

Behind the Charm, a Political Pope

When **Jorge Bergoglio** finished studying chemistry at high school, his mother asked him what he would study next.

“Medicine,” replied the skinny 19-year-old, according to his younger sister, Maria Elena.

Bergoglio’s mother cleared a storage room in the family’s working-class Buenos Aires home for him to use as a study. Every day, after his morning job in a lab, he would arrive home and disappear into the room.

One morning, though, his mother got a surprise. In the room, she found not anatomy or medicine texts but books on theology and Catholicism. Perturbed at his change of course, she confronted her eldest son.

“What is this?” she asked.

Bergoglio responded calmly: “It’s medicine for the soul.”

For the man who recently took over as the head of the **Catholic Church**, the shift from medicine to religion was the first of many in a career that has often defied expectations. It was also an early hint at what Argentines who know Bergoglio, now 76, describe as a steely determination—prepared even to mislead his mother—that lies beneath his charming and modest exterior.

“Jorge is a political man with a keen nose for politics,” says Rafael Velasco, a Jesuit priest and former colleague who is now rector of the Catholic University of Cordoba, in central Argentina. “It’s not an act, the humility. But it’s part of his great capacity to intuitively know and read people.”

The first **pope** from Latin America is also the first Jesuit pope. Like priests from other orders, Jesuits take vows of

poverty, chastity and obedience, as well as a fourth special vow of obedience to the pope. They also make a promise to refrain from seeking high Church offices.

But Bergoglio rose steadily through the order's leadership posts and beyond, sometimes crossing swords with colleagues and once proving so meddlesome that a Jesuit boss dismissed him from the school where he was teaching. After being named a bishop he climbed through the Church hierarchy itself, rising to lead Argentina's largest archdiocese and eventually being named a cardinal.

Throughout his rise, Bergoglio eschewed the trappings of the positions he attained. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he famously took the subway from his one-room apartment in the Argentine capital instead of accepting the grand residence at his disposal. When his name emerged as a possible successor to John Paul in 2005, Bergoglio told family, friends and Argentine media that he didn't want to be pope. He loved Buenos Aires too much, he said. He had no desire to leave.

When the conclave named him successor to Pope Benedict earlier this month, he joked: "May God forgive you."

In Argentina, countrymen have expressed glee that one of their own has become the first non-European pope in 13 centuries. Francis has also charmed millions with his plainspoken banter, refusal to wear ornate vestments and his insistence that he pay his hotel bill in person the morning after the conclave. Some genuinely hope he can revive a Church roiled by scandal and undermined by rival religions and secularism, which many Catholics find to be out of touch with contemporary values.

At the same time, questions remain, not least about the exact nature of Bergoglio's role during the Argentine dictatorship's "Dirty War" against leftists and other political opponents in the 1970s and early 1980s. Some also point to his description of gay marriage as "the work of the devil" as proof of a hard-line conservatism.

The **Vatican** has moved quickly to defend Francis. The attacks,

said Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi, “reveal anti-clerical, left-wing elements that are used to attack the Church.”

Interviews with nearly two dozen people, including his sister, colleagues from the Jesuit order in Argentina, his archdiocese and social circle, build a picture of a devout and dedicated priest whose scholarly grasp of Church doctrine rarely hindered his down-to-earth focus on charity, compassion and social work. They also reveal a calculating leader so used to getting his way that he once summoned a courtroom to him, rather than walk a few blocks to the courthouse.

Early Years

Bergoglio, the first of five children, was born and raised in the blue-collar neighborhood of Flores in central Buenos Aires. His father, an Italian immigrant, worked as an accountant in a hosiery factory. His mother, also of Italian descent, worked at home.

His paternal grandparents, who lived close by, taught him Italian. His grandmother, he has said, taught him to pray.

Friends and family recall the neighborhood as a simple and friendly area where residents would sometimes set up tables in the street and share meals. Maria Elena, his only surviving sibling, recalls that their father would gather the family to pray the rosary before dinner.

