

The Problem of Two Popes

by Michael Curtis



It takes two to tango, two to really get the feeling of the truth. You can sail on a ship by yourself, but it takes two to tango.

On January 14, 2020 nominations for the 2020 Academy Awards (Oscars) were revealed. Among them were nominations for the main two actors and the writer of the screenplay for the film *The Two Popes* directed by the Brazilian Fernando Meirelles. It is not a true story but a brilliant highly speculative account of imagined meeting between the Pope Benedict XVI, former Cardinal Ratzinger of Bavaria, and his successor, present Pope Francis I, former Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina, and the process by which they became Popes.

It is imaginary and inventive in two senses; the film implying Benedict as a reactionary and Francis as a reformer, even revolutionary in part, does not accurately represent the real views of the prelates. Moreover, the two Popes, one German and

the other Argentinian are played by two gifted Welshmen, Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce. All good drama benefits from conflict, and the film does this by tending to present the men as stereotypes, Ratzinger as conservative, even reactionary, personally severe, sometimes angry, ambitious, and Bergoglio as playful, a pastor, singing pop songs by ABBA, progressive and sympathetic.

The film is a fictional account mixed with real life footage from the two papal conclaves and historical events, although not a documentary, and is in essence an interpretation by the director of the interaction between the two prelates who disagreed on issues but are in their own way loyal to the Church,

For all its inaccuracies and flights of imagination, the film throws some light on a number of factors. The most striking are the indications of differences and the ideological opposites between the two men, the politicking and infighting cliques in the curia, the administrative institutions of the Vatican and the central body conducting the affairs of the Catholic Church, and among the Cardinals. Indirectly, one senses the tension between faith and ambition, as well as the loneliness of the papacy.

However, most important in the dialogue is the gulf between the two Popes. Benedict rejects all suggestions from Bergoglio and says, "I do not agree with anything you say."

Bergoglio criticizes Benedict, "You forgot to love the people you were meant to protect."

The gulf is symbolized even by the shoes of the two, Benedict by bright red loafers, and Francis with black shoes and simple cassock and cape.

In the film which ends on a relatively positive note, the two prelates bond by eating pizza and drinking Fanta soda, and watching soccer games, especially between Germany and

Argentina. But the two men were different. Ratzinger, highly educated, scholar, academic researcher, and university teacher of theology, culturally cultivated and a lover of Mozart. He was for a long time a major Vatican insider, prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Pope John Paul II, and Dean of the College of Cardinals, defender of traditional Catholic doctrine. He became Pope Benedict XVI between 2005 and, 2013.

On February 10, 2013, aged 85, he decided to retire, exclaiming it was because of "lack of strength of mind and body." Benedict is the first pope to stand down voluntarily since Celestine V in 1294. Later, Pope Gregory XII resigned in 1415 because of the Great Western Schism in which two men, and then a third claimed to be the true Pope. On resignation, he took the name Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.

The expectation was that Benedict would not interfere in church affairs. He would be obedient to his successor. He said he would remain hidden from the world and live a life dedicated to prayer. This seemed to be the case until mid-January 2020 he was 92. He reentered the public sphere by publishing what was supposed to be a defense of the policy of the Catholic Church of celibacy for priests, but was then retracted.

The film hints at Benedict's early life with possible links to the Nazis without elaborating. Born in 1927, Ratzinger had been conscripted into the Hitler Youth at age 14, drafted during World War II into an anti-aircraft corps, and then into the infantry. But apparently, he was not a Nazi sympathizer.

Bergoglio born in Buenos Aires , was ordained a priest in 1969 before becoming Bishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal in February 2001, and Pope on March 13, 2013 taking the name Francis. He was a football fan, fond of tango dancing, worked in various occupations, including bar bouncer and janitor. Early in his career he became a Jesuit, taking the three vows of poverty,

chastity, and obedience, and then obedience to the pope. He was provincial superior of the Society of Jesuits in Argentina, 1973-79. Jesuits have a reputation for modernizing the Church, for being linked to liberation theology, and involvement in the political struggle of the poor.

Francis is the first Jesuit pope, but he is also the first Pope from outside Europe since the 8th century.

Francis has been known for his simple unassuming life style, humility, traveling by public transport, cooking his own meals, and belief in social justice. But he has been criticized, and eventually apologized for his compromise with the Argentinian military junta which he did not criticize when in 1976 priests were abducted and tortured. His defenders said that behind the scenes he had protected the priests, and that he sheltered people from the dictatorship.

The most troubling issue is the existence of two Popes, even if one is Emeritus, and the reality that they symbolize the differences within the curia. No political system can sustain parallel, competing authority. The two Popes are said to embody differences on a range of issues, such as divorce, homosexuality, climate change, economic inequality, the covering up of the pedophilia scandal. Benedict and Francis are considered to be ideological opponents, representative of different wings of the Church. Benedict promoted the use of Latin, and revived a number of traditions. Francis in a trip to Romania in June 2019 asked forgiveness in the name of the Catholic Church for the mistreatment on Roma people. He visited among other places Muslim countries, the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and the blue mosque in Istanbul , and the State of Israel.

The issue is delicate and unique. Benedict has taken the name Pope Emeritus, lives in the Vatican grounds, which is his postal address, and continues to wear papal garb, the white gown. Can there be two men in white?

The issue began to come to a height when on October 26, 2019, a Synod of Bishops for Pan-Amazon of 181 members meeting in Rome discussed a range of issues, including ordination of married men. By vote of 128-41 the Synod passed a resolution agreeing on married clergy. It held that legitimate diversity does not harm the communion and unity of the Church, but expresses and serves it. The Synod also called on the Church to recognize and promote women by strengthening their participation in pastoral councils of parishes and dioceses, and even instances of government. It recognized that in the Amazon, the majority of Catholic committees and communities are led by women.

The issue of parallel leadership by two Popes was in the forefront when in January 2020 it was announced that Benedict was publishing a book, *From the Depths of Our Hearts*, he had co-written with Cardinal Robert Sarah of the former French colony of Guinea in West Africa, a recognized conservative, and prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship. Thus, publicly defending the rule of priestly celibacy, Benedict warned not to be impressed by the special pleading, the theatrics, the diabolical lies, the fashionable errors that would end priestly celibacy.

However, on January 14, 2020 Benedict distanced himself from the book and said he no longer wanted to be considered as its co-author. Cardinal Sarah will now be listed as the author of the book, with a contribution of Benedict XVI. The truth remains uncertain since the book is written in French, while all of Ratzinger's previous 66 books are written in German. But it is possible the book was written to influence the thinking of Francis on priestly celibacy

The event has meant that Francis affirmed his commitment to celibacy, a rule he had been reconsidering. Celibacy he said could be a possibility only in the most remote of areas, "I think of the islands in the Pacific where there are priestly needs."

The differences within the Catholic curia are evident though they do not at present constitute a schism. It was Francis who in 2017 in a Christmas address spoke of the cliques and plots in the curia, and that reforming Rome is like cleaning the Sphinx of Egypt with a toothbrush. The crucial problem is whether Benedict is undermining the Papal authority of Francis. in April 2019 Benedict wrote for a German church magazine a 6,000 word letter blaming the clerical abuse crisis on the sexual revolution of the 1960s , on the disappearance of God from discussion in the West , and on dangerous liberal theological ideas after the Second Vatican Council.

These exchanges are a reminder for the Church of the danger when a ship leaks from the top.