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Recommended Citation
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Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2013-03-20

The election of Jorge Bergoglio, a Jesuit cardinal from Argentina, as the next pope elicited many positive reactions in Mexico. The general consensus was that it was a good sign that Bergoglio came from a Latin American country, and the move by the new pontiff to take the name Pope Francis was also seen as positive because it signaled his commitment to put solidarity with the poor at the top of his agenda. But reactions were mixed on what his election meant for the future of the Catholic Church.

Bergoglio, who becomes the 266th bishop of Rome, said changing his name to Francis was a way to symbolize the need for the church to be "of the poor, for the poor."

As expected, the most positive reaction came from the Mexican Catholic bishops conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM). Bishop Eugenio Lira Rugarcia, secretary-general of the CEM, acknowledged that the election of Francis was a surprise to the CEM, not only because of his country of origin but because the process was not drawn out, as had been the case in some previous elections. "I think this is a great blessing for us, the election of the new Pope Francis," said Lira, who is auxiliary bishop in the Diocese of Puebla.

"I believe that we are witnessing the start of a papacy that will surely be extraordinary," Lira told reporters. "Francis I is an expert in communications, and he has spoken with great certainty, simplicity, and humility. We are grateful for the pope that God has sent us."

"[The pope] is going to make Latin America a huge priority, he knows our problems, and he knows the importance that Mexico has for global Catholicism," said Hugo Valdermar, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Mexico. Valdermar confirmed that President Enrique Peña Nieto and Mexico City Mayor Miguel Mancera, who were on hand for Pope Francis I’s inauguration, had invited the new pontiff to visit Mexico.

**Pope's age a concern**

Other bishops, while pleased at the choice, raised the concern that Pope Francis I might not have an extended tenure because of his age, a situation similar to that of his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, who resigned because of health reasons. "We do not believe he is going to have a long papacy," said José Luis Dibildox Martínez, bishop of the Diocese of Tampico in Tamaulipas state. "He will probably have to resign when he sees that he cannot continue because of his age and his health. It is likely that he will have to make the same decision as Pope Benedict."

This concern was also raised in other circles. "When the name of Argentine Cardinal Bergoglio was announced, many questions arose. The first one was his age. At 76, he is an old pope, as was his predecessor [Joseph] Ratzinger during the previous election," Bernardo Barranco, an expert on the Mexican Catholic Church, wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "So again we have the prospect of either a transition papacy or a College of Cardinals that is not planning for the long term."
"This means that the divisions within the Vatican were not resolved and will probably not be resolved soon," added Barranco. "[The discussion] was just delayed for some time in the future."

But, for now, Francis’ commitment to a church that stands with and advocates for the poor of the world resonated with bishops like Raúl Vera López, a staunch advocate for the rights of the poor. Vera was auxiliary bishop in San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, where he worked closely with Bishop Samuel Ruiz to defend the rights of indigenous peoples (SourceMex, Jan. 26, 2011). Vera was widely expected to replace Ruiz upon his retirement in 2000, but instead he was named bishop of Saltillo, in what many saw as a politically motivated move (SourceMex, Jan. 19, 2000, and April 27, 2005).

Vera did not make public comments on the selection of the new pope, but a spokesman for the Diocese of Saltillo said the bishop was pleased with the selection of Francis I and his commitment to the poor.

Secular analysts also saw a positive sign in the new pope’s commitment to the poor and that, as a bishop in Argentina, Bergoglio had lived a simple life. "We have only observed him for a few hours, but there are good signs," Federico Reyes Heroles wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "We don’t know how the controversial issues like a woman’s right to choose, gay rights, celibacy, and women’s ordination will play out. So we take the optimistic path and rejoice that we have a Catholic Church that advocates for the poor, is austere, and supports transparency."

But other analysts point out that the Vatican hierarchy is generally conservative on social issues, and there is no reason to believe that Francis would take a radically different stance from the Catholic Church’s recent positions.

"The bad news regarding the election of Jorge Bergoglio is that those who are waiting for a progressive pope will have to keep waiting," columnist León Krauze wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio. "His history of tense relations with the current Argentine government [of ex-President Néstor Kirchner and current President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner] in such matters as gay marriage is a sign of the route that he is likely to take. It will be very difficult for this 76-year-old man to reverse the anachronistic stance of the social policies of the church."

