



THE GREAT REFORMER

Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope

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PROLOGUE

THIS BOOK CAME out of a minute's meeting with Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square in June 2013. My colleague and I had been given sought-after front-row tickets at the Wednesday audience, when there is the chance to speak to the pope as he moves along the row chatting briefly to delegates and guests. He took over two hours to reach us, because after his address—the usual mix of homespun humor and startling metaphors—he disappeared for what seemed like an eternity among the ones he calls God's holy faithful people. They, the *anawim*, the poor of God, not we, the front-row ticket holders, were his priority.

It was a sun-struck day and the exertion had taken its toll: by the time he got to us, Francis, at that point seventy-six years old, was sweating, hot, and breathless. But what most struck me was the energy he gave off: a biblical blend of serenity and playful joy. The archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, put it well after he met Francis some days later. The Argentine pope, he said, is “an extraordinary humanity, on fire with Christ.” If joy were a flame, you'd need to be made of asbestos not to get burned.

Francis had fascinated me more and more since the rainy night of his election on March 13, 2013. I was up on a TV platform overlooking St. Peter's Square conducting minute-by-minute commentary for a British news channel. It had been an hour since the white smoke, and we were waiting, with the globe's media, for the twitch on the balcony curtains.

Some minutes before Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran came out to announce the new pope, I had a tip-off from my old boss, the retired archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, who had taken part in the pre-conclave discussions but was too old to take part in the conclave itself. He told my emissary that, as it had been a short conclave, the new pope could well be Jorge Mario Bergoglio.

Bergoglio? It was a name from the past. I knew his country: it began with parakeets in hot humid rainforests, continued in vast herds of cattle and horses in great prairies between the mountains and the ocean, and ended with penguins on ice floes floating past spouting whales. It had once been a wealthy nation, one that saw itself as an outpost of Europe stranded in Latin America; later it was a textbook study in failed promise, a warning of how deep-rooted political polarities can paralyze society. I recalled a trip to Argentina in 2002 to write an article about the country's economic collapse, when people spoke highly of their aloof and austere cardinal; but also further back, to the early 1990s, when I had lived in Buenos Aires while researching a doctoral thesis on the Church and politics in Argentine history. Over a number of visits, in the midst of attempted coups and currency crises, I had come to love that beguiling city; and living there for many months at a time, my Spanish had sprouted the inflections and idioms of *porteño* Spanish. It was all—as W. H. Hudson titled his memoir of Argentina—*Far Away and Long Ago*. Now Bergoglio had brought it back.

I had another memory, of the April 2005 conclave that had elected Benedict XVI, when I had been in Rome with Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor. Some cardinals had been making a bid to find a pastoral alternative to Joseph Ratzinger and were looking to Latin America, the Church's new hope. A few months later, an anonymous cardinal's secret diary revealed that Bergoglio of Buenos Aires had been the other main contender in that election. But after that, he had seemed to fade, to the point where almost nobody in 2013 thought he was *papabile*. That's why I was so glad for that tip-off: the Argentine cardinal hadn't been on my list, or almost anybody's. At least when the balcony curtains finally opened and the new pope was announced, I could say who it was and something about him. It didn't go so well for some commentators on other channels.

Afterward, the consensus seemed to be that Bergoglio had just emerged, that there had been no group of cardinals working for his election. But if that was so, why did my old boss seem so sure, before the conclave, that it

would be him? I sensed there was more, that Bergoglio had not faded at all but had simply been invisible to our Eurocentric radar, and that there had been a group organizing his election.

But that wasn't my main curiosity. What I really wanted to know was who he was, how he thought, how being a Jesuit shaped him, where he stood among all those controversies I had studied so long ago. In those first hundred days of the electrifying Francis pontificate, he had taken the Vatican, and the world, by storm—flipping the omelet, as he liked to say. People were trying to fit him into straitjackets that just didn't apply in Latin America, and even less in Argentina, where Peronism exploded the categories of left and right. The misreadings had given rise to contradictory claims: A slum bishop who was cozy with the military dictatorship? A retrograde Jesuit who became a progressive bishop? Some tried to claim he was both, and had “converted” during his Córdoba exile in the early 1990s. Those in Argentina who knew him well said this just wasn't true. But what alternative account existed?

The first Argentine biographies, hastily assembled by journalists who had spent years reporting on him, were full of fascinating stories and insights, and this book owes much to them. But their focus, understandably, was on Bergoglio's latter years as cardinal, for which there was an abundant paper and Internet trail, leaving virtually untouched his thirty years as a Jesuit—the time of the controversies, as well as the period when his spirituality and vision of the world had taken shape. What exactly had gone wrong between Bergoglio and the Jesuits? If I could understand that, I felt, it would all be much clearer.

When I met Francis for that brief minute in the hot square, I took comfort from the hand he had placed firmly on my arm. I don't mean that he wanted this biography—he hates the idea of books about him; he wants to deflect attention to where it belongs—but the firm grip gave me encouragement: as a foreigner who had long grappled with Argentina's complexities, and knew the Jesuits, perhaps I was well placed to help outsiders understand the Francis enigma.

