

Francis and Mary

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 13, 2013 All Things Catholic; National Catholic Reporter

While pop culture remains fascinated by small clues to Pope Francis' personality -- such as the fact that he was once a bouncer -- we got a reminder on Sunday of something far more fundamental, albeit a point that probably won't get much play on TMZ: his incredibly strong devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Dec. 8 was the festival of the Immaculate Conception, known in Italy as the *Immacolata*, and Francis made the traditional outing to Rome's Piazza di Spagna to venerate a column with a statue of Mary erected in 1857 to celebrate the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed by Pope Pius IX three years earlier.

Francis composed a special prayer for the occasion, the heart of which was a plea that "the cry of the poor may never leave us indifferent, the suffering of the sick and of those in need may never find us distracted, the loneliness of the elderly and the fragility of children may always move us, [and] every human life may always be loved and venerated by all of us."

It was a classic Francis outing. He showed up in a blue Ford Focus, not a Mercedes limo, not even riding in the back this time but sitting in the front chatting with his driver. He stopped briefly to greet shopkeepers, and then decided to take an impromptu walk the rest of the way. He paused to greet locals and tourists, paying special attention to children and the sick. Some folks tossed the flowers they brought to honor Mary in the pope's path, and he bent over to pick them up and carry them to the column.

Afterward, Francis crossed town to visit the Basilica of St. Mary Major, Rome's premier Marian shrine, to pause a few moments before the famous icon of Mary as *Salus Populi Romani*, "Protector of the Roman People." He didn't give a speech, and there was no scrum of photographers and TV cameras because Francis wanted it to be an intimate act.

This was the sixth time Francis has stopped at St. Mary Major since becoming pope, with the first coming on March 14, less than 24 hours after his election. It's easily his most visited location in Rome outside the Vatican, illustrating how important the basilica and its dedication to Mary is to Francis' spirituality.

As Argentine journalist **Elisabetta Piqué** notes in her terrific recent biography of Francis, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio made a point of visiting St. Mary Major every time church business forced him to travel to Rome. The only difference now, Piqué

writes, is that he shows up in a white cassock rather than a simple priest's outfit. (She might also have observed that he no longer takes the bus.)

In popular parlance, "the Vatican" is shorthand for the papacy. One could argue, however, that the real spiritual center of this pontificate lies across town in St. Mary Major.

All this tracks with what we know about Francis' Marian devotion throughout his life.

For instance, we know that when Bergoglio was in semi-exile in Germany in 1986, related to tensions within the Argentine Jesuits, the future pope took comfort in an image of the Virgin Mary he discovered in a church in Augsburg. It's the famous 18th-century image of "Mary Untier of Knots," a reference to St. Irenaeus, who wrote that "the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosened by Mary's obedience."

Perhaps sensing a connection with the knots in his own life, Bergoglio was consoled by the image and promoted devotion to it in Argentina. He encouraged the construction of a shrine with a replica of the painting in the Church of San José del Talar, located in the Agronomía neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

Nowhere was the emotional depth of this pope's Marian devotion on clearer display than in Brazil, where Francis took a day trip to the shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida. It was the site of the gathering of Latin American bishops in 2007 where Bergoglio was lead author of the "Aparecida document," a call for a more missionary church that in some ways is the charter for his papacy.

When he prayed before the image of Mary, Francis seemed on the point of tears while entrusting his entire papacy to Our Lady of Aparecida.

For those with eyes to see, signs of devotion are impossible to miss. Clergy who have concelebrated Mass in the Casa Santa Marta, for example, report that Francis has asked them to join him after Mass for a hymn of honor in front of a statue of the Virgin.

The Marian streak also sheds light on Francis' thinking on some of the most contested issues in the church.

For instance, Francis repeatedly has said that while the issue of women priests is closed, he wants stronger roles for women in Catholicism. Some may see that as a contradiction, but his point of departure is Mary -- who, though never a priest, played a decisive role in salvation history.

He made that connection during his airborne press conference on the way back to Rome from Brazil:

"A church without women is like the Apostolic College without Mary," Francis said.

"The role of women in the church is not only maternity; the mother of the family, but it's stronger: It is, in fact, the icon of the Virgin, of Our Lady, the one who helps the church grow!

"But think that Our Lady is more important than the apostles! She is more important ... A woman's role in the church must not end only as mother, as worker, limited. No! It's something else ... I think we must go further in making the role and charism of women more explicit."

For a Marian thinker, in other words, ordination and influence are thoroughly distinct things.

That Marian angle may also help shape the perspective Francis brings to discussions about divorced and remarried Catholics and people in other irregular relationships. It certainly hasn't escaped his attention that when Mary conceived the Christ child, she was technically still outside wedlock.

Francis recalled the point Sunday in his Angelus address before heading out to Piazza di Spagna.

"When the Angel of the Lord calls her 'full of grace,' Mary is 'greatly troubled,' because in her humility she felt like nothing before God," the pope said. "The announcement [that she would bear a child] upset her all the more, in part because she wasn't yet married to Joseph."