Bergoglio, she said in an interview, was a studious and kind brother. “He was a great companion,” she says. “He always looked out for friends and family.”

During his first year at high school— a six-year vocational course focused heavily on chemistry—Bergoglio sought permission to ask classmates if they had taken their first communion. The school director agreed and Bergoglio tutored four classmates about the sacrament and introduced them to a local priest. A few months later, all four took communion.

"He already had that vocation," says Alberto Omodei, one of the classmates. "He had a desire to bring people closer to God."

Four years on, Bergoglio decided to make it his life. Walking to a spring picnic one morning, he felt the strong urge to enter a church. At a confessional, he had an intense conversation with a priest, decided to skip the picnic and vowed to enter the priesthood.

"I don't know what happened," he told an Argentine radio station last year. "But I knew I had to become a priest."

When he eventually let his parents into his plan, his mother worried the life of a priest would be too lonely. His father embraced the idea.

At 21, he was set to join a seminary in Villa Devoto, another working-class area just west of Flores. But his studies were delayed by a fever that doctors feared could kill him. They removed three cysts in his right lung. According to an account in *The Jesuit*, an authorized biography by journalists Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti published in 2010, Bergoglio was annoyed by the hopeful assurances of people who tried to cheer him. Instead, he found strength in a nun's declaration that he was "imitating Jesus" through suffering.

"Pain is not a virtue in itself," Bergoglio told his biographers, "but the way that one handles it can be."

The young man recovered, entered the seminary and decided to join the Jesuits. The order at the time administered the seminary and Bergoglio found their focus on education and brotherhood appealing.

A year later, in 1960, he moved to Cordoba, Argentina's second city, where the order trained initiates. The atmosphere, fellow initiates recall, was disciplined and formal. "Brother Bergoglio" was cheerful, but devout. He embraced the order's curriculum with its emphasis on language, literature and philosophy.

Occasionally, something else caught his eye. In a book of conversations with a rabbi friend, one of several Jewish leaders with whom Bergoglio has maintained a public dialogue over the years, he mentions a young woman he met while attending a wedding while at seminary.

“Her beauty and intellectual glow surprised me,” he says in the book, *On Heaven and Earth*, published in 2010. “I couldn’t pray for an entire week because whenever I tried, the girl would appear in my head.”

The infatuation passed. For much of the next decade, as he worked towards ordination, he studied at Jesuit universities in Argentina and Chile, and taught at Jesuit schools. Colleagues and students remember a firm but enthusiastic teacher, able to bond with almost anyone—from young pupils and their families to Church superiors and scholars. At one point, he convinced Jorge Luis Borges, one of the giants of Argentine letters, to read to his students.

A Dirty War

After his ordination in 1969 and a brief assignment in Spain, Bergoglio returned to Buenos Aires to run the order’s program for initiates. There, he quickly impressed superiors, according to fellow Jesuits from the period. In 1973, aged 36, Bergoglio was chosen as the order’s national leader, or “provincial,” a post that usually lasts six years.

He earned a reputation as someone who remembers names, hometowns, acquaintances and other small details about his colleagues and Church faithful, say several Jesuit peers. He also made important contacts, most notably with Antonio Quarracino, the bishop who would precede him as archbishop and cardinal.

But Bergoglio’s tenure coincided with one of the most tumultuous periods in Argentina’s history. Like much of the rest of Latin America, the country was riven by economic crisis and growing conflict between right and left. Some members of the regional Church were beginning to flirt with

Liberation Theology, a movement that sought to empower the poor. Priests at the extremes of the movement began to advocate armed struggle.

Though Bergoglio had worked for the poor, he made it clear in discussions that the order would not stray too far toward Marxism, according to several of his successors as provincial as well as other Jesuit officials.

Things got much harder when the Argentine military seized power in a coup in 1976 and cracked down on opponents in a brutal campaign of kidnappings, torture and murders that left between 10,000 and 30,000 dead or “disappeared.” Among the regime’s victims were at least 19 priests and scores more Catholic leftists.

