

From Ratzinger To Bergoglio. Two Political Visions Light Years Apart

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[The following text is the talk given by Sandro Magister at the [study conference](#) organized on June 4 2019 in Rome, at Palazzo Giustiniani, by the Fondazione Magna Carta, on the theme: “Catholics, politics, and the challenges of the third millennium”].

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About politics Joseph Ratzinger has written and said a great deal, as theologian, as bishop, as pope. But to grasp his overall vision it is enough to review the [speech](#) that he gave on September 22 2011 in Berlin, to the Bundestag, on the last of his journeys to Germany.

He began by citing the prayer of the young king Solomon on the day of his ascent to the throne, when he did not ask God for success or wealth but “a listening heart so that he may govern God’s people, and discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9). A request that is “the decisive issue facing politicians and politics today”.

Then Benedict XVI summarized as follows, in history, the role that Christianity has played in this question:

“Unlike other great religions, Christianity has never proposed a revealed law to the State and to society, that is to say a juridical order derived from revelation. Instead, it has pointed to nature and reason as the true sources of law – and to the harmony of objective and subjective reason, which naturally presupposes that both spheres are rooted in the creative reason of God. Christian theologians thereby aligned themselves with a philosophical and juridical movement that began to take shape in the second century B.C. In the first half of that century, the social natural law developed by the Stoic philosophers came into contact with leading teachers of Roman Law. Through this encounter, the juridical culture of the West was born, which was and is of key significance for the juridical culture of mankind. This pre-Christian marriage between law and philosophy opened up the path that led via the Christian Middle Ages and the juridical developments of the Age of Enlightenment all the way to the Declaration of Human Rights.”

But today, he continued, this construction has gone to pieces:

“There has been a dramatic shift in the situation in the last half-century, of which Hans Kelsen was a great theoretician. A “positivist conception of nature” has been imposed, from which “no ethical indication of any kind can be derived” and in which “the classical sources of knowledge for ethics and law are excluded.” With the result that we find ourselves living as if in “a concrete bunker with no windows, in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to obtain either from God’s wide world.”

But we need not resign ourselves to this outcome: “The windows must be flung open again, we must see the wide world, the sky and the earth once more and learn to make proper use of all this.” With a journey of reconstruction that Benedict XVI described as follows, with a surprising reference to ecology:

“I would say that the emergence of the ecological movement in German politics since the 1970s, while it has not exactly flung open the windows, nevertheless was and continues to be a cry for fresh air which must not be ignored or pushed aside, just because too much of it is seen to be irrational. [...] We must listen to the language of nature and we must answer accordingly. Yet I would like to underline a point that seems to me to be neglected, today as in the past: there is also an ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled.”

Which leads to the final question: “Is it really pointless to wonder whether the objective reason that manifests itself in nature does not presuppose a creative reason, a ‘Creator Spiritus’?”

BERGOGLIO THE YOUNG PERONIST

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find even a trace of Ratzinger’s vision in the idea of politics that is ingrained in Pope Francis, born instead from his experience of life, beginning with the Argentine ’68:

In Argentina, the student and labor uprisings flared up shortly after those in Paris or Los Angeles, in 1969, the year in which Bergoglio celebrated his first Mass, and

immediately the militias joined the fray, the Montoneros, who in 1970, when he took his vows, kidnapped and executed former president Pedro Aramburu.

Precociously appointed novice master, the then 34-year-old Bergoglio completely espoused the cause of bringing back Juan Domingo Perón, who in those years was in exile in Madrid. He became the spiritual director of the young Peronists of the Guardia de Hierro, who had a powerful presence at the Jesuit Universidad del Salvador. And he continued this militancy after his surprise appointment as provincial superior of the Jesuits of Argentina in 1973, the same year in which Perón returned to the country and won his triumphant reelection.

Bergoglio was among the writers of the “Modelo nacional,” the political testament that Perón wanted to leave after his death. And for all of this he drew the ferocious hostility of a good half of the Argentine Jesuits, more leftist than he, especially after he surrendered the Universidad del Salvador, which was put up for sale in order to stabilize the finances of the Society of Jesus, to none other than his friends of the Guardia de Hierro.

It was in those years that the future pope developed the “myth” - his word - of the people as protagonist of history. A word that by its nature is innocent and a bearer of innocence, a people with the innate right to “tierra, techo, trabajo” and that he sees as overlapping with the “santo pueblo fiel de Dios.”

