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Religion and Democratic Contestation in Latin America

What Pope Francis Brings to Latin America

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The general accusation of improper mixing of religion with politics, or undue “politicization” of religion, is a regular feature of critiques from right and left of religious figures who address issues of social and political relevance.

Introduction

Is Pope Francis political? Is he too political? Is he “politicizing” religion? Should he “go back to church” and restrict himself to the narrowly religious? The issue erupted recently in the world press after the Pope’s visit to Mexico with his statement to reporters that “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian.” The allusion was clearly to Donald Trump, and Trump’s response was outrage and a suggestion that the Pope was too political, a pawn of the Mexican government (Yardley, 2016).¹ Controversy on this point is not new: it began early in this papacy with irate conservatives reacting to Francis’ position on inequality (“pure Marxism,” according to Rush Limbaugh); ecology (with Republican politicians urging the Pope to stick to religion); and sexuality and greater acceptance of divorced and homosexual persons (denounced as undermining doctrine by conservative clerics and newspaper columnists alike) (Douthat 2015a). Controversy about whether or not religion is political (or too political or not involved enough) did not begin with Francis. The general accusation of improper mixing of religion with politics, or undue “politicization” of religion, is a regular feature of critiques from right and left of religious figures who address issues of social and political relevance. Prominent recent examples include Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. for his opposition to segregation; liberation theologians for raising issues of inequality and political action; Mons. Oscar Romero for his denunciations of violence and repression; and Pope John Paul II for his opposition to communism.²

Linguistic conventions often distinguish between “the church and the world” and “religion and politics,” as if these were separate, self-contained spheres. But this is profoundly misleading. We all live in a world shaped by political choice, and full of political commitments. Because religious leaders and institutions live in this same world, what they say and do inevitably has political resonance. Francis acknowledged this in his response to Trump’s comment, stating: “Thank God he said I was a politician, because Aristotle defined the human person as *animal politicus* ... So at least I am a human person. As to whether I am a pawn, well, maybe. I don’t know. I’ll leave that up to your judgment and that of the people” (Yardley, 2016).³

I am grateful to Patrice Fletcher and Fortunato Mallimaci for their comments and observations on earlier drafts.

¹ Trump is not alone in promoting barriers and walls, but the specific idea of a wall along the Mexican border (to be paid for by Mexico) is associated with him.

² Elsewhere I have written extensively on the notion of politicization and on the misunderstandings to which it leads. See Levine (1979; 1986) for early statements on this issue.

³ The Pope’s remarks were part of a wide-ranging interview with the press on the Pope’s flight back to Rome following his visit to Mexico. In this same interview he refused to

The Pope's high visibility and appealing, open manner gives immediate resonance to what he says and does, and how he does it. The impact of actions and statements is more difficult to measure and evaluate. Any effort to understand impact has to begin by acknowledging that a top-down model is misleading. It is not as if the Pope snaps his fingers and institutions, movements, or individuals respond in some direct and automatic fashion. By himself the Pope cannot change public policy, clean up the environment, undo the marks of violence, or sweep away inequality. What he brings to the public sphere is an ability to focus light on key issues, while legitimizing and encouraging those already involved and sustaining them in their commitments. The answer to Stalin's famous and cynical question ("How many divisions does the Pope have?") is, then, that the Pope's ability to set the public agenda, sway opinion, legitimize initiatives, and encourage groups and individuals is a kind of power that must be acknowledged alongside conventional expressions of force and coercion.

Since his election in 2013, Francis has embodied an approach centered on personal simplicity,⁴ with a stance that is open and welcoming to all, above all to the marginalized and vulnerable: the poor, ethnic minorities, migrants fleeing violence or persecution, or victims of violence or ecological degradation. These concerns are knit together by a commitment to positive acts of mercy, what Francis has repeatedly termed "mercy" (Pope Francis, 2013; 2016). In what follows, I examine the resonance and possible impact of the Pope's public stance on five issues: peacemaking and violence; ecology; migration and migrants (internal and international); inequality; and gender and sexuality. Each of these issues has a long history in Latin America (as elsewhere) of public debates, campaigns for changes in law (and resistance to those changes), and mobilization and lobbying by individuals and social movements. Francis' role is, therefore, best understood less as initiation than as encouragement and promotion. I take the Pope's visits to the region as grounds for assessing his involvement with the issues and gauging his potential impact. His actual physical presence in the region—where he goes, who he sees, what he does, and how he does it—puts a sharper and more focused spotlight on the issues than is possible with documents alone.

