



Pope Francis embraces a young boy with cerebral palsy
on Easter Sunday

Jorge Mario Bergoglio – “Our” New Pope Francisco

Fabiano Spisla, C.M.

Visitor, Province of Curitiba, Brazil President
of CLAPVI³

It was March 13, 2013. The Conclave was in progress, and we all had great expectations for the election of the new Pope. Suddenly, people gathered in St. Peter’s Square could not contain their excitement as they saw white smoke pour from the make-shift chimney on the roof of the Sistine Chapel, indicating the choice of a new pontiff.

The day before, I went from Curitiba to São Paulo to obtain my visa to travel to the United States for the International Visitors meeting. I stopped at the Church of St. Vincent de Paul in the region of Ipiranga. After lunch with two confreres, we talked while checking to see if there

³Editor’s Note: CLAPVI is the Latin American association of Visitors of all Vincentian provinces: “Conferencia Latino Americano De Provincias Vicentinas”. Founded in 1971, it is the oldest of all the Conferences of Visitors in the Congregation.

was any news from Rome. I retired briefly to relax. But moments later there was a knock at the door, and one of the confreres excitedly said, "We have white smoke". A new pope had been elected! My interest greatly increased. The news media, eager to report on the new occupant of the chair of St. Peter, set its camera on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica where the announcement would be made.

Looking at the clock, I realized it was close to the time of my appointment for the interview to obtain my USA visa. Yet, the time between the white smoke and the actual announcement seemed to drag on, taking more than the clock showed. Perhaps it felt more like 'psychological time' than actual time. None of us wanted to miss the live announcement and to find out the identity of the new pope, but I also knew that I could not miss the appointment for my interview if I wanted to obtain the visa for the USA.

When the announcement did not come soon enough, I left and called for a taxi. The weather outside was dark clouds threatening rain, a real contrast with the white smoke in Rome. While waiting for a taxi that was slow to arrive, a lady yelled out her window, "*We have a Pope! He is an Argentine! His name is Mário Jorge Bergoglio!*".

At the same time, it was around 19:00 in Rome time, and in the Sistine Chapel, a voice belonging to Cardinal Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, said "I accept". After the positive response, he was welcomed by the other cardinals who thanked him for his courage in accepting the Papacy. Later, the new Pope would say to people who gathered in St. Peter's square: "You know that the duty of the Conclave was to give Rome a bishop. Well, it seems that my brother cardinals decided to pick someone from near the end of the world. And now I'm here with you tonight. So, let us begin this journey of the Church of Rome, the primary See presiding in charity to all the Churches. Let this be the start of a walk of brotherhood, of love, and trust between us".

When asked what name he would choose as Pontiff, he replied: "Francis". Why this name? From where did the inspiration come? This is what Cardinal Bergoglio said in his own words: "Some thought of Saints. Francis Xavier, Francis de Sales or Francis of Assisi. I'll tell you why. During the election, I had at my side a great friend, the Bishop Emeritus of São Paulo and prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy, Cardinal Claudio Hummes. When things became somewhat tense during the balloting, he comforted me. And when I received two thirds of the votes, there was applause at the election of the new Pope. And Cardinal Hummes hugged me, kissed me, and he said: 'Do not forget the poor'. And I kept thinking of the poor, the poor all over the world. So I thought, in order to remember the poor, I will take the name of Francis of Assisi".

And in his first address in his pontificate, Pope Francis tried to be one with the people, as seen before the traditional 'Urbi et Orbi' blessing, when the Holy Father made an unprecedented request of the people gathered there: "I ask you a favor: before the Bishop blesses the people, I ask you to pray to the Lord to bless me with your prayer. I ask your blessing as your Bishop. Let us do this by way of silent prayer from you for me".

While in Buenos Aires as Cardinal, Jorge Mario Bergoglio lived simply in a modest home. He took the bus to work each day, and also did so to encounter his flock when he went out to the slums for the celebration of Mass, and to minister to the poor.

In Buenos Aires, as the news spread of Pope Francis' election, people gathered, and there were many expressions of great joy. The Cathedral was packed with faithful who were thrilled. In a note to Argentina's President Cristina Kirchner, the Holy Father said: "It is our hope, that my Argentine people who have to take on the management and direction of the church, will enjoy a pastoral and fruitful time, as they undertake the great responsibilities of seeking justice, equality, fraternity and peace of mankind".

Surprise and celebrations in Argentina marked the choice of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. All over Buenos Aires, one could hear ovations, applause, cries and chants of the faithful who came to the Cathedral located in front of the historic square. In the streets, there was honking of car horns and shouts of people passing by in cars.

Some days after sending emails to friends in Buenos Aires for their reaction, I received this response: "This man chosen for the Papacy is humble and ready to serve the poorest of the poor. He is a man of God who walks with his people; a man of communion, mission, and hope: and a servant of the Gospel for the hope of the world".

While a couple of months have passed since the election of the Pope, there have been some very positive reactions. In Latin America, the tone among the people and in the Church is one of optimism. In the Vincentian Provinces of Brazil as well as the other provinces in Latin America, the initial reaction of confreres and members of the Vincentian Family has been very positive. The simplicity of Pope Francis and his love for the poor is very consistent with the life and charism of St. Vincent de Paul.

So the confreres and Vincentian Family in Latin America manifest joy at the election of Pope Francis. In the words of some Vincentian Family members who put together a statement: "In this Pope's pontificate, he has chosen to exercise it with the people, because only then can the people feel God's love and presence. As Jesus and St. Vincent de Paul worked to meet the needs of the poor, certainly this pontificate

will do so by demonstrating God's love and availability to others in the present moment".

In correspondence I have had with confreres, religious from other congregations, diocesan clergy and Vincentian Family members, all express tremendous confidence that this papacy will now usher in a time for renewal. They hope that now the Church can re-claim the path of prophecy by announcing the Good News and being that voice to cry out for justice and equality. In doing so, we become a living sign of the authentic testimony that embraces the mission of Christ, our Savior.

This feeling of optimism for the Holy Father is not confined to the continent of Latin America who is proud of their "native son". It is especially because the vision Pope Francis has for the world and how we can live together with all people. One lady summed up the comment thought of many quite well: "He is one like us. He is always humble, and he never puts himself in a position of superiority or distance from people".

Pope Francis is striving to be that true Good Shepherd who keeps the flock together seeking community and eliminating all forms of rivalry as well as anything that hinders the Church from becoming the true herald of Good News for the entire world.

Fabiano Spisla, C.M.

29 April 2013