One particular episode drew in Bergoglio. In May 1976, naval officers seized two Jesuit priests, Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalics, because of their pastoral work in a Buenos Aires slum. The military believed the priests were helping anti-government activists.

Fellow Jesuits say Bergoglio, by that time well versed in local politics, would sometimes get tips about pending military sweeps and alert colleagues to avoid them. In the case of Yorio and Jalics, though, no hard evidence has emerged that Bergoglio knew about the abduction in advance.

But Horacio Verbitsky, an Argentine journalist who has written extensively on the period, has said Bergoglio did not do enough to warn the priests of the danger. According to Verbitsky’s book, *The Silence*, Bergoglio withdrew his order’s protection of the two priests after they refused to quit visiting the slums, paving the way for their capture. He offers no proof of this.

In the authorized biography, Bergoglio said he long ignored such accusations “so as to not get caught in their game, not because I have anything to hide.”

In the book, Bergoglio said he worked tirelessly to secure the men's freedom. He said he convinced a military chaplain—no name is given in the biography—to miss a Mass so that he himself could officiate and ask the head of the governing junta to set them free.

The priests were held for five months, blindfolded and chained, before being drugged and released in a field. It's not clear what ultimately secured their freedom.

Bergoglio and others have described his efforts to hide or help other targets flee, including one who Bergoglio said resembled him and crossed the northern border in clerical garb and carrying his identity card.

Another case that involved Bergoglio shows the delicate balance that he and many others sought between helping victims and not falling foul of the regime. In 1976 and 1977, seven members of a leftist family near Buenos Aires disappeared, including a pregnant woman who would give birth to a baby girl in captivity. Siblings who had exiled themselves in Rome, and believed their family members had been abducted by the military, appealed to the head of the Jesuits in Italy. He contacted Bergoglio, who wrote a carefully worded letter for the father of the family, Roberto Luis de la Cuadra, to give to Mario Picchi, a bishop near the family's home.

"I bother you to introduce you to Mr Roberto Luis de la Cuadra," Bergoglio wrote, according to a photocopy of the letter still in the family's possession. "He will explain to you what this is about, and I will appreciate anything that you can do."

Several months later, Picchi told de la Cuadra he had learned that the infant girl was alive, but had been handed for adoption to another, less troublesome family, according to a surviving family member, Estela de la Cuadra.

The bishop, now deceased, told de la Cuadra he had no further details about the baby. Bergoglio, in written testimony to a court looking into the case in 2011, said he received no more

specifics about the case and only learned further details through the media.

Bergoglio's allies and many historians say there was little he could do to limit such atrocities. Many of those who did speak out were killed, and Bergoglio, though the head of the Jesuits, was far less prominent than more senior clerics outside the order.

Even those who did more at the time sympathize with Bergoglio's position. "If I hadn't come face to face with someone who had been tortured, I wouldn't have been able to speak out," says Miguel Hesayne, a retired bishop who is widely regarded as one of the few senior Church officials who criticized the regime.

But others, including Estela de la Cuadra, other family members of disappeared and human rights activists, criticize him for not speaking out more at the time and for his reluctance to talk about the period later.

Interference

Bergoglio's tenure as provincial ended in 1979. His successor appointed him rector of the top Jesuit school in Buenos Aires, the Colegio Maximo de San Miguel, where he taught, continued his own studies and remained an influential voice.

In 1986, the next provincial sent Bergoglio to Germany to work on a doctorate. Staying near Frankfurt, he studied the work of Romano Guardini, a Catholic philosopher active in the 1930s who wrote about the moral hazards of power.

"Catholicism and confronting violence is something he too had to think about," says Michael Sievernich, a professor of theology who met Bergoglio at the time and noted the parallels between the subject matter and the recent Argentine horror.

Bergoglio stayed just a few months, to the surprise of his fellow Jesuits, returning to Argentina with books and photocopies. The order lodged him at another Buenos Aires school, where he continued his studies, resumed teaching and

wrote.

His standing in the capital remained high. But soon, several Jesuits recall, Bergoglio began voicing disapproval of the way his peers ran the school, mostly petty details about courses and administration. His interference was unwelcome. Soon the provincial at the time, Victor Zorzin, sent him back to Cordoba.