Home to about 40 percent of the world's Catholics, Latin America is important to

be drawn into discussion of the debates then occurring in the Italian legislature on civil marriage, telling reporters that this was not proper for him to comment. His comment about the relation of being human to political action recalls the statement by the murdered Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was recently beatified by Francis. In a speech at Louvain University on February 2, 1980, shortly before his assassination, Romero made the point that "Our Salvadoran world is no abstraction . . . it is a world made up mostly of men and women who are poor and oppressed. And we say of that world of the poor that it is the key to understanding the Christian faith, to understanding the activity of the Church and the political dimension of that faith and that ecclesial activity. It is the poor who tell us what the world is, and what the Church's service to the world should be. It is the poor who tell us what the polis is, what the city is, and what it means for the Church really to live in that world" (Romero, 1985: 179).

⁴ Faggioli (2015: 58) speaks of a "grammar of simplicity."

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the Vatican.⁵ Because Francis is the first pope from Latin America, a “man of the peripheries” (Prieto, 2015), it is often taken for granted that he has a special affinity for issues that are central to private and public life in the region. The point is well taken, but more is involved here than a simple question of geographic origin. Francis is also the son of immigrants, and comes from a country, a church, and a region that have experienced horrific violence and deep inequalities. His biographers make it clear that the future Pope’s encounter with these realities, and with the evolving dynamic of the Church as a whole, goes a long way to explaining the origins of his decided emphasis on simplicity and of the issues that he has made central to his papacy (Cue and Ordaz, 2015; Ivereigh, 2015; Politi, 2015; Prieto, 2015; Vallely, 2015).

Setting the Scene

Although the focus of this paper is not on theology or intra-church issues, full understanding of the direction and possible impact of Francis’ words and actions requires setting them in the context of developments within the Catholic Church itself at any level. One way to understand Francis’ public positions is to see them as closely derived from traditions of Catholic Social Doctrine (with its emphasis on justice, solidarity, and organization), and shaped by the reforms of thought and practice set in motion at the Second Vatican Council a half century ago (Allen, 2015). Faggioli locates Francis squarely in these two streams of thought, as mediated by the Pope’s own experience coming of age in Latin America. He writes:

If Pope Benedict made clear the contours of the “politics” of the message and its audience (both inside and outside the Church) a “social Catholic” like Pope Francis re-proposed the essence of a theology that is indigestible to the neoliberal economic culture, to a progressivism that finds it hard to accept the ethical demands of Catholic morality an integral part of the “common good” and to a gentrified Catholicism that would like to make Jesus Christ a self-righteous moralist ... the Pope who came from the south of the world took note of the marginality and peripheral situation of Christianity in the contemporary world in order to make it not a lamentation on the deplorable state of the Church today, but a key to the pontificate of a church that starts from the margins (Faggioli, 2015: 14).

A hallmark of Francis’ public positions has been the effort to move discussion of rules, legalistic formulations, and “culture war” issues (most notably those surrounding gender and sexuality)⁶ off center stage to concentrate on openness, outreach, and

⁵ It is all the more important given the fact that the Church has been losing ground throughout the region to evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which have grown substantially in recent decades. For details, see Levine (2012c; 2014).

⁶ A notable sign of this was the closing of the investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States, who had been accused of improper doctrine. Fag-

practical acts of mercy. Faggioli (2015) also draws a parallel between John XXIII and Francis: “John tried to disengage Catholicism as such from the Cold War; Francis is trying to disengage Catholicism from the ‘culture wars.’ The objections (or worse than objections) against both popes arrive from the ones who see their attempt as an appeasement. There is a clear reversal of trends with Francis, when compared to the pontificates of his two predecessors” (p. 81). In terms of theology and memory, Francis has reversed the positions of his two immediate predecessors in ways that resonate strongly in Latin America. He has rescued liberation theology from marginalization and condemnation and publicly honored some of its most prominent heroes and martyrs (Bedoya, 2013). Receiving Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (often labeled the father of liberation theology) in the Vatican and advancing the beatification of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador (assassinated in 1980) sent signals that the culture wars of the last few decades within the church itself might be coming to an end, or at least abating notably (Malin, 2015).

Francis’ formative and adult experiences in Argentina shaped and changed his outlook. He was deeply affected by the conflict and violence that divided the country and the Catholic community, and also by the repeated economic collapses of the late twentieth century that deepened and extended poverty and exclusion. In personal terms, he moved from being a man of order and discipline to being a bishop of the people, who lived simply, paid his own bills, rode public transport everywhere, and engaged people in a direct and open way. This does not mean that he abandoned all past positions. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires he engaged in repeated public confrontations with the governments of the two Presidents Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, above all over issues of contraception, sex education, sexuality, civil unions, gay marriage, and the active promotion of human rights for victims of state terror and prosecution of those responsible. His positions on these matters have not changed, but he now argues that it is wrong for the church to focus exclusively on these issues. Other matters urgently need attention—violence, inequality, environmental degradation, migration, and the fate of migrants—and Francis has advanced these repeatedly in a wide range of forums.

