

THE ELECTION OF POPE FRANCIS

An Inside Account of the Conclave That Changed History

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ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

THE ELECTION OF POPE FRANCIS on March 13, 2013, was a historic and momentous event for the Catholic Church. In becoming bishop of Rome, he also became the leader of the 1.2 billion church members around the world. He was elected in a secret ballot by 115 cardinals under the age of eighty who were kept incommunicado and isolated from the outside world during the conclave¹ in the Vatican's famous Sistine Chapel. He was elected for life, but can resign of his own free will.

His election marked a number of "firsts." He is the first pope from Latin America, home to the majority of the world's Catholics; the first non-European in almost thirteen hundred years;² the first Jesuit pope; and the first from one of the great metropolises of the southern hemisphere. He is also the first bishop of Rome ever to take the name of Francis, after Saint Francis of Assisi. In taking that name he sent a distinct signal to the world that he intended to be close to the poor, but at the same time the name recalled the mission given to Saint Francis by the Lord from the cross in the chapel of San Damiano: "Go, repair my house."

This book focuses on his election and tells the story of how this seventy-six-year-old cardinal from Argentina, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires, already on the threshold of retirement, came from the periphery and was elected leader of the Catholic Church in a conclave that lasted just over twenty-four hours. Even though he was runner-up in the 2005 conclave, his election as the 265th successor to Saint Peter took the world by surprise, as he was not ranked among the likely candidates to succeed Benedict XVI; at best, he was considered an outsider.

To understand how he became pope it is necessary to know the context in which his election took place. This introduction seeks to provide that context by recalling the situation of the Catholic Church when Benedict XVI stunned the world on February 11, 2013, by announcing

that he would resign seventeen days later; he was the first pope in six hundred years to resign. The Church was then living through a period of great crisis—indeed, several crises.

The first was due to the scandal of the sexual abuse of minors by priests and religious, and its cover-up by cardinals, bishops, and religious superiors in several countries, mostly in the Western world. The scandal surfaced in the late 1980s/early 1990s and exploded with uncontrollable force in the early part of the twenty-first century, first in the United States, then in Ireland, the UK, Australia, Belgium, and Germany. It did incalculable damage to the credibility of the Catholic Church and its clergy. Seeking to respond to these scandals, the church in England and Wales first, in the year 2000, invited Lord Nolan, an esteemed UK judge, to investigate the abuse of minors by priests and the safeguarding of children in the Church. The 2001 Nolan Report report led to the drafting, and the approval a year later, of guidelines for safeguarding children and dealing with abusers in England and Wales. In the following year, 2002, the US bishops responded to the crisis that had exploded in Boston and elsewhere, and, at a meeting in Dallas, Texas, agreed to a charter for dealing with this grave problem. The Vatican too, starting under John Paul II but especially under Benedict XVI, moved to respond with strict new norms in church legislation for dealing with the crimes of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy.

Under pressure from the media and public opinion, some governments also took action. The Irish government established a commission in the year 2000 to inquire into child sexual abuse by clergy. Nine years later the commission published a devastating final report. The Australian government's newly established Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse began its work in January 2013, just before Benedict announced his resignation.

In 2005, the Vatican had to deal with the terrible scandal linked to Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the charismatic, Mexican-born founder of the Legionaries of Christ, a religious institute composed of priests and seminarians and associated with a branch of lay men and women, now present in twenty countries. Maciel, who founded the institute in 1941 and led it until 2005, enjoyed the trust of John Paul II and senior Vatican officials because of his strong, orthodox positions on theological and moral issues, his success in attracting many young men to the priesthood, his founding of Catholic educational institutes in many countries, and his facility in raising money for papal projects—including in Poland. But an investigation ordered by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as John Paul II was on his deathbed and conducted by Monsignor Charles Scicluna, the Vati-

can's top prosecutor³ of clergy who sexually abused minors, concluded that Maciel had abused minors and was guilty of other serious offenses. Benedict XVI sentenced the then more-than-eighty-year-old priest to a life of prayer and penance.⁴

Because of such scandals, many of which were first revealed by the media, bishops were accused of putting the good name of the church institution before the welfare of children, covering up the abuse, and protecting priest abusers. Many lost credibility in the countries affected. Catholic priests in these lands who had lived their lives with integrity were demoralized and were sometimes treated with suspicion or contempt. In some countries the Church was in a veritable free-fall.

The sexual abuse scandal, which had shaken the Church to its foundations, was still unfolding as the cardinals gathered in Rome to elect a new pope. It hovered like a dark cloud over their pre-conclave meetings as organizations representing victims of abuse, especially in the United States, called on several cardinals not to participate in the election because of their alleged failure to have dealt properly with abuse cases in their dioceses.

