

Latin Americans Hail Francis as Man to Lead Troubled Church

Across Latin America, the faithful rejoiced that the new Pope Francis was one of them.

Even though some commentators said he had a reputation as being as conservative and inflexible as his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, Latin Catholics celebrated that cardinals had, in Francis' own words, gone "to the end of the world" to find him.

"A Latino is more open to others, while a European is more closed. A change like this, with a Latin American, will be very important for we Latin Americans ... (he will be) more open, more honest," said 75-year-old Ana Solis, a retired hospital worker, outside Santiago's Metropolitan Cathedral in Chile.

"I'm happy because another European pope would be like eating the same bread every day," Martin Rodriguez, a 49-year-old Mexico City cab driver, said of the first non-European pontiff in nearly 1,300 years.

The cardinals in the conclave had faced a tough task in finding a leader capable of overcoming crises caused by priestly child abuse and a leak of secret papal documents that uncovered corruption and rivalry inside the Church government or Curia.

The new pope will take up a burden that Benedict declared in February was beyond his physical capabilities.

The reaction from Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, who two years ago accused the Vatican of hampering an inquiry into

child sex abuse by Irish priests, summed up the thoughts of many.

"We pray that he will have the strength, the good health and the spiritual guidance needed to lead the Catholic Church in the many challenges it faces," Kenny said.

Challenges Ahead

Mindful of the scandals, Deise Cristina, 43, who goes to Mass every week, hailed the Church for having broken "a taboo" by choosing a Latin American, but said outside the cathedral in Sao Paulo, Brazil: We are facing a lot of challenges now and I pray that the pope will help lead our youth back to the church."

Home to 42 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, Latin America far outweighs Europe's 25 percent, although the Church has for years been losing ground to Protestant and evangelical rivals across the region.

Orani Tempesta, archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, said: "This shows that the Church is now looking at Latin America."

But the man who was widely reported to have come second to Joseph Ratzinger for the papacy in 2005 is not seen as bringing many changes to the way Church is run this time round.

"He's not going to be a big liberal, there will not be big changes in Church teaching, probably in church outreach ... I think he will be careful and conservative and we hope for the best," said Father James Bretzke, professor of moral theology at Boston College, and a Jesuit priest, like Francis.

"He has a reputation of being rather inflexible and staunchly conservative."

For Catholics across the world though, his outlook mattered less, at least for now, than his origins and his quiet, calm

demeanor as he was announced to the vast crowd in St Peter's Square – thanking God for choosing such a messenger.

Jorge Bergoglio is known in his native Argentina as a modest man from a middle class family who is content to travel by bus. He is media shy and deeply concerned about the social inequalities rife in his homeland and across Latin America.

Leonardo Steiner, general secretary of National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, in Brasilia, said: "He's a very humble man, very close to the people. We could perceive that in the way he asked for the prayer and leaned into the public."

In Nigeria, where many have hoped for a first African pope, Father Raymond Anoliefo, the priest who runs Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church, in Ibeju, on the outskirts of Lagos, said: "I'm very elated, emphatic, impressed.

"I've been shouting and screaming. It wasn't like an obvious, well known name or popular contender ... This is clearly a divine touch. The first Jesuit, the first from Latin America, something new."

"Champion for the Poor"

The official reaction to the new pope was warm, with U.S. President Barack Obama calling him "a champion of the poor and the most vulnerable among us".

"As the first pope from the Americas, his selection also speaks to the strength and vitality of a region that is increasingly shaping our world, and alongside millions of Hispanic Americans, those of us in the United States share the joy of this historic day," Obama said in a statement.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said he hoped Francis would continue to promotion of inter-faith dialogue.

"We share many common goals – from the promotion of peace, social justice and human rights, to the eradication of poverty

and hunger – all core elements of sustainable development,” he said. “We also share the conviction that we can only resolve the interconnected challenges of today’s world through dialogue.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, daughter of a Lutheran pastor, said in a statement: “Millions of believers in Germany and the whole world were waiting for this moment. Their hopes now rest on the new pope.

“I am particularly pleased, together with the Christians in Latin America, that one of theirs has been nominated to the head of the Catholic church for the first time.” Benedict is German.

Hailing a “moment of joy” for the world’s Catholics, French Prime Minister François Fillon said in a statement: In a century that is searching for meaning and peace, we all feel that the speech and influence of the Pope can help bring more light and wisdom to the human condition.”

Despite the genuine emotion of the day, it was not long before the teasing and jokes on social media began.

The World Jewish Congress offered congratulations.

Some on Twitter called the choice of an Argentine “the hand of God”, a reference to illegal goal scored by Argentine soccer legend Diego Maradona during the 1982 World Cup. Maradona himself used the phrase at the time, after referees mistakenly allowed the goal, scored with his hand, as a header.

The banter also came thick and fast from Brazilians who had hoped one of their cardinals, including the Sao Paulo archbishop who had been considered a frontrunner, would emerge as pope.

“The pope couldn’t be Brazilian, after all, GOD is Brazilian,” tweeted Cristiano Romero, a journalist.

Reporting by Reuters correspondents in United States, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Ireland; Writing by Alison Williams; Editing by Giles Elgood

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