Within the institutional church Francis has set in motion an ambitious program of change, including a cleanup of Vatican finances and reform of the Roman Curia; reduction of excessive legalism and pomp; and bringing the church and its ministers closer to the people. He clearly prefers welcome and blessing to exclusion and condemnation. He has described the Church as a field hospital after a battle, and made “mercy” central to its presence in society, with preferential attention for the poor and vulnerable. In church terms this is a *pastoral* agenda, devoted more to care of those in need than to theological or legal definitions.⁷ These concerns translate

goli argues that, with the election of Francis, the Vatican has in effect declared a truce on the battlefield of feminist theology (Faggioli, 2015: 53)

⁷ The term “pastoral” evokes iconic images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and his stress on the need to care for lost sheep. Emphasis on the pastoral distresses those for whom doctrinal

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directly into commitments to promote peacemaking and reduce violence; condemn and alleviate inequality; rescue the damaged environment and support those who do; advocate for victims of environmental degradation who may lose access to land, water, and clean air; and control and sanction sexual abuse. Francis has articulated this agenda in numerous interviews, homilies, speeches, and also in two major documents: the Apostolic Exhortation on *The Joy of the Gospel, Evangelii Gaudium* (2013, referred to here as EG) and his encyclical letter on the environment, *Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home* (2015, referred to here as LS). I draw freely on these along with secondary accounts and press reports.⁸

Francis has been very active and visible on the international scene from the beginning of his papacy.⁹ He has been front and center on the plight of migrants fleeing violence across the Mediterranean and Adriatic to safety in Italy (and Europe more generally). His visit to the island of Lampedusa in July 2013, where he celebrated mass for migrant victims of a shipwreck, helped bring the issue into focus in the early stages of what has evolved into a major regional and worldwide refugee crisis. He has traveled extensively (in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa), and numerous trips are scheduled for the future. On all of these occasions, his message and the tenor of his public statements have been consistent. The tone was set in the very first trip (Brazil, July 22–29, 2013), where Francis showed his pastoral touch in numerous ways. The world press was riveted by the now famous “Who am I to judge?” comment. Talking with reporters on the plane back to Rome, Francis said: “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge him?” The phrase reaffirmed the open and welcoming tone that has been a signature element of Francis’ presence, and marked a clear difference from his predecessors. Less noticed was that he gave away no ground on other issues surrounding gender and sexuality, including contraception, abortion, civil unions, and gay marriage.

On his second trip to the region (July 5–13, 2015) the Pope engaged with activist social movements and ecological issues in Paraguay and Bolivia, while managing to maneuver between partisan groups in Ecuador that sought to capture him for their cause. This visit was followed two months later by another (September 19–27) to Cuba and the United States, where Francis combined pastoral concerns (visits to schools and hospitals) and open air masses with major public addresses including speeches to a joint session of the U.S. Congress and to the General Assembly of the

clarity is a primary value. See for example, Douthat (2015b), who describes the pastoral approach as “basically rubbish.” Mickens (2016) advances a strongly contrary view. See also Wilde (2015b).

⁸ I have used newspaper accounts from *The New York Times*, *El País* (Spain), *El Tiempo* (Colombia), *La Repubblica* (Rome), and numerous Mexican papers, including *La Reforma* (Mexico City) and *El Diario* (Ciudad Juárez). I have also included accounts in specifically Catholic media like *National Catholic Reporter*, *Catholic Herald*, *Crux*, and the Vatican News Service for the full text of some speeches, like the Pope’s addresses to the U.S. Congress and to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

⁹ Much like his predecessor Pope John Paul II.

United Nations, and meetings with public officials and ordinary people. He touched directly on issues of peace, relations between the United States and Cuba, violence, inequality, and migration. Speaking to the U.S. Congress, he praised the tradition of immigration that is so central to American history, described himself repeatedly as a child of immigrants, and cited a variety of American heroes, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dorothy Day, a noted Catholic radical. The visit to Cuba and the United States was followed just two months later by an extended visit to Africa (November 25–30, 2015), where he stayed in Kenya, Uganda, and the Central African Republic.

Francis returned to Latin America in February 2016 in a visit that took him to Mexico, with a stop in Cuba for a meeting with the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow. In Mexico he traveled across the country, with stops at areas known for extreme violence and inequality. The itinerary also included a visit to Ciudad Juárez, on the U.S. border, where he officiated at a remarkable cross-border mass. Further trips to Latin America are on the agenda, including a visit to Colombia in 2017 to follow the hopefully successful negotiations between the government and guerrilla movement in which the Pope has played an important role.