A second major crisis, known as "Vatileaks," erupted in May 2012 when an Italian investigative journalist, Gianluigi Nuzzi, published a three-hundred-page book, *His Holiness: The Secret Papers of Benedict XVI*,⁵ based on confidential correspondence stolen from Pope Benedict's desk and given to the reporter by Paolo Gabriele, the pope's butler. An estimated 75 percent of it had crossed the desk of the pope's private secretary. The trove of leaked material fell into four categories: exchanges between senior Vatican officials and other persons with Benedict XVI or his private secretary; exchanges between Vatican officials and the cardinal secretary of state; communications between the head of the Vatican bank (the Institute for the Works of Religion) with the pope and senior Vatican officials; and encrypted reports to the Secretariat of State from the Holy See's nunciatures (embassies) in many countries, including the United States, Germany, Spain, Israel, and Japan.

The explosive documentation included letters from the number-two official in the Governorate of the Vatican City State, Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, to Benedict XVI and Cardinal Taricisio Bertone, his secretary of state, denouncing corruption, malpractice, internal fighting and the internal opposition he encountered when he tried to clean things up. The archbishop lost the internal battle and was subsequently reassigned, somewhat unwillingly, to Washington DC as the papal nuncio or ambassador to the United States, in a classic move of "promote so as to remove."⁶

The documentation also included correspondence relating to Benedict XVI's controversial rehabilitation of four excommunicated Lefebvrite

bishops, including Richard Williamson, a British-born cleric who denied that six million Jews had died in the Nazi gas chambers and claimed that the US government had staged the September 11 attacks as a pretext to invade Afghanistan and Iraq. The four bishops were members of the Society of Saint Pius X, founded in 1970 by French archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who rejected some of the Second Vatican Council's teachings. After Archbishop Lefebvre ordained the four in Switzerland in 1988, in defiance of John Paul II, all five were declared excommunicated. Archbishop Lefebvre died in 1991. Benedict's 2009 rehabilitation of the four remaining excommunicated bishops including Williamson caused a storm in the Jewish community, but it subsequently emerged that no one in the Vatican had informed the pope about Williamson's declarations.

The leaking of the confidential documents caused grave concern, not only among cardinals and bishops but also among government officials in some countries, who wondered whether their personal correspondence with Benedict or senior Vatican officials might also end up in the Italian press. Since confidentiality seemed no longer assured in the Vatican, many hesitated to write to Rome.

On May 24, 2012, after the publication of Nuzzi's book, the pope's butler, Paolo Gabriele, was arrested, charged with "aggravated theft" of confidential documents, and sent for trial. Pope Benedict was shocked and saddened by all of this. Moreover, the day before the arrest, Benedict suffered another grave blow when he was informed that the man he had tapped to head the Vatican bank, Professor Gotti Tedeschi, who had helped him write his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), had been sacked by the institute's board of directors for an alleged deterioration in standards of governance, though he insisted the reasons were linked to his push for transparency.⁷

A Vatican tribunal in October 2012 found Paolo Gabriele guilty of the theft of confidential documents and sentenced him to eighteen months in prison, but Benedict XVI visited him in prison before Christmas and pardoned him.

In the wake of Vatileaks, Benedict XVI set up a commission of three cardinals over the age of eighty—Julián Herranz (Spain), Salvatore De Giorgi (Italy), and Josef Tomko (Slovakia)—to investigate the wider background to the Vatileaks scandal. They handed him their confidential report on December 17, 2012. Soon after the pope announced his resignation, Italy's highest circulation daily, *La Repubblica*, ran a front-page story under the title "Sex and Career: The Blackmails in the Vatican behind Benedict XVI's Resignation"⁸ that claimed to reveal key elements of the top-secret report. According to the article, the report revealed the ex-

istence of “lobbies” in the Vatican linked to religious orders and geographical areas, along with a “gay lobby.” It alleged that Benedict decided to resign after reading the report.

These events in 2012 and 2013 left everyone in Rome and leaders worldwide wondering what was happening in the Vatican and what might come next. It was difficult for cardinals gathering for the conclave to distinguish fact from fiction and misinformation. The situation seemed out of control.

Cardinals, especially those from Europe, the Americas, and Australia who were more aware of what had happened, were concerned by the leaks, the alleged corruption, the infighting, and much else that had been revealed and that was damaging the Church’s credibility. Before electing a new pope, they wanted to understand the real situation in the Vatican and what problems he would have to deal with.