THE “MYTH” OF THE PEOPLE

But in addition to his experience of life, Bergoglio’s political vision also took shape thanks to the instruction of a teacher, as he confided to the French sociologist Dominique Wolton in a book-length interview that Wolton also edited, entitled “Politique et société,” released in 2017:

“There is a thinker that you should read: Rodolfo Kusch, a German who lived in northwestern Argentina, an excellent philosopher and anthropologist. He made one thing clear: that the word ‘people’ is not a logical word. It is a mythical word. It is not possible to speak of people logically, because that would mean making only a description. In order to understand a people, to understand what are the values of this people, one must enter into the spirit, into the heart, into the work, into the history, and into the myth of its tradition. This point is truly at the basis of the theology called ‘of the people.’ That is to say, to go with the people, see how it expresses itself. This distinction is important. The people is not a logical category, it is a mythical category.”

An author of both anthropological and theatrical works, Rodolfo Kusch(1922-1979) took his inspiration from Heidegger’s philosophy to distinguish between “being” and “dwelling,” describing with the first category the rationalistic and domineering vision of Western man and with the second the vision of the indigenous Latin American peoples, in peace with nature and animated by none other than a “myth.”

For Kusch, the first of the two visions, the Eurocentric one, is intolerant and incapable of understanding the second, which he instead wanted to accentuate and to which he dedicated his most important studies. For this reason too he found himself at the margins of the culture of the dominant elites and instead found an admirer in Bergoglio.

WITH THE “POPULAR MOVEMENTS”

So according to Bergoglio, “it takes a myth to understand the people.” And he has recounted this myth, as pope, above all when he called around him the “popular movements.” He has done it three times so far: the first time in Rome in 2014, the second in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in 2015, the third again in Rome, in 2016. Every time he rouses the audience with endless speeches, of around thirty pages each, which when put together now form the political manifesto of this pope.

The movements that Francis calls to himself are not ones that he created, they preexist him. There is nothing overtly Catholic about them. They are in part the heirs of the memorable anti-capitalist and anti-globalization gatherings in Seattle and Porto Alegre. Plus the multitude of rejects from which the pope sees bursting forth “that torrent of moral energy which springs from including the excluded in the building of a common destiny.”

It is to these “discards of society” that Francis entrusts a future made of land, of housing, of work for all. Thanks to a process of their rise to power that “transcends the logical proceedings of formal democracy.” To the “popular movements,” on November 5, the pope said that the time has come to make a leap in politics, in order “to revitalize and recast the democracies, which are experiencing a genuine crisis.” In short, to upend the powerful from their thrones.

The powers against which the people of the excluded are rebelling, in the vision of the pope, are “the economic systems that in order to survive must wage war and thus restore economic balance,” they are “the economy that kills”. This is his key for explaining the “piecemeal world war” and even Islamic terrorism.

It can be added that at the first meeting in Rome and at the one in Santa Cruz there was present, in his capacity as “cocalero” activist, president of Bolivia Evo Morales, a champion of the populist left in Latin America.

Who was again invited to Rome, in April of 2016, as a speaker at the conference organized by the pontifical academy of sciences for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the social encyclical of John Paul II “Centesimus Annus,” together with fellow populist leader Rafael Correa, the president of Ecuador, neo-Malthusian economist Jeffrey Sachs, and the far-left Democratic candidate for the American presidency, Bernie Sanders:

Pope Francis received as a gift from him a letter from unspecified representatives of the “popular movements” and three books on the health benefits of coca, of which Morales himself is a fervent cultivator. And the farewell between the two - the agencies reported - was “very affectionate,” just the contrary of the opposition that the bishops of Bolivia have been carrying out against him there, going so far as to accuse him openly of “bringing drug trafficking into the structure of the state.” With the result that, back in Bolivia, Morales advised the bishops to “form openly a pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist party.” While on his side he exhibits the pope. Who “is content with what we have done and has told me: You always stand with the people”.

A WHOLLY “FRANCISCAN” POLITICS

To the drawn-out speeches to the “popular movements” can be added the one Pope Francis gave on November 27, 2015 to the young people of the Nairobi slums,

there too with the exaltation of the native “wisdom found in poor neighbourhoods,” as also, in the same perspective, his incessant gestures, journeys, and speeches concerning migrants.

But one must also take the same tack in reinterpreting the speech Bergoglio gave at the summit of Latin American judges convened at the Vatican in early June of 2019 - one year after a similar summit held in Buenos Aires - on the theme of social rights and of “Franciscan doctrine” (in reference not to Saint Francis of Assisi but to the pope who bears his name).

This too was a long speech, with extensive references to the second of the three addressed to the “popular movements,” the one given in Bolivia, and plainly written by a hand not his own even if in full agreement, perhaps by one of the Argentine judges present, Raúl Eugenio Zaffaroni, a prominent figure, member of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and supporter of a “critical