Still, Krauze joined the chorus of praise for the positions that Francis has taken regarding the poor. "The new pope has the reputation of being a man who is humble. He seems accustomed to honoring the best facet of his Jesuit formation by demonstrating an authentic tendency to lift up those who have the least," said the Milenio columnist. "And, judging by his first words as pope, he appears to have a sense of humor. A few decades ago, the election of a man of this profile would have been unthinkable."

Some suggest that Francis I has the potential to leave the type of legacy left by the two pontiffs who presided over the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which resulted in profound changes in the Catholic Church. "Perhaps we can expect something similar to what happened under Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, who supported a renewal of the church through Vatican II, and which was supported by the Jesuits," said SDPNoticias columnist Alexia Barrios. "During this transformation, the Catholic Church returned to a tradition of lifting up the poor and set aside the theology of opulence, which is still practiced by the Catholic hierarchy in Mexico."
Mexican Cardinal Rivera was not a candidate

There was a fleeting thought following the resignation of Benedict XVI in February that Mexico’s Cardinal Norberto Rivera might be considered as a replacement. After all, Rivera was relatively young at age 66 and is a Latin American bishop.

But analysts said Rivera’s legacy as head of the Mexican Catholic Church was too tainted for him to be considered. The biggest obstacle for Rivera was his connection with Father Marcial Maciel, who is accused of sexually abusing dozens of children. In addition, Maciel founded the Legion of Christ, a secretive cult-like organization that came under investigation by the Vatican.

"No group in the Catholic Church is going to support [Rivera] because of his ties with Marcial Maciel," said Rev. Gonzalo Balderas, a faculty member in the religious sciences department at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City.

Balderas said Rivera was also hampered by another connection to a pedophilia cover-up. In the 1980s, Rivera arranged for the transfer of Father Nicolás Aguilar—who was facing charges of molesting boys in the Diocese of Tehuacán in Puebla state—to a parish in California. Aguilar proceeded to molest other boys in the new parish in the US, causing a scandal for both Rivera and then Los Angeles Archbishop Roger Mahony (SourceMex, April 11, 2007).

Other analysts noted that Rivera was part of the hierarchy that persecuted Ruiz and Vera and favored the political establishment in Mexico, both the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). Those bishops—which included Rivera and Bishops Juan Sandoval Iñíguez, Emilio Berlié, Onésimo Cepeda—was known as the Club of Rome because of their traditionally close connection to the Vatican. "They are the ones who control the Catholic Church in Mexico," said columnist Alexia Barrios.

Barrios said these bishops benefited politically and economically from their position, and she went as far as to compare them to entrepreneurs and drug traffickers who earned riches by illicit means.

The Catholic hierarchy has sometimes clashed with political authorities. In 2003, the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) launched an investigation into charges that Sandoval Iñíguez, head of the Archdiocese of Guadalajara, was involved in money-laundering activities (SourceMex, June 4, 2003, and Oct. 1, 2003).

Local Catholic authorities are aware that drug-trafficking organizations have provided many economic benefits to local communities, but bishops have generally not spoken much about this to avoid controversy. One exception came in April 2008, when Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes suggested that the Catholic Church should recognize that drug traffickers have provided "generous support" to their communities. This comment immediately put the Catholic hierarchy on the defensive, causing the CEM to issue a rebuke to Aguiar Retes (SourceMex, April 23, 2008).

New pope urged to take stronger stance against pedophilia

While those controversies have put the Catholic Church in Mexico in a difficult position, the pedophilia scandal remains a sore spot. Some Catholic faithful in Mexico have urged Pope Francis I to take a vigorous stance against this problem that has plagued the Catholic Church in Mexico, the US, and other countries. "We have to see what stance he takes," said Alberto Athié Gallo, a former priest who has denounced pedophilia by priests in Mexico. "And we hope that he assumes a very
public position on denouncing any kind of pedophilia, as well spelling out as any actions that he plans to take."

Others noted that Pope Francis I’s predecessor failed to take decisive action on the controversial issue. "Pope Benedict XVI will be remembered for two things: as one of the only popes to resign from his post and as one who protected thousands of pedophile priests," Jorge Ramos Ávalos wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

Before assuming the papacy and becoming Benedict XVI, Cardinal Ratzinger led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a Vatican office that had the power to decide whether priests accused of child abuse should be given canonical trials and defrocked. Ramos said Ratzinger chose to remain quiet in many of these cases. "He could have made his mark in history by protecting thousands of children who were abused sexually by Catholic priests," said the Reforma columnist. "Instead, he chose to stay quiet and protect criminal pedophiles. His silence destroyed the lives of young people all over the world."

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