Many foreign cardinals, but also several Italians, were looking to elect a pope who could govern, clean house, and bring order in the Roman Curia. They wanted a pope who would bring transparency to Vatican finances and ensure that the Vatican would incentivize rather than obstruct the preaching of the Gospel.

In addition to these two major crises, several other crises had emerged clearly during the eight-year pontificate of Benedict XVI, and these also weighed heavily on the minds of the cardinals as they gathered for the election.

The first related to the rapid decline of Christianity in Europe and the spread of secularization in what had once been the powerhouse of the Church. The number of Catholics going to church in Europe had decreased significantly over the preceding forty years (Poland was the exception); so too had the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Five decades earlier, Europe had been sending missionaries all over the world, but by 2013 Africa and Asia were sending priests, and especially nuns, to help the struggling church in Europe. Paradoxically, as the Catholic Church in Europe declined (in spite of the emergence of new lay movements⁹), it was now flourishing in African and Asian countries where vocations were plentiful. Significantly, too, some 43 percent of the world’s Catholics now lived in Latin America. The Church had ceased to be Eurocentric.

The decline of Christianity and Catholicism in Europe was a matter of grave concern to the cardinals, the majority of whom were European. They wondered what kind of pope might help revive the faith on the old continent. Did it have to be another European? What would it mean for the future of the Church in Europe to elect a non-European?

At the same time, the cardinals were aware that the Catholic Church in Latin America was also in crisis in several countries, as many faithful were abandoning Catholicism and moving to the evangelical or Pentecostal churches, which drew inspiration and often much funding from the purveyors of the “Prosperity Gospel” in the United States. The evangelicals were growing, especially among poor people on the outskirts of the great metropolises.

Brazil, the country with the largest Catholic population in the world, illustrated the problem most clearly. In 1940, some 95.2 percent of the population was Catholic, but this had decreased to 73.8 percent by the year 2000. The evangelicals, on the other hand, had grown from 2.7 percent of the population in 1940 to 9 percent in 1991, and their numbers were continuing to rise.

Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy and former archbishop of São Paulo, highlighted the gravity of the problem at the 2005 synod of bishops. He reported that while 83 percent of all Brazilians were Catholic in 1991, the number had declined to 67 percent by 2005. “The number of Brazilians who declare themselves Catholics has diminished rapidly, on an average of 1 percent a year,” he stated, adding that “there are two Protestant pastors for each Catholic priest in Brazil, and the majority come from the Pentecostal churches.” Noting that much the same seemed to be happening throughout Latin America, he asked: “We wonder, until when will Latin America remain a Catholic continent?” He called for the Catholic Church to “pay more attention to this serious situation.” Less than two weeks later, Pope Benedict decided that the Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops Conferences (CELAM) would hold its fifth plenary assembly at the Marian shrine of Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007, and that he would attend.¹⁰

This flight of Catholics from the Church to the evangelicals and Pentecostals across the Latin American continent was one of the main issues on the agenda of the fifth CELAM conference at Aparecida, which took place from May 13 to 31, 2007. Benedict XVI opened the conference, at which 162 cardinals and bishops (from Latin America and the Caribbean as well as the United States and Canada) and 110 other persons (including theological experts, religious men and women, and some laity) took part. Cardinal Bergoglio played a central and inspiring role at the conference as it sought to plot a course for the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean; he was elected, almost unanimously, to serve as editor in chief of the Aparecida final document, which called for the building of “a missionary church” in the continent.¹¹ Through his

role at the assembly he emerged as the leader of the Latin American church, a fact that would impact the 2013 conclave.

Across the world from Latin America, the cardinals knew the Catholic Church was facing another major crisis, this time in the Middle East, due to the ever-diminishing Christian population there. Before World War I (1914–1918), Christians made up some 20 percent of the population in the Middle East, but by the time of the conclave it was estimated that they made up less than 5 percent. The decline had increased rapidly over the twenty years preceding the conclave and was exacerbated as a disastrous consequence of the war launched against Iraq in March 2003 by a coalition led by the United States and Great Britain. John Paul II and the Holy See had tried in every possible way to prevent that war; on the eve of the invasion of Iraq the pope had sent special envoys¹² to the Iraqi and US leaders, Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush, appealing to them to find a negotiated solution to the escalating crisis and insisting that a decision to use military force could be taken only within the framework of the United Nations. The pope and the Holy See warned the main political actors, as well as governments across the world, that such a war would bring immense suffering to the Iraqi people and all those involved in the military operations, impact negatively on Christian-Muslim relations, and likely provoke geo-strategic disorder in the region.¹³ But their prophetic warnings fell on deaf ears. Seven years later, in 2010, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the civil war started in Syria, forcing many Christians to leave the land of their birth. That war was still being fought on the eve of the conclave.

