

Who Is Pope Francis? Really?

A reformer? A radical? A revolutionary? He has been called all of these things since he was the surprise choice of the cardinals at the Vatican conclave in March 2013. Sometimes the label has been meant as a compliment, sometimes as a criticism.

Whatever one feels about the pope—and many people have strong opinions, mainly positive, but also sharply negative—the answers to those are very much on the minds of Americans as they await the pope's visit Sept. 22-27. The trip, with stops in Washington, New York and Philadelphia, marks the first visit to the U.S. for the Argentine-born Francis, the first Latin American pope.

Much is at stake, both for the Catholic Church, which is trying to chart a course between the poles of rapid secularization and growing religious fundamentalism, and for a world facing wildfire conflicts and environmental crises.

Apart from being the first Latin American pope, Francis – Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio – is the first non-European pope since the early centuries of Christianity, as well as the first from the Southern Hemisphere and the first Jesuit.

The two “firsts” that matter most to understanding him are that he was born and raised in Argentina and that he became a Jesuit priest.

Bergoglio was born on Dec. 17, 1936, in Buenos Aires to Italian immigrants who fled the Mussolini regime in 1929. His Italian roots probably made him appealing to the cardinal-electors in 2013, because, ethnically at least, he was not too far from Rome.

But his family's immigrant experience has informed his passionate advocacy for migrants and refugees. As he told the

crowd at the Vatican the night he was elected, he was a pope “from the ends of the earth” – so far-removed from the European experience that it was inevitable he would bring a different perspective and different priorities.

Bergoglio was the oldest of five children; only a sister survives. He was by all accounts a regular kid, and likes to recall how he would get in trouble with his teacher to the point that his mother had to be called to school. As a young man he loved to dance the sensuous Argentine tango – “I love the tango a lot. It is something that comes from inside me,” he once said. (A few decades earlier, Pope Pius X had condemned the dance as indecent.)

He liked girls, and during his seminary days developed such a crush on one young woman that he considered abandoning his vocation. “It would be abnormal for this kind of thing not to happen,” he later said, reflecting the kind of realism he would continue to embrace as pope.

He worked as a bouncer at a bar for a while, studied chemistry and worked as a chemist before entering the seminary. But contrary to many reports after his major papal document on caring for the environment, he did not get a master’s degree in chemistry; his father was an accountant and his mother a housewife, and that sort of advanced degree would have been beyond their means.

In 1957, at age 20, he developed severe pneumonia, which led to cysts; surgeons had to remove part of his right lung. It’s not true that he has just one lung, as some have reported. He can get winded at times, but close observers say he manages well and has a remarkable amount of energy considering his age and various ailments.

“He ‘eats work,’ it’s true,” said the Rev. Antonio Spadaro, a Jesuit priest who conducted a book-length interview with the pope last year and knows him well.

If Bergoglio was a normal, fun-loving youth, he also was always serious about his Catholic faith. He had begun studying medicine, as his mother wanted; she had discouraged his interest in the priesthood because she did not want to “lose” her oldest son to the church.

Then one day she discovered books on theology and Latin and realized he was preparing for seminary. “Jorge, you’ve lied to me,” she said.

“No, mother,” her son replied. “I’m studying medicine for souls.”

With such a clever response, it should be no surprise that in 1958 he became a novice in the Society of Jesus, popularly known as the Jesuits. The largest all-male religious order in the Catholic Church, Jesuits are known for their rigorous intellectual and spiritual development and their intense focus on missionary work.

Bergoglio wanted to go to the mission field, perhaps to Japan. But his health prevented that and he remained in Argentina, becoming engaged in issues Jesuits were devoted to: advocating for the poor and battling injustice.

Those passions have been hallmarks of Francis’ pontificate, but they only crystallized in him after a series of often agonizing trials.

The first crucible was the dark period of Argentina’s military dictatorship and the so-called “dirty war” against guerrillas, trade unionists and anyone seen as a leftist. Over nearly a decade, security forces and right-wing death squads killed thousands and tortured countless others, leaving scars on the national psyche that persist to this day.

The start of this veritable civil war coincided with Bergoglio’s appointment as head of all Jesuits in Argentina and neighboring Uruguay.

"That was a difficult time ... an entire generation of Jesuits had disappeared. I found myself provincial when I was still very young, only 36 years old. That was crazy," Francis said. "I had to deal with difficult situations, and I made my decisions abruptly and by myself."

Critics say one of his bad decisions was failing to protect two Jesuit priests who worked in the slums and had been targeted by the government. They were kidnapped and tortured, and found five months later drugged and seminaked. They and others accused Bergoglio of having sold them out, but it later emerged that he probably saved them – and numerous others – from death.

But many more were not spared, and Bergoglio lost friends in that brutal period that remains a searing experience informing his approach to both societal conflict and international relations.

