

A Farewell to Francis

As the 266th Pope is laid to rest at Rome, may he be remembered as a culturally sophisticated and profoundly well-intentioned man, rather than for his political lapses.

By Conrad Black

It always seems to me to be, as a mere but faithful communicant in the vast mass of the pope's more than one billion active adherents, a bit presumptuous to critique a pope or a papacy. I was converted to that faith by my own analysis and experiences of spirituality and by my privilege in being a confidant of two outstanding Church leaders, Paul Emile Cardinal Leger, Archbishop of Montréal, who retired from his see to fund-raise for and build and direct a hospital in the Cameroons, and G. Emmett Cardinal Carter, Archbishop of Toronto and a dear friend.



Pope Francis at the Vatican, January 24, 2023. AP/Domenico Stinellis, file

Yet I don't feel that my status as a comparative newcomer, though I have been a practicing Roman Catholic for 54 years, since I went to Africa to ask Cardinal Leger to receive me, diminishes my right to have and express respectful opinions about the popes. Thanks to Cardinal Carter, I met briefly with John Paul II and had two extensive and convivial conversations with Benedict XVI prior to his elevation.

A pope in his secular capacity must tolerate the normal vicissitudes of dissent and criticism. There is no reason to doubt the benignity of the nature and perspective of Pope Francis. He was not only a man of peace but a pacifist, and I doubt if he felt strong hostility toward anyone. This profoundly tolerant nature was uplifting, and I believe his comment early in his pontificate about same sex matters – “Who am I to judge?” – expressed his sincere broad-mindedness and his constant recognition of his duty to respect and care for every human soul.

Like almost all practicing Roman Catholics, I was pleased at his ability to make it more difficult for the Church's enemies to portray it as operated by a group of septuagenarian celibates or closet queens scolding the world about its sex life. It was encouraging in the early days of Pope Francis to see increasing attendance at Roman Catholic Church services, to perceive lengthening lines for confessions, and to read reports of increased numbers of clerical recruits in many countries.

I have never been much concerned about this or other popes' authoritarianism. I am a fervent believer in democracy in the secular world but have always thought that the key to the success and continuity of the Roman Catholic Church, despite numerous appallingly inappropriate and even depraved former popes (among the 264 between St. Peter and Francis), is that it remains effectively a dictatorship.

Otherwise, it will devolve into a congregational church like

Islam, Judaism, and the non-episcopal Protestant churches. Everyone who believes that the Roman Catholic Church is, for all its shortcomings, the legitimate continuator of the church that Jesus Christ is generally believed to have asked St. Peter to found, and who believes it to be a genuine if fallible agency of a divine intelligence, wishes it well as an institution and has a natural tendency to defer to the pope, if not to all of his episcopal and parochial representatives.

It is easy for a lay person to abstain from religious practice, but not from the current defined obligations of a citizen. With that said, I thought Pope Francis' war on those of us who like a Tridentine mass was oppressive and unjust. Some of us are somewhat conversant with Latin and are reinforcing our faith by liturgy that has been essentially unaltered for many centuries. The late pope deprecated us all as reactionaries and opponents of any reform in the church. As it applies to me, that is an unjust charge and imputation of motive.

Because I am a North American and would by most standards rightly be considered politically conservative, though not an extremist, I found it dismaying that Pope Francis was so opinionated in areas where he was obviously governed by paradisiacal ambitions rather than practicalities.

He was a leftist and to the extent that this mitigated hostility to the Church and religion generally among disadvantaged people, and to the extent that it promoted the Roman Catholic Church as a rival for the faith of those tempted by Marxism and its variants, this was a good thing.

Yet the pope showed no respect or recognition of the fact that capitalism is by far the best economic system, because it is the only one that is psychologically aligned with the almost universal desire for more. This is not only a human ambition; it inspires practically all animals from John Locke's famous squirrel to the great beasts, to assure their food and

shelter.

Capitalism is the greatest engine for the elimination of poverty, and a huge number of his coreligionists are conscientious practicing capitalists and his reflexive hostility to the pursuit of job creation and rising incomes for all through moderately regulated capitalism was erroneous, divisive, and unjust.

The pope was very much a Latin American where there is a widespread tendency to blame poverty on capitalism and the Gringos and to subscribe to the heretical fallacy that Marxist proposals for enforced economic outcomes and non-meritocratic distribution of income is a more effective method of reducing poverty than sensible capitalism.

That perspective colored his comments on economic matters as well as on contemporary international politics. He was far too indulgent of the Castro regime, of the People's Republic of China, and of Islamic extremism. He waffled somewhat on Gaza, though he deplored anti-Semitism.

I'm well aware of the many prior examples of the Church consenting to share the authority for naming bishops with a secular authority, from William the Conqueror to Louis XIV to modern dictators, and the Church always outlives its secular associate. But the compromises with the People's Republic of China were excessive. At least in his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si*, he included the statement that "the Church cannot substitute itself for scientists or politicians." This softened his implicit endorsement of faddish and relatively hysterical ecological alarmism.

As a Latin American, he was hostile to the United States. As an early follower of Juan Peron (who was no friend of the Roman Catholic Church), he was inconsiderate of his 80 million American coreligionists and was sometimes verging on Lenin's characterization of a "useful idiot" in the machinations of

the enemies of Christianity and democracy.

His attack on President Trump's policy toward the invasion of the United States by millions of destitute (mainly) Latin Americans was an outrage. His political infelicities are doubtless more than balanced by the generosity of his spirit, though that is not our evaluation to make.

Pope Francis was also a man of great culture, especially in music, where he had an astounding knowledge of different composers and versions of concerts and symphonies. He was never pedantic and never intellectually superior and only spoke of these matters in interviews with specialist cultural publications, but it is always reassuring to know that the head of one's Church is culturally sophisticated, as well as profoundly well-intentioned.

I hope that Pope Francis will be remembered for these qualities more than for some of his political lapses so illustrative of the unsatisfactory secular history of Latin America. To Roman Catholic believers, the death of a pope is always a solemn occasion. Pope Francis was surely a good man. Everyone, whatever their religious views or absence of them, should hope that the cardinals choose his successor wisely.

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