The cardinals were gravely concerned at the failure of the international community to find a negotiated solution to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict that had started in 1948—a conflict that a former Vatican secretary for relations with states (that is, foreign minister)¹⁴ once described as “the mother of all conflicts.” This situation too contributed to the ever-decreasing Christian population in the Holy Land, as well as to an escalation in tensions between Jews, Muslims, and Christians there, and the failure to guarantee the right of access of all Muslim and Christian believers to their respective holy sites in Jerusalem. The specter of a Holy Land without Christians was looming on the horizon.

In addition to these crises, the cardinals—particularly those from Asia and Africa—were deeply concerned about interreligious relations, especially between Christians and Muslims. This was a matter of the utmost importance in Asia, where the majority of the world’s Muslims live, and where Christians are a tiny minority in majority-Muslim states, including

Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia. Relations between Muslims and Christians were good under John Paul II but suffered a significant setback in September 2016 when Benedict XVI, in a lecture at Regensburg University in Germany, appeared to link Islam and the prophet Muhammad to violence; his words sparked protests across the Islamic world and—in some places—violence against Christians. While the German pope, with the assistance of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue led by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, succeeded in repairing relations with Muslim leaders and scholars in most countries by, among other things, visiting the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey, church and diplomatic sources in several countries¹⁵ said he never regained the confidence of the Muslim people. Given this reality, the cardinals preparing for the conclave wanted to ensure that the next pope would be able to dialogue well with Muslims and with the followers of the other religions too, including Hinduism and Buddhism. In a word, interreligious dialogue was a matter of fundamental importance for cardinals from Asia and Africa.

Yet another major concern of cardinals on the eve of the conclave was the difficult situation of an estimated twelve million Catholics in mainland China and the future of the Church in the most populous country in the world. For several years during Benedict XVI's pontificate, the Holy See had engaged in dialogue with the authorities in Beijing, seeking to reach agreement on the crucial question of the appointment of bishops, to ensure that it is the pope and not the communist authorities who have the last word on the nomination of bishops. On May 27, 2007, Pope Benedict wrote a letter of great importance to Catholics in the People's Republic of China in which he sought to offer a way forward.¹⁶ In 2010, however, the negotiations floundered and then broke down. Beijing retaliated by ordaining several bishops without papal approval. The Holy See declared or considered them excommunicated. As the cardinals reviewed the possible candidates to be pope, they were hoping to find one who would be able to reach out to Beijing and obtain an accord with the Chinese authorities.

At the time of the conclave, conflicts, wars, and terrorism continued to plague the world. In his last speech to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See on January 7, 2013,¹⁷ Benedict XVI drew attention to conflicts in the Middle East and, in particular, in Syria. He spoke too about the violence in the Horn of Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the hostilities in Mali, terrorist acts in Nigeria, and much else. He noted with sadness that, especially in the West, “one

frequently encounters ambiguities about the meaning of human rights and their corresponding duties. Rights are often confused with exaggerated manifestations of the autonomy of the individual, who becomes self-referential, no longer open to encounter with God and with others, and absorbed only in seeking to satisfy his or her own needs. To be authentic, the defense of rights must instead consider human beings integrally, in their personal and communitarian dimensions.”

In addition to all this, Benedict and the Holy See were concerned over the developing humanitarian crisis of refugees and migrants caused by the wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and other places. Problems such as these have been an area of constant attention for all the popes of the last century, as have issues related to the right to life from conception to natural death, the denial of religious liberty, and the persecution of believers. The cardinals expected the next pope to be sensitive to all such matters.

Above and beyond these many crises however, there was an overarching concern that all the cardinals agreed was an absolute priority: evangelization. How can the Church bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the peoples of the world? What does it need to do to preach the Gospel in this epoch-changing globalized world, where two out of every three inhabitants of planet Earth have never heard of Jesus Christ?

Many cardinals were profoundly conscious that the scandals mentioned earlier, especially the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, were undermining the Church’s best efforts to evangelize, and thus compromising the Church’s primary mission and the very reason for its existence: to enable all people to know and believe in Jesus. They understood that it would be necessary for the new pope to deal effectively with these scandals if the Church was to regain credibility and make progress in its mission to evangelize.

