

New pope elected as Catholic Church tries to stem crisis

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Former cardinal of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was yesterday installed as the new head of the Catholic Church.

The elevation of “Pope Francis” has received breathless media coverage and been hailed by heads of government around the world. The Church and its allies in ruling circles internationally are consciously using the occasion to help ensure the survival of Roman Catholicism, following the eruption of numerous corruption, sexual abuse, and related scandals.

Joseph Ratzinger’s unprecedented resignation as pope last month threw the Church—an institution that for two millennia has functioned as a bulwark of reaction, obscurantism and oppression—into further crisis.

Bergoglio is the first non-European pope in 1,200 years and the first ever from the Jesuit order.

While Bergoglio previously was a member of different Vatican departments, he never previously worked within the Vatican, in contrast to Ratzinger, who had spent the bulk of his career within the Church’s apparatus in Rome. With the nomination of Pope Francis, the Church’s senior cardinals are apparently hoping that an “outsider” can reorganise the institution amid reports of murky financial arrangements and money laundering, and factional rifts revealed in the so-called “Vatileaks” affair, including groups of senior clergy being blackmailed for homosexual activities.

Ratzinger’s resignation, it is now clear, was prompted by these scandals. While “health reasons” was the stated reason, the Church has now elected a new 76-year-old pope who is just two years younger than Ratzinger was when he became pope in 2005, and who only has one lung, with the other removed when he was a teenager.

The Church’s nomination of an Argentinian pope is aimed at bolstering its international standing. Part of the calculation is demographic—the number of active Catholics in Europe is rapidly declining and insufficient

numbers of young people are now joining the priesthood to sustain existing parishes without importing clergy from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. An estimated 40 percent of the world’s Catholics are in Central and South America, though the Church is also under pressure there from rival evangelical groups on the one hand, and growing numbers of young people rejecting all religion on the other. Within Argentina, for example, fewer than 10 percent of the population regularly attend mass.

At the same time there are definite political calculations behind Bergoglio’s elevation. Within Latin America, the Church has long worked hand in hand with the most reactionary political forces, in league with US imperialism, against left-wing movements of the working class and oppressed peasantry. The continent is now wracked by enormous social inequality and mass opposition to the free market economic policies that have impoverished wide layers of the population in numerous countries over the last three decades. The Church is preparing to again intervene against the threat of social revolution—now with the additional authority of an Argentinian pope.

US President Barack Obama hailed Pope Francis as a “champion of the poor and the most vulnerable among us”, adding that “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”.

The world’s media broadcast hours of footage, and devoted endless newspaper space, to the minutiae of the Vatican’s arcane and medieval election processes. After the announcement of Bergoglio nomination, no less effort was spared relating anecdotes about the new pope’s humility and compassion. This has included reports that as cardinal of Buenos Aires, the man took public transport, lived in an apartment, and cooked his own meals. Remarkable achievements!

The US and international media conglomerates have

largely ignored the serious questions that have been raised in Argentina about Bergoglio's role within the Church during the military's rule between 1976 and 1983. During this time an estimated 30,000 left-wing opponents of the junta were "disappeared" in a US-backed "dirty war". The Argentinian Catholic Church enjoyed intimate relations with the military, both in the lead up to its seizure of power and under the junta.

Bergoglio was ordained in 1969, and served as the Jesuit Provincial (elected leader of the order) for Argentina between 1973 and 1979, before becoming rector of the Philosophical and Theological Faculty of San Miguel between 1980 and 1986. In the 1990s he began to be promoted up the Church hierarchy by Pope John Paul II.

Under the junta rule, Bergoglio worked to enforce within his Jesuit order the Vatican's edicts against "liberation theology". This movement had been founded by reformist elements within the Latin American church in the 1960s, seeking to focus on the plight of the poor as a means of maintaining the Church's position amid a political radicalisation of the working class across the continent.

In 1976, Bergoglio demanded that two Jesuit priests—Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalics—cease preaching liberation theology and leave the slums where they were working. After they refused, Bergoglio had them removed from the order. The two men were subsequently kidnapped and tortured by the military. According to Associated Press: "Yorio accused Bergoglio of effectively handing them over to the death squads by declining to tell the regime that he endorsed their work."

Argentinian journalist Horacio Verbitsky wrote a book in 2005 covering the affair, *El Silencio: de Paulo VI a Bergoglio: las relaciones secretas de la Iglesia con la ESMA*. "He put the safety of the [Jesuit] Society of Jesus above the safety of the priests," Verbitsky alleged.

The case was brought before the Argentinian courts by a human rights lawyer in 2005, but remains unresolved. Bergoglio has denied the allegations, accusing Verbitsky of "slander". He maintains that he intervened privately with the junta on behalf of the two priests after their detention, and secured their release.

Bergoglio was called to testify in the case after a Catholic lay worker, María Elena Funes, who was imprisoned at the infamous ESMA (navy mechanics) torture center, testified in relation to the disappearance of the French nuns Alice Domon and Leonie Duquet and said that the two priests had been abducted by the military

after Bergoglio took away their protection.

Luis Zamora, the former national deputy and lawyer in the case, described Bergoglio's testimony as "reticent," adding, "When someone is reticent, they are lying, they are hiding part of the truth."

In another episode, Bergoglio has been accused of ignoring the pleas for help from a family that lost five of its members to the junta, including a young woman who was five months pregnant before she was kidnapped and killed in 1977. Bergoglio allegedly assigned a junior colleague to the case, who was subsequently given a note from a colonel explaining that the young woman had given birth while in detention and that the baby had been given to an "important" family. Despite his involvement in this case, Bergoglio testified in 2010 that he did not know about stolen babies until after the fall of the dictatorship.

After the end of military rule, now Pope Francis worked to shield the criminals within the armed forces. In 2006 he endorsed a public protest organised by ex-military and right-wing forces demanding blanket immunity from prosecution for crimes committed during the junta. In 2012, responding to growing disgust among ordinary Argentineans, Bergoglio issued a statement on behalf of the country's bishops formally apologising for the Church's "failures" during the "dirty war"—while at the same time placing equal blame for the violence on the military dictatorship and its left-wing opponents.

"History condemns him," Reuters reported Fortunato Mallimacci, the former dean of social sciences at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, as saying. "It shows him to be opposed to all innovation in the church and above all, during the dictatorship, it shows he was very cosy with the military."



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