It's hard to imagine that his meditations on that moment haven't had an impact on how Francis thinks about the pressures faced by women and couples in all sorts of situations.

Bottom line: If you're looking for insight into Francis, you'd probably do well to look less at the bars in Buenos Aires where Bergoglio once tossed people out and more to the Marian shrines, where he delights in seeing them come in.

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New biography of Pope Francis hailed in Argentina as most complete portrait of him to-date



From left to right: Rabbi Skorka, Prof. Barbaro, Elisabetta Pique, Fr. Fazio and Fr. Carrara

A new biography of Pope Francis, based on primary sources and testimonies, is being praised in Argentina by people who know him as the most complete and authoritative portrait of him in any language to-date

GERARD O'CONNELL
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Hundreds of people crowded into one of the most beautiful bookshops in the world, the Ateneo Grand Splendid in the heart of Buenos Aires, on November 19, for the presentation of "Francisco: Vida y Revolucion" (Francis: life and revolution), the new biography of Pope Francis, written by Elisabetta Piqué, an Argentinean journalist who has known him since 2001. Her book is being hailed by many who knew Bergoglio here as the most complete and authoritative portrait of him in any language to-date.

"This book is based on solid research, and written from the heart", Father Mariano Fazio, former Rector of the Santa Croce (Opus Dei) university in Rome, told the large audience that included the Papal Nuncio to Argentina, Archbishop Emil Paul Tscherig, who, the book reveals, enjoyed a better relationship with Cardinal Bergoglio, than did his predecessor.

Rich in testimonies from Jesuits and laity, including many poor people whom he helped, the 332 page book written by the Rome correspondent of La Nacion, one of Argentina's main dailies, is being published simultaneously in Spanish (by El Ateneo) and Italian (by Lindau), and negotiations are under way for its release in other languages too.

Fazio said it communicates well "key aspects of Bergoglio's spirituality" and "the humility of the man" who, in countless hitherto unknown ways, helped the neediest in society and saved many lives during the military dictatorship. He was one of a panel of 5 that

presented this page-turner book which offers many new insights into the personality of the first Jesuit Pope, provides an accurate history of his life as a Jesuit and bishop, and reveals hitherto unknown information about the conclave that elected him, as well as reporting on the first six months of his pontificate.

On the panel with Fazio were Rabbi Abraham Skorka, a close friend of Bergoglio who expects to travel with him to the Holy Land in 2014, Professor Julio Barbaro, the renowned historian of Peronism, and Father Gustavo Carrara, the 'vicar' appointed by Cardinal Bergoglio to oversee the Church's mission to the slum-dwellings of this metropolis of almost 12 million people.

"This very fine book has enriched me because even though I thought I knew Bergoglio and his spirituality, on reading it, I discovered many new things hitherto unknown to me", Rabbi Skorka said. He praised the author for writing a highly readable book, "rich with testimonies" of many people from different walks of life who knew him, which shows clearly that he is "a man truly committed to dialogue."

"This is a biography marked by lucidity and passion", Julio Barbaro told the overflow audience on the second floor of this magnificent former theatre and cinema. He highlighted the faith-centered leadership given by Bergoglio during the turbulent and bloody period in Argentina's history immediately before and during the military dictatorship, and recalled how he rejected both ideologies and repression, and showed that "the faith is stronger than ideology". Barbaro, who was a friend of both Argentina's former president - Nestor Kirchner, and Bergoglio, said "Kirchner's problem was not with Bergoglio as such, it was with whatever he could not control". He praised the book for bringing out Bergoglio's "striking spirituality" and his 'revindication of faith over ideology'.

Father Gustavo Carrara warmly welcomed the new biography that devotes a whole chapter to Bergoglio's inspiring and courageous ministry in the "villas miserias" or slum districts of this metropolis where some 250,000 people live, 43 % of them under the age of 17. He recalled Bergoglio as "a pilgrim bishop who walked among the people, especially among the most needy and the last in society", and called the city's believing communities, including those in the slums, to be "a missionary Church", and 'go out to the existential peripheries'.

Bergoglio highly valued 'popular piety' and reminded everyone that frequently "people who are poor in this world are rich in faith", Carrara said. He recalled the intense emotion and rejoicing in the villas di miserias when he was elected Pope, and the powerful impact on them when Francis appeared for the first time, dressed in white, on

the central balcony of St Peter's and humbly asked people to pray for their new bishop. Bergoglio always told his priests and people that "if you take the Gospel seriously, your life will become more complicated", Carrara said, "And if we take Francis seriously, he will complicate our lives too!"

Responding to questions at the end of the book-presentation, Elisabetta Piquè confirmed that while Pope Francis knew she was writing the book, she had never involved him in any way in the project because she felt this was not proper, also given that she was touching such delicate questions as his relationship to the Roman Curia before becoming Pope.