

Could Pope Francis Usher in Catholic Renewal?

Catholics in Africa and Asia on Thursday greeted the election of Pope Francis from Argentina as a historic breakthrough that would pump the developing world's vital energy into a struggling Church and amplify the voice of the planet's poor.

While there was disappointment that Pope Benedict's successor did not come from the African or Asian continents, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio's Third World origins spurred hopes of a kindred spirit among Catholics from Manila to Maputo.

Argentina, in Latin America's southern cone, is as far from Africa and Asia as Europe, the prime source of previous pontiffs. But these rapidly developing southern continents of the globe, where poverty still looms large, are now home to the world's fastest growing Catholic communities.

African and Asian Catholics quickly identified with the new Pope's chosen name, in honour of St. Francis of Assisi, the 12th century saint who spurned wealth to pursue a life of poverty, as a sign of a fresh direction in the global Church.

"This will be the pope of the poor since he also comes from the far corners of the earth," said Celso Dias, a 39-year-old law firm worker, as he stopped to pray at the whitewashed Santo Antonio da Polana Cathedral in the Mozambican capital Maputo.

On the outskirts of Nigeria's commercial metropolis Lagos, Father Raymond Anoliefo, who runs a parish Church at Ibeju, said he was heartened to hear that Bergoglio had criticised the Argentine government for not doing enough to tackle poverty.

"The problems he has in his country are the same as ours:

poverty, corruption," he said. "It's encouraging to have someone from the developing world. This is 'our pope'".

In the Philippines, where more than 80 percent of the population are Catholic, Church leaders saw the selection of the first non-European pontiff in well over a millennium as a just recognition that the face of global Catholicism was changing.

"Pope Francis will have a grasp of what the Church faces in the Third World, where people are poor and yet the faith is growing fast," said Jose Palma, the Archbishop of Cebu, the largest archdiocese in the Philippines.

"In contrast, we see a decline of our faith in the more affluent Europe," he added.

Restore Dignity

The selection of the cardinal from Argentina served to reaffirm the Catholic Church's universal identity, the bishop of Benguela in Angola, Dom Eugenio Dal Corso, told reporters.

Palma saw Pope Francis' appointment signalling "a renewal" for Catholicism, where morale among some faithful has been badly battered by a widespread **child sex abuse scandal** and infighting in the Vatican bureaucracy. Western congregations have dwindled.

Yet Catholic congregations in the teeming mega-cities of Africa and Asia, and also in their rural hinterlands, have been swelling, and many said they believed Pope Francis could channel this revitalising vigour back into the body of the Church.

"The people of the West who converted us, who sent us the Gospel, they are now losing their faith. We're now the ones who must send people to convert them," said Alfonsine Manke, a retired Ivory Coast teacher in her 70s, speaking at the Saint

Francois Xavier parish in Abidjan.

"It symbolizes that the future of the Catholic faith is in the developing world ... I really feel proud and energized once again as a Catholic," said Dominic Karyarugokwo, 38, also a teacher, in the Ugandan capital Kampala.

African Catholics, who make up some 16 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics and are among its most conservative believers, said they hoped too that Pope Francis would champion the traditional Church teachings opposing same sex relationships, abortion, contraception, and women priests.

"Now that we have a pope from South America I hope he will be non-partisan in solving these sex scandals happening mostly in Europe and America," said Jennifer Maina, 35, who was heading to worship at the Holy Family Basilica in Nairobi, Kenya.

"First and foremost he has to restore the dignity of the church in the eyes of the faithful," she added.

World Is Changing

A spokesman for the Syro-Malabar Church in the south Indian state of Kerala, Father Paul Thelekkat, said he expected Pope Francis—who unlike Vatican insider and academic Benedict has long pastoral experience—to speak out against the market-driven consumer culture that he called "the curse of the world".

African Catholics, who had been hoping a candidate from their continent could win the papacy this time round, nevertheless saw the choice of a Latin American as a sign that an African Pope could still be possible one day in the future.

Likely candidates from Africa had included Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson. A leading archbishop from Ghana had said in February a black African Pope to succeed Pope Benedict would be "quite some miracle".

“It’s not a big deal that our man didn’t get the position ... Whether Pope Francis is from Ghana or Argentina, we love him,” said Accra truck driver John Kumah, 42.

“It gives people hope that one day there will be a black pope ... the world is changing,” said Cheridan Luragwa, a young job-seeker lined up outside the parish hall of the crumbling Notre Dame Cathedral in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo.

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