"He needed to go somewhere he could relax," says Zorzin.

In Cordoba, Bergoglio's duties would be simple: say Mass, hear confessions and continue to work on his doctorate. He complied, colleagues recall, but he also brooded.

"He was no longer as active," says Andres Swinnen, a contemporary in the order and a successor to Bergoglio as provincial.

Bergoglio's exile ended abruptly in 1992 when Quarracino, now a cardinal, recommended to his superiors in Rome that he be made auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires.

He returned to the city, but instead of moving into a house at the archdiocese, went back into a Jesuit residence. There, colleagues from that period say, he began to meddle again. Once, when a friend of the order left them a gift of pastries, Bergoglio grabbed it and carried it to the kitchen, where maids and cooks could share the goodies.

"We didn't need a bishop to teach us how to share," recalls one Jesuit present, who requested anonymity because he does not want to offend the pope.

After a few months, some Jesuits began to ask when Bergoglio would leave. Eventually, says a senior Jesuit at that time, the order formally asked him to move.

"Pray for Me"

Bergoglio is not the first Jesuit to climb the ranks of the

broader Church. While they do not seek higher office, they accept appointments as bishops, archbishops and cardinals in obedience to the pope, who decides these promotions.

In the archdiocese, Bergoglio ascended quickly. By 1997, with Quarracino ailing, Pope John Paul II designated Bergoglio his successor to lead the archdiocese. Eight months later, Quarracino died.

Church officials say Bergoglio inherited an archdiocese whose finances were in disarray. He soon proved an efficient administrator; one who would rearrange its affairs to focus more on ministry to the poor.

Among other measures, he created a new vicariate to organize the charity work and preaching that priests carry out in the many villas, or slums, that surround Buenos Aires. More than 30 priests are now permanently based in the villas—there were nine when he first took over.

“He carried the church out into the streets of Buenos Aires,” says Gabriel Marronetti, the parish priest at the church in Flores where Bergoglio felt the call to service.

His popularity grew among parishioners. Photographers captured images of Bergoglio, on his own trips into the slums, washing the feet of poor faithful as part of the ritual on Holy Thursday before Easter.

Bergoglio’s political profile also grew.

He angered President Nestor Kirchner in 2004 with a speech criticizing the “exhibitionism and strident announcements” of political leaders. In a chaotic dispute with the administration of President Cristina Fernandez, Kirchner’s widow and successor, he sided with farmers and opposed her push for a gay-marriage law. He did support an alternative bill to allow civil partnerships.

With growing renown came renewed questions about his actions during the Dirty War. Lawyers looking into many of the

disappearances sought to question Bergoglio, but he exercised a provision in Argentine law allowing senior church officials to decline a summons to court.

When attorneys insisted in 2010, he forced the court to come to him, prompting a group of dozens of lawyers and judicial officials to set up a tribunal inside the archdiocese. An image of the Virgin Mary hung on one wall and other priests sat nearby, protectively.

“What sort of humility is that?” asks Estela de la Cuadra, the aunt of the disappeared baby, who is still seeking answers about her missing family members. “He’ll pose for photos paying his hotel bill, but he won’t testify in court like the rest of us?”

When Benedict stepped down in February, many Church observers thought that Bergoglio’s moment had passed. He had lost out in 2005 and was now perhaps too old to contend for the papacy at a time many Catholics were calling for the rejuvenation of the Church.

His sister, Maria Elena, recalls how she and a now deceased sister, Marta, had joked with their brother when he returned from the previous conclave.

“So you got off the hook,” Marta told him.

“Yes,” Bergoglio replied. “Thank the Lord.”

This time, before he left, Bergoglio phoned Maria Elena for a quick goodbye. “Pray for me,” he told her. “I’ll see you when I get back.”

Additional reporting by Guido Nejamkis in Buenos Aires and Edward Taylor in Frankfurt; edited by Simon Robinson, Richard Woods and Sara Ledwith.

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