Five Issues

Peacemaking and Violence

The Vatican's long tradition of involvement in international affairs is well represented in Latin America, where the Church has played a key role as an "honest broker" on a range of issues: border disputes (mediation to define the Beagle Channel line between Argentina and Chile) (Lindsley, 1987); political transitions and truth commissions (Chile, Peru, Guatemala, and El Salvador); and negotiation of truces (in civil wars or between gangs in El Salvador or Honduras). Francis has energetically taken up this role, giving a new and heightened role to professionals within the Vatican diplomatic service.¹⁰ He took a personal hand in negotiating the opening of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba and brokering peace negotiations to end the fifty year civil war in Colombia. Relations between the United States and Cuba had been frozen in place for over a half century; the wars in Colombia are even older, and alongside the massive toll of victims is a list of numerous failed efforts at peace.

Francis' role in the unfreezing of U.S.-Cuba relations is well-documented and has

¹⁰ Soon after his election, Francis named Cardinal Pietro Parolin, an experienced Vatican diplomat, as his Secretary of State. Parolin has experience in Nigeria, Mexico, and most recently Venezuela, and also a long stint as Undersecretary of State for Relations with States. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI had also recognized the importance of the diplomatic corps, naming Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Beccio, who was Nuncio in Cuba until 2011, to a high position in the Vatican's equivalent of the State Department.

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been publicly acknowledged by both sides (Boorstein, 2014; Hooper, 2014; Squires, 2015). Francis wrote personal letters to Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro urging the two to “resolve humanitarian questions of common interest, including the release of certain political prisoners, in order to initiate a new phase in relations” (cited in Hooper, 2014). He facilitated extensive talks at the Vatican between diplomatic representatives and discussed the issue at length with President Obama when Obama visited the Vatican in March 2014.¹¹ Negotiations for peace in Colombia are part of the same process. Although talks between the government and the country’s largest guerrilla group, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) began in Havana in November 2012 (before Francis was elected), he soon took an active role. Working closely with the community of Sant'Egidio (a transnational Catholic peace group with experience in Colombia), the Pope encouraged negotiations, met with President Santos in Rome, and corresponded with FARC leaders. At his meeting with President Santos, Francis was quoted as saying, “You are the person for whom I’ve prayed the most for the peace process. And I pray for this.” Santos responded, “This is why I am here, to ask for your help” (quoted in Ieraci, 2015). The Pope also met later with FARC leaders during his visit to Cuba. The Papal visit to Colombia now scheduled for early 2017 is both a prize and a follow up to these talks. Although each negotiation marks the end of a long, difficult, and costly process, in a real sense they also set the bottom line for a beginning. Signing the accords opens the way for what is likely to be a difficult and lengthy process of disarmament, pardon, economic development, and compensation rights and reconciliation. Much remains to be done, but the start is important.

Official accords and negotiated agreements are important, but they do not fully capture the changing nature of violence in the region. Although the civil conflicts, revolutionary struggles, and massive state repression of earlier decades have mostly been settled—and even Colombia appears to be on the verge of peace—violence is unlikely to disappear. On the contrary, violence has changed ground. A deadly combination of drug trafficking, gang warfare (with accompanying assassinations and kidnappings), ordinary crime, and the expansion of the region’s horrific prison system now account for more victims in some countries than during the worst periods of the 1970s and 1980s (Garrard Burnett, 2015; Levine, 2012; Wilde, 2015a). In Mexico itself, the toll of violence has exploded over the last decade or so. The most spectacular manifestations of this phenomenon include multiple assassinations, kidnappings, and bombings associated with gang warfare and fueled by the drug trade; femicide (Lakhani, 2015; Matloff, 2015); violence against journalists (Holzner, 2011); and killing of clergy (Barranco, 2014; Gallegos, 2016; Marosi and Gerber,

¹¹ The Vatican has a long-standing interest in Cuba and in opening Cuba-U.S. relations. Francis’ two immediate predecessors visited the island (John Paul II in 1998 and Benedict XVI in 2012). Francis himself had accompanied Pope John Paul II on his trip to Cuba, and later wrote a book entitled *Dialogues Between John Paul II and Fidel Castro* (Boorstein, 2014).

2016). There are also major phenomena of violence associated with migration to the north, experienced by Mexicans and inflicted on Central Americans attempting to transit through the country to the United States (Frank Vitale, 2015).