In October 2013, I left for Buenos Aires for an intense five weeks of interviews and research, scooping up copies of most of what he had written, much of which was long out of print. I retraced Bergoglio's steps beyond Buenos Aires to San Miguel, Santa Fe, Córdoba, and Entre Ríos, as well as over the Andes to Santiago de Chile. There have been other

trips in the course of this book: to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for World Youth Day in July 2013; and twice to Rome, for the consistory of cardinals in February 2014 and the canonizations the following April of John XXIII and John Paul II. In dozens of interviews with Jesuits, ex-Jesuits, and others close to him from his twenty years as a bishop, archbishop, and cardinal, the missing narrative began to take shape. I realized that many of the important stories about Francis had not yet been told and that only by grasping the deep past—Argentina’s, the Church’s, the Jesuits’—could Francis’s thinking and vision be understood. *The Great Reformer* is, necessarily, not just Bergoglio’s story but those other stories too.

Many biographies are written after their subject retires or dies. During the seven months this was written, December 2013 to June 2014, its subject became a global phenomenon. It was impossible not to see the links between Bergoglio and Francis, or to pretend that the reader would not be thinking of Francis while reading about Bergoglio. I knew the canvas had to be broader than the Bergoglio backstory, that the fast-unfurling Francis pontificate needed to be seen through his biography. Yet to constantly refer the reader forward to Francis would not only disrupt the narrative but commit the crime of hagiography, reading the past through the eyes of the present, as if his life had been a warm-up act for the papacy. My solution is to begin each chapter with an important episode (a trip or a document) from Francis’s papacy that the reader can keep in mind: that way, some interesting—and sometimes provocative—connections can be made with his past without disturbing the flow or the integrity of the narrative. In the epilogue, I draw together both streams, analyze his first year, and suggest where this remarkable papacy is taking the Church.

The Great Reformer is, then, chronological but not rigorously so: it zooms in on stories that bring our subject into focus and then pans back to take in the land and history that shaped him. In the early chapters, where I have called him “Jorge” until he was ordained, there are excursions into the divisions and tensions in Argentine political and church history that are essential to understanding his vision. The Jesuit story, worldwide and in Argentina, past and present, figures strongly: both Saint Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*, which have so deeply formed Bergoglio’s thinking, spirituality, and leadership, and the struggles within the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) over its renewal after the Second Vatican Council, play a major role in the first half of the book. Throughout, *The Great Reformer*

takes seriously Bergoglio's Jesuit spirituality of discernment as the key to his decision making. He made and makes judgments not just on the basis of information and interests, but where he saw God's will, and its opponent: the temptation of the "bad spirit."

During the writing of this book, I have read thousands of Bergoglio's words: from his first published article in 1969 through to his retreats and homilies as cardinal. (He is a natural writer: vivid and precise.) Most of his early writings and almost all of his homilies exist only in Spanish, and the translation is almost always my own, even when another translation exists, unless otherwise specified. The same is true of the interviews, almost all of which were conducted in Spanish, heroically transcribed in Argentina by Inés San Martín (now Rome correspondent for the *Boston Globe*), and translated by me. In order to avoid excessive notes, quotes should be assumed to come from those interviewees (listed at the back) unless otherwise specified. In the Note on Sources is a detailed list of writings, interviews, and other resources on which this book has drawn.



THERE are many stories in *The Great Reformer* that will draw attention for the new light they cast on areas of controversy or important episodes in Francis's life. But there is a narrative thread, captured in the title, that runs through them all: of a church leader who from an early age felt called to be a reformer, and was given the authority to do so. This is a story not just of the man but his three reforms: of the Argentine Jesuit province, of the Argentine Church, and now of the universal Church. His lodestars have been two French theologians, Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, who taught him how to unite God's People by a radical reform that will lead them to holiness. If the reader comes to see that thread and understand this papacy better as a result, the book's purpose will have been accomplished.

Some of the best stories and insights in these pages came out of fascinating meetings of great warmth and intensity, in Argentina, Rome, and elsewhere. There are many listed in the Note on Sources; but I wanted generally to thank here those—they include Jesuits, cardinals, and confidants of Jorge Bergoglio's, some of whom did not want to be mentioned—who went into tense or complex territory at my probing, and others who entrusted me with confidences that could easily be misused. I hope that,

even when it comes to conclusions they might not agree with, *The Great Reformer* repays the confidence they placed in me .

Among the most trusting and inspiring of those interviewees was Bishop Tony Palmer, one of Pope Francis's spiritual sons whom we meet in Chapter 9 and again in the Epilogue. Palmer, a tireless worker for unity between the Churches, was the driving force behind a major agreement being drawn up, with the Pope's support, between Catholics and evangelicals, the backstory of which is told in these pages. Tony had been briefing me on the historic developments, just as the book was going to press, when news came of his death in a motorcycle accident on July 20, 2014. I feel sure, somehow, that his death will not be the end of the work he and Francis started.

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