Several cardinals emphasized that evangelization and the future of the Church are closely linked to the family—now often in crisis—and to involving women and young people more fully in the Church’s life.

The crises and questions discussed above were, in varying degrees, on the minds of the 150 or more cardinals from around the world who assembled in Rome two weeks before the conclave. They recognized that the next pope would have to face these issues. They talked among themselves, one-on-one or in small groups, reflected and prayed in the pre-conclave period as they sought to discern who among them was best suited to lead and govern the Church at this moment in history.

By the time they gathered in the Vatican on March 4 for their first plenary assembly, or “General Congregation,” a significant number of

cardinals seemed to be focusing on three potential successors to Benedict XVI: Cardinal Angelo Scola, 72, the theologian-archbishop of Milan, the foremost Italian and European candidate; Cardinal Odilo Scherer, 63, the archbishop of São Paulo, Brazil, who had worked for many years in the Vatican; and Cardinal Marc Ouellet, 68, the former archbishop of Quebec, Canada, who had worked for several years as a priest in Latin America and was now prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops.

There seemed to be a general consensus among journalists too, particularly those who specialized in Vatican affairs, that these three were the front-runners. This consensus was based on private conversations with cardinals, Vatican officials, and other insiders, as well as on the information they themselves had gathered over the preceding years.

In the thirty-day period between Benedict's resignation and the conclave, several other cardinals, including Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 76, archbishop of Buenos Aires, were mentioned as possible candidates, but they were generally considered outsiders who would stand a chance only if the conclave failed to agree on electing one of the three front-runners. At the same time, even a week before the conclave, there was much uncertainty in the air; the search was still on for the next pope.

The 2013 papal election was being followed not just by Catholics but also by the rest of the world's 2.3 billion Christians, who count for 31 percent of the population of planet Earth.¹⁸ Due to historical reasons, Christians are divided into many churches and communities, but now many were hoping for a pope who would inspire and somehow open new paths to Christian unity. John Paul II had made some significant contributions, especially with his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (On the Commitment to Ecumenism),¹⁹ in which he opened discussion on the papacy, asking how it might be reformed in order to become more a "service of love recognized by all concerned."²⁰ Few responded to his call to dialogue.²¹ His decision to hold an ecumenical celebration of the Christian martyrs of the various Christian churches at the Coliseum in Rome, on May 7, 2000, was welcomed and greatly appreciated by the other Christian churches. But his strong stance in 1994 against the ordination of women as priests,²² following the teaching of Paul VI, was not well received in many Christian churches.²³

His successor, Benedict XVI, also made a significant contribution in the ecumenical field and was much liked by the Russian Orthodox, but neither he nor John Paul II were able to meet the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and of All Russia, even though they both tried. Soon the Lutheran Church would be celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Many Christians hoped that the new pope

would be able to open new horizons on both fronts and also find new and creative ways to relate to Anglicans, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals.

The election of a new pope was a matter of some interest to the leaders and followers of the other great world religions as well, beginning with Islam (with 1.8 billion followers) and including, among others, adherents of Hinduism, Buddhism, Traditional Religion, and Judaism. Their interest was based on the realization that harmonious relations between Christianity and these religions is a fundamental factor for peace not only in African and Asian countries but also at the international level, as we have seen clearly at the start of this century.

Governments across the globe also monitored the papal election; they had seen religion emerge again as a major force in the world, particularly in the twenty-first century. They were well aware of the moral authority of the pope and the role he and the Holy See can play as a force for stability and peace in a fragmented world with a globalized economy. Governments know the invaluable contribution that the Catholic Church makes in many lands, particularly in the developing world, in the fields of education, health, and care for the poorest and weakest members of society. Because of all this, some 180 states had already established diplomatic relations with the Holy See by the time of the conclave, and their ambassadors in Rome were tracking the process of electing a new pope.

For the media too, a papal election is a global news event, and never more so than in the modern era of social communications. The March 2013 conclave brought more than six thousand journalists, radio and television reporters, and photographers from all over the world to Rome to cover what has been described as “the world’s most secretive election.” They came to report on the conclave but, as this book demonstrates, they also to some degree influenced its outcome.

The following pages provide the reader with a day-by-day account of much of what happened in Rome from the time when Benedict XVI announced his resignation to the evening when Cardinal Bergoglio was elected pope. It presents the people and events that influenced the cardinals as they prepared for the papal election and explains what in the end moved them to vote for the first Latin American pope in the history of the Church. Few understand how this historic decision came about, and many wonder whether the cardinals truly knew the man they were electing to be pope. This book aims to shed light on all this.