The situation is such that Mexican cartoonists greeted the Pope with a series of drawings depicting him deplaning to rivers of blood and fields of crosses (Mulato, 2016). Francis directly engaged many aspects of the violence and its causes, although he did not comment publicly on femicide, sexual abuse, or the notorious case of the 43 students kidnapped and disappeared in 2014. His itinerary included a visit to Ecatepec, a district outside Mexico City known for its violence and for the cult of the Santa Muerte; to Morelia and Michoacán, states known for gang warfare and kidnappings; and to San Cristóbal de las Casas in the southern state of Chiapas, home to much indigenous activism and to the Zapatista rebellion. Francis closed the trip in the northern border city of Ciudad Juárez, where he prayed at a memorial for those who have died at the border. He celebrated a public mass at the border, an event also viewed by thousands in the United States. Throughout his approach was consistent: denunciation of the inequalities that drive the violence (a violence often inflicted precisely on those fleeing violence); calls for care and shelter of victims; and rejection of exclusively punitive measures like border walls or the death penalty.

Ecology

With the encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, Francis entered worldwide discussions about the causes and consequences of environmental degradation. The encyclical draws on scripture, documents by previous popes (including his two immediate predecessors), relevant science and economics, and of course his namesake Francis of Assisi, famous for his love of all creation. So there are precedents to such a work in Catholic tradition, but no other Pope has made the issues so central to his public agenda or tied ecological questions so closely to social, economic and political issues. Parker (2015) writes:

Laudato Si' can be considered the most complete and authoritative document on the environmental crisis ever been issued by any religious figure. It clearly locates the church on the side of environmental justice. The basic theme of the encyclical is that nature is God's gift to all and that humans must be responsible stewards of this gift. Because nature is a free gift, access to things like land, clean water and uncontaminated air are rights, and should not be subject only to economic criteria" (author translation).

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Francis has articulated this message on every one of his trips to Latin America. In doing so, he joins and reinforces an already substantial body of thought, activism, and social movements concerned with environmental issues. Particular flash points for mobilization and conflict have included rights to land, access to water, and local resistance to mining and oil drilling. Struggles over land rights in the Amazon basin have precipitated notable violence by police and military, and also by armed groups working for developers and landowners. Catholic leaders and institutions (including the Pastoral Land Commission) have been deeply involved, and some have fallen victim (Fowks, 2015). On his first trip to the region, Francis took on the defense of the Amazon, meeting with indigenous leaders who told him they were resisting ranchers and farmers trying to invade their land in the northeast (Winfield, et al, 2013). Two years later in Ecuador, where disputes over concessions for oil drilling on indigenous lands have been intense, Francis also made a point of calling for the protection of the Amazon and of the indigenous people who live there (Yardley, 2015). “The goods of the earth are meant for everyone,” he stated, “and however much one may parade his property, it has a social mortgage. The tapping of natural resources, which are so abundant in Ecuador, must not be concerned with short term benefits” (Winfield, 2015).

Disputes between indigenous communities and mining interests have been particularly sharp in the Andean region. Resistance to mining development and to the associated degradation of water and air are a regular part of the scene in Peru, with sharp moments of violence that have claimed numerous victims during protests in the communities of Conga and Bagua, and others surrounding smelting operations at La Oroya. Some priests and Bishops (notably, Bishop Pedro Barreto) have been prominent in these conflicts, as has Radio Marañon, a church-supported radio network in the region of Jaén. Both the bishop and the radio network have been the targets of sharp criticism by government and the mining industry (Arellano Yanguas, 2015; Fowks, 2015; Salazar, 2006).

Migration and Migrants

With the extended war in Syria and its exploding toll of violence and refugees, immigration and the horrific situation of migrant families and children have taken center stage in Europe. Migrants and migration also became a hot-button issue in the 2016 election in the United States, with migrants from Central America and Mexico sharing the spotlight with refugees from other parts of the world. Within Latin America itself, international migration is particularly salient in Mexico and Central America, as individuals, families, and often young children try to reach what they hope will be safety and a better life in the North. A new wave of Cuban migrants moving through Central America and Mexico has followed the opening of relations with the United States, as fear of the loss of special status drives many Cubans to take the chance.

Francis has consistently advanced a call for welcome, compassion, and care for refugees and migrants. In *The Joy of The Gospel*, he states plainly: “Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all. For this reason, I exhort all countries to a general opening, which, rather than fearing the loss of cultural identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis” (EG, 210). Here he reinforces a position that has been central to the public agenda of the U.S. Catholic Bishops for well over a decade. Issues surrounding migration and migrants were front and center during the trip to Mexico and nowhere more prominent than in Francis’ visit to Ciudad Juárez, on the border with the United States. Facing a militarized border, Francis prayed at a memorial to those who have died and, as mentioned above, celebrated a public mass with thousands watching on both sides of the border. It is worth quoting the description of this event by correspondents following the Pope:

Francis slowly walked up to a sloped memorial that was built for his visit to commemorate those who have died along the Mexican border. He stood before a large cross overlooking the border fence, made the sign of the cross, and prayed before laying a bouquet of flowers on a small table before the cross. Then he looked over to the United States and waved his hand to offer a papal blessing. It lasted two minutes, maybe three. But for those moments, on both sides of the border, despite the huge crowds, there was only silence (Yardley and Ahmed, 2016).