Diplomacy is personal more than ideological, Francis says, and peace is "a handcrafted product. ... We make it every day with our work, our life, our love, our closeness, our loving each other."

Bergoglio engendered a devoted following among many priests and seminarians; he headed Argentina's main seminary after six years as Jesuit provincial. But that loyalty also annoyed some other Jesuits, and Francis admits his lack of seasoning didn't help his own cause.

"My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultraconservative," he has said.

Moreover, it was a time of great ferment in the Catholic Church, especially in Latin America, with the Jesuits leading the way in controversial social justice movements such as liberation theology. Bergoglio and his followers were also

dedicated to the poor, but preferred different strategies. For this and a variety of reasons, he found himself on the outs with the Jesuit headquarters in Rome and with many Jesuits in Argentina.

“He was silenced as part of the new provincial leadership’s attempt to clamp down on what they regarded as dissent,” writes Austen Ivereigh, author of a biography of Francis titled “The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope.”

He was effectively sent into exile by the Jesuits, first to Germany to write a doctoral thesis. But he was deeply unhappy there and never finished it, returning after little more than a year. Then he was immediately sent to the remote city of Córdoba, more than 400 miles from Buenos Aires. He would spend two years there. “I lived a time of great interior crisis when I was in Córdoba,” he recalled.

“Bergoglio emerged from that spiritual crisis an utterly different man,” writes Paul Vallely, author of “Pope Francis: The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism.” “He developed a new model of leadership, one which involved listening, participation and collegiality. ... He had transmuted from an authoritarian reactionary into the figure of radical humility who is today turning the Vatican upside down.”

An appointment as auxiliary bishop in 1992 put him on a hierarchical track that Jesuits typically avoid. In 1998, he became a bishop and immediately doubled the number of priests assigned to work directly with the poor, leading many to dub him the “Slum Bishop.” He also visited the poor himself whenever he could. He lived simply in a small apartment, cooking his own meals and taking public transportation.

He avoided the receptions and fundraisers that churchmen of his rank would attend as a matter of course. He even gave up watching television – even his beloved soccer team – and spent

what little down time he had with close friends and family.

Mainly he devoted himself to being a pastor. He took no vacations – and hasn't done so as pope, refusing to use the papal summer residence outside Rome in the hilltop town of Castel Gandolfo.

His was a "theology of the people," or the "theology of the kitchen table," as the Rev. Humberto Miguel Yanez, an Argentine Jesuit theologian in Rome, puts it. As Francis likes to say, "Realities are more important than ideas."

In Latin America, however, Bergoglio quietly became an influential figure within the hierarchy, and in 2001, he was named a cardinal, eligible to participate in the papal conclave.

When Pope John Paul II died in April 2005 after a long and public battle with a degenerative nerve disorder, Bergoglio emerged as a possible successor and the only serious contender besides Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who ultimately was elected Pope Benedict XVI.

After the 2005 conclave, Bergoglio returned to Argentina and went about his ministry as usual. But eight years later, on Feb. 11, 2013, everything changed.

In what was expected to be a routine Vatican ceremony, Benedict stunned his audience by announcing that he would resign as pope effective Feb. 28. No pope in six centuries had retired.

When cardinals gathered to choose a new pope, many said did not want anyone over 70. Bergoglio was then 76, and seemed out of the running. But during the closed-door meetings before the conclave, something changed. Each cardinal was allowed five minutes to talk about what he saw as the main issues facing Catholicism and what the next pope might need to do.

Bergoglio got straight to the point: The church was “self-referential” to the point of sickness, he said, immersed in a self-destructive “theological narcissism” that led its leaders “to give glory only to one another,” not the rest of the world. It was a “worldly” church, he said, that had forgotten its mission.

In the New Testament, he continued, “Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter. But I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we will let him come out. The self-referential church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.”

The cardinals went into the conclave, and 24 hours later, Jorge Mario Bergoglio came out on the balcony of St. Peter’s as Pope Francis. He did not want the job, he said, but accepted it as a sign from God.

“On the night of my election,” Francis told a friend, a fellow Latin American bishop, “I had an experience of the closeness of God that gave me a great sense of interior freedom and peace, and that sense has never left me.”

Aides say that if he is humble, he is also wise about the ways of the church, and especially the challenges of reforming the Roman Curia, one of his first and most daunting tasks. He has even been described as a chess master when it comes to church politics.

But above all he wants the Catholic Church get out of its own way, to accompany those on the margins of society, all those left behind by the “throwaway culture” of the modern world. Mercy is the byword of his pontificate, and he wants to show the world that the church welcomes everyone.

“Who Is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” Spadaro asked him in 2013.

“I am a sinner,” Francis responded. “This is the most accurate

definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.”

But he believes he is saved by grace, by God’s mercy, and that the church and the world have the same opportunity – if he can persuade them to take the leap of faith.