioning the leaders by name—Pope Francis denounced the complicit forces hiding behind these "different faces." He pointed to the "monopolizing of the communications media" as another of the forms taken by the new colonialism. "Colonialism reduces poor countries to mere providers of raw material and cheap labor," the pope said.

Two years ago, at a World Youth Day event in Brazil, Francis called on young people to "make a mess" (hacer lío), a slogan that made headlines around the world and was treated with a certain amount of sympathy by La Nación, in the pope’s native Argentina (NotiSur, July 5, 2013), where he was born Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Francis delivered a similarly memorable catch phrase in Bolivia, telling campesinos, indigenous people, and workers "not to lose heart" (no se achiquen). La Nación was far more critical this time around, dismissing the slogan as another of the pope’s "simplistic declarations," as columnist Zanatta wrote.

As it turned out, "no se achiquen" wasn’t the only showstopper Francis had in store that day. To the surprise of many, the pope, speaking in the name of the Church, also made a bold mea culpa. "Some may rightly say, ‘When the pope speaks of colonialism, he overlooks certain actions of the Church.’ I say this to you with regret: many grave sins were committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God," Francis said. "I would also say, and here I wish to be quite clear, as was Saint John Paul II: I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offenses of the Church herself, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America."

Luis Bruschtein commented afterward that the pope’s choice of stage, location, and words—together with his being originally from Latin America—"imply a political decision that has profound
implications in the international arena.” The pope "has opted for an earthly role," the analyst went on to say.

**A Peronist pope?**

There was nothing ambiguous about the pope’s message. He used clear language that did not lend itself to interpretations beyond the implicit meaning of the words. It was little surprise, therefore, that his speech would draw such conflicting responses.

"At first glance, Francis says things that any reasonable person can subscribe to: guaranteeing peace, fighting hunger, protecting nature, prioritizing humans, fighting against exploitation, inequality, the culture of waste," Zanatta—a history professor at the University of Bologna in Italy—wrote in his July 10 column for La Nación. "But one can clearly object to the fact that his diatribes against the market economy are simplistic and don’t help fight poverty and that the manner he uses to demonize money is reminiscent of one the Church used to reserve for sex."

Zanatta, whose own choice of language was a bit unusual for a Catholic talking about the Church’s highest authority, concluded his column by saying, "What stands out more than the pope’s words are his silences." The historian questioned why the pope would complain so loudly about the "culture of waste" but fail to mention political repression in Cuba and Venezuela. "Does the pope as politician take precedence in these cases over the pope as pastor?" he asked. "Why does the pope bring flowers to [the Italian island of] Lampedusa, symbol of European egoism in the face of immigration, but never thought to do the same at Havana’s Malecón? Thousands of people have died there trying to escape the island! Only silence."

The Uruguayan daily El Observador did not offer any analysis of its own, choosing instead, on July 11, to reprint a piece from the British weekly The Economist. The article, titled "The Peronist pope," took a critical view of Francis’ Latin America tour, suggesting that the pope is perhaps "overplaying his hand politically." The Economist considers Peronism, an Argentine political movement whose adherents include Argentine President Fernández de Kirchner, to be populist, using the term in a pejorative sense.

Religious analyst Bernardo Barranco Villafán, in a July 15 article in the Mexican daily La Jornada, offered his own take on the pope’s visit and the controversy it sparked. "What is this? Europe’s brightest minds are asking themselves. ‘A pope who evokes the nostalgia of the revolutionary Christianity of the 20th century?’" he wrote.

One of those "bright minds" is Matteo Salvini, journalist and member of the European Parliament representing [the Italian political party] Lega Nord. "[Salvini] was indignant that the pope had accepted the cross and hammer from Evo Morales," wrote Villafán. The object in question is a crucifix mounted on the global symbol of Communism that was made by a Spanish Jesuit priest killed in 1980 by Bolivia’s then dictatorship and is supposed to represent the need for "dialogue among everyone."

Barranco Villafán mentioned Greg Gutfeld, a Fox News host who called the pope "the most dangerous person on the planet," as another example of conservative alarmism. "Who is this pope who dares challenge the global economy?" the Mexican analyst asked. The answer—something "many judicious Vaticanists have difficulty understanding," he went on to say—"is that that Bergoglio comes from the South and has all the modern Argentine sensibilities regarding the Great
Homeland; he is a pope from the Third World who, from his seat in Rome, is embracing a Pan-American vision centered around Bolivarian ideals."

-- End --