Symbolic events matter, and as we have seen, this particular event had immediate reverberations in the heated debates about immigration now raging in U.S. politics.

Inequality

From his earliest public pronouncements, Francis has drawn the fire of conservatives (“A Cautionary Epistle to Pope Francis,” 2015) with his denunciation of trickle down economic theories:

... which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power, and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. (EG, 54)

The Pope’s denunciation of entrenched inequality goes beyond the provision of welfare and charity—“merely temporary responses” (EG, 202)—to a vigorous critique of economies of exclusion. “Just as the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say, ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills”

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What is striking about Francis' public stance on these issues is how he has combined an effort to end the culture wars, to be open and welcoming to all (including gay people), and to provide for flexibility in practice with the affirmation of maintaining pre-existing basic legal and doctrinal positions.

(EG, 53).

Latin America remains marked by deep and persisting economic inequality, often reinforced by ethnic and racial discrimination. Francis has made this point in every trip to the region, but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Bolivia, where he troubled conservatives by accepting a gift from President Evo Morales of a crucifix carved into a wooden hammer and sickle.¹² In his speech to Second World Meeting of Popular Movements,¹³ he stated: “let us say no an economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules, rather than service ... that economy kills, that economy excludes, that economy destroys Mother Earth” (Prieto, 2015: 150). In the Andean countries, as in Mexico, Francis included ethnic discrimination in his discourse on inequality. As part of his visit to the southern state of Chiapas, the pope prayed at the tomb of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, a defender of indigenous communities who had been marginalized by the two previous popes as too radical.

Gender and Sexuality

Issues surrounding gender and sexuality are universal flash points for debate and dispute between religion and politics, and within religions. These include so-called pelvic issues (sex and artificial contraception, including the use of condoms and abortion); sex education; questions of sexual identity, including homosexuality; gender equality; and matters concerning marriage and the family, such as family law and divorce. All of these issues have a long history in Latin America, but recent years have seen a change in the mix, with concerted moves to legalize civil unions and same sex marriage (broadly known in Latin America as “egalitarian marriage”) making strides in numerous countries and local jurisdictions.¹⁴ What is striking about Francis' public stance on these issues is how he has combined an effort to end the culture wars, to be open and welcoming to all (including gay people), and to provide for flexibility in practice¹⁵ with the affirmation of maintaining pre-existing basic legal and doctrinal positions.

¹² The crucifix was a replica of one designed by the Reverend Luís Espinal, a Jesuit priest who was tortured and killed by Bolivian paramilitary squads in 1980. Francis prayed at the site of Espinal's assassination upon his arrival in Bolivia.

¹³ This group has close associations with comparable organizations in Argentina including the Movimiento Evita, the Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (CTEP), and the Movimiento de Trabajadores Excluidos (MTE), with whom then-Archbishop Bergoglio regularly celebrated mass from 2008 onwards (Prieto, 2015: 167–69).

¹⁴ Three countries in Latin America (Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil) now provide full marriage equality, joining Canada and the United States within the Americas as a whole. Same sex marriage is constitutionally banned in Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, Honduras, and Cuba. Elsewhere the picture is mixed, with civil unions permitted in Ecuador (along with a ban on marriage itself) and some subnational jurisdictions (as in Mexico). Corrales and Pecheny (2010), Vaggione (2009), and Htun (2009) provide useful accounts of this multi-dimensional issue.

¹⁵ For example, in the case of contraception for those threatened by the spread of the Zika virus.

This nuanced and flexible position, and the effort to move such issues off center stage, has resulted in a mixed message that ends up satisfying no one completely (Goodstein, 2015a). Those seeking reform in church and society want greater openness to communion for divorced and remarried persons, a more forthright stance on gender equality (in general and within the institutional church), and more active engagement with lesbian, gay, and transgender issues. Conservatives in church and society (Douthat, 2015a; 2015b) want a return to more open and insistent denunciation of contraception, abortion, and divorce, and affirmation of denial of communion to divorced and remarried Catholics. On sexual abuse within the church, the record is good but mixed. Jozef Wesolowski, the former apostolic nuncio to the Dominican Republic who was charged with pedophilia and possession of child pornography, was removed from office, laicized, and returned to the Vatican to face criminal charges. He died in mid-2015 while awaiting trial. In 2015 the Pope accepted the resignation of Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City (USA) who was accused of covering up sexual abuse, but around the same time created an uproar in Chile with his appointment of Juan Barros as bishop of the southern city of Osorno. Barros had been accused of covering up sexual abuse by others. The pope made things worse by calling the bishop's critics "dumb," and suggesting they were being "led by the nose by the leftists who organized all this" (Bonney, 2015; see also Ivereigh, 2015). During the visit to Mexico, no mention was made of the legacy left by the sexual abuse scandals of the Legionaries of Christ (Patterson, 2016).

As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis had strongly opposed the government on sex education in schools, condom use, gay rights legislation, and national approval of civil unions and same sex marriage. But he has kept mostly silent as similar legislation spread throughout the region. On gender equality (especially within the Church), the Pope's position is ambiguous. Like many prelates before him, he praises the unique gifts of women, urging love and respect. He has begun to draw down the culture wars with feminist theology and rebuilt relations with North American nuns.¹⁶ But patriarchal traditions are hard to shake, and the door remains firmly shut on the admission of women to the priesthood, or for that matter on male priests marrying and forming families.

Conclusion: Is the Pope Political?

Consider once again the questions with which I began. Is Pope Francis political? Is he too political? Is religion being politicized in some inappropriate way? The answer is no. Politics does not explain the origins of the Pope's agenda; political definitions and categories (right or left, liberal or conservative) are not enough to make sense of the underlying motivations and where they may lead. Francis is no more political, and religion is no more politicized

¹⁶ Faggioli (2015) states that, with the election of Francis, the Vatican in effect has declared a truce on the battleground of feminist theology (p. 53).

Politics does not explain the origins of the Pope's agenda; political definitions and categories (right or left, liberal or conservative) are not enough to make sense of the underlying motivations and where they may lead. Francis is no more political, and religion is no more politicized with him, than in numerous cases in the past.

What the Pope brings to Latin America is a message with inevitable political resonance, but not therefore, and certainly not only, a political message. It is a message rooted in scriptural sources that support an agenda that is already being advanced by an active constituency on the ground.

with him, than in numerous cases in the past. Religion has always been political in Latin America, as elsewhere, providing norms and values to guide and judge behavior, offering symbols, leadership, and institutional resources to promote these ideas, sometimes in support of the status quo, sometimes in opposition.

What the Pope brings to Latin America is a message with inevitable political resonance, but not therefore, and certainly not only, a political message. It is a message rooted in scriptural sources that support an agenda that is already being advanced by an active constituency on the ground. What knits the different elements of this agenda together into a coherent package is not a political program, but rather the core goal of addressing faith in the context of life, real life as lived and experienced every day throughout the region. In that context, the commitment is to care for those most in need, not only as charity, but as a positive contribution to bettering lives. The issues that move Pope Francis cannot be treated in isolation from one another. Comments that distinguish “political” from supposedly more appropriate “religious” action miss the point. They are part of the same process, the same commitment. What holds them all together is the overarching theme of Francis’ papacy: the centrality of mercy.

Mercy requires healing wounds, mercy requires compassion and welcoming those in need, mercy longs for peace and hopes for a better life for all, not just a few. When general calls for mercy and openness meet head on with policies and political programs, sparks can fly and those advancing a practical cause with religious justification find themselves criticized for being improperly “political” and not confining themselves to their properly more delimited religious sphere. The charge that was labeled at Martin Luther King is also directed at Francis by those who feel challenged by his positions and the way he goes about doing things. But the charge is misplaced. What Pope Francis brings to Latin America is an approach that is consistent across all issues, and bound together by his commitment to practical acts of mercy. The headline in one Italian newspaper had it precisely correct: “Bergoglio’s mercy creates a scandal in the church” (Bianchi, 2015). The real scandal is mercy.

Francis has set so much in motion that it is difficult to believe that he has been pope for only a few years. The obvious question that follows is what to expect in the future? How and how much will these initiatives survive and prosper? How will they shape public discourse, and affect the ways in which the Church as an institution and community acts in the world. What impact will they have on how Catholicism is lived and experienced? It is no simple matter to change the culture and direction of an institution like the Catholic Church, with its embedded traditions and enormous geographical and cultural spread. Change is bound to be slow and marked by hiccups and setbacks. All this is true, but on the record, there are grounds for optimism despite sustained and often fierce opposition from both clerical and lay conservative groups.

From the very beginning of his Papacy (from the election itself and his first

appearance on the Vatican balcony), Francis has reshaped the public face of Catholicism. He has shown that the Church can engage the world in something other than a defensive manner. In everything he does and says, from how he dresses, the shoes he wears, the car he drives, where he lives, and what and where he eats, Francis embodies the idea of a church committed to move away from medieval pomp to greater to a simpler life and a joyful engagement with the world as it is. The vision that moves Francis is deeply rooted in the Second Vatican Council, which recognized that the Church is more than its formal organizations. It is not a perfect and unchanging organization in an imperfect world. Rather, it is above all “a Pilgrim People of God,” working its way through history. Conceived in this way, the Church necessarily participates actively in social and political debate—not in the dominating style of other eras (of Christendom) but as one player in a plural environment. Francis also knows that the future of Catholicism (and of Christianity in general) is not to be found in Europe, but rather in the global South. He has recognized and welcomed that reality with episcopal and other appointments that bring non-European prelates to more prominent roles, something that is bound to shape the face of the institution over the long term.¹⁷

From the onset of his papacy, Francis has made simplicity and mercy central to his public presence, and to the vision he articulates for the Church. Together these undergird his stance on the issues and disputes examined here. Simplicity requires direct engagement with reality and concern for mercy enjoins active efforts to defend and help those most in need. Inequality shapes the world in which the Church lives and does its work. Inequality is tied closely to ecological degradation, because those who suffer most from environmental degradation are the poor and powerless, who lose land, water, and health. Migrants are victims of injustice, strangers to be welcomed with compassion. Matters of violence and of gender and sexuality are often brought together in discussions of “life,” which as a practical matter boils down for many to opposition to abortion. Francis is firm in his condemnation of abortion, but situates this in the context of a broader defense of life which requires opposition to war, to the death penalty, and to life-shortening inequalities and injustices of all kinds.¹⁸

A short-term score card on the issues reveals directly visible effects, above all, in the area of peacemaking and violence. The Pope’s salient role in unfreezing relations between Cuba and the United States and promoting and sustaining peace negotiations in Colombia is already having an impact. The civil wars in Colombia have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives over more than five decades. If peace is successfully negotiated, if it holds, and if the accords are implemented, the potential long-term

¹⁷ This clearly distinguishes him from his immediate predecessors. Indeed, Faggioli (2015) writes that the election of Bergoglio to the papacy “is an unprecedented step toward the fulfillment of what the German theologian Karl Rahner called ‘the world church’” (p. 61).

¹⁸ Francis renewed his call for all Catholics to oppose the death penalty in his public address on February 21, 2016.

Francis also knows that the future of Catholicism (and of Christianity in general) is not to be found in Europe, but rather in the global South.

Francis has changed the tune of the Church and he has also begun to change the players in the orchestra. He has shown himself to be a skilled politician and an astute manager of bureaucracies.

benefits are clear: deaths avoided, economic opportunities opened, lives rebuilt. In terms of violence more generally, by himself of course the Pope cannot control war making or gang fighting. But although he works primarily with tools of moral persuasion, he also has more specific means at his disposal: encouraging groups and individuals who work for peace; sustaining church people who resist violence, facilitate mediation, and work for rights; visiting those held in the region's horrific jails; lobbying for compassion and acceptance of migrants, especially children. All these he has done.

On migration and migrants, inequality, and the environment the effort has to be seen more as a matter of setting and legitimizing the agenda than as a question of immediate results. On migration, for example, Francis' positions and his presence in Mexico humanized the issue, encouraged those already providing aid and protection, sustained the U.S. bishops in their already strong position, and entered directly into U.S. electoral debates, providing a counterpoint to the positions of many Republican candidates in the 2016 election year, most notably (although not exclusively) Donald Trump. Something similar can be said about ecology: the issues are not new, but Francis has undoubtedly put them back on the radar of public debate.

Francis' impact, even symbolic, is more difficult to find on other issues. He has highlighted inequality as a legitimate issue, legitimized its presence in public debate, and in so doing, converged with political and social movements, as in the U.S. elections. However, movement on this question within Latin America seems many steps away. Matters of gender and sexuality remain the most ambiguous of all, the most resistant to change. This is no surprise, for these are notoriously difficult to change, all the more so in the Catholic Church, which remains strongly patriarchal in structure and operating style.

What will happen when this Pope departs the scene? Will those energized within the Church be able to continue working on the issues he has made front and center in his papacy? Much will depend on the people Francis manages to put in place and on the relations he can promote and institutionalize with these constituencies: in the clergy, with social movements, in schools and universities, with appointments of bishops, and in the Vatican itself. Francis has made a significant beginning, one that responds to a real constituency. Compared to his two immediate predecessors, Francis has changed the tune of the Church and he has also begun to change the players in the orchestra. He has shown himself to be a skilled politician and an astute manager of bureaucracies. As Marco Politi (2015) puts it in his admiring biography, "Francis plays for keeps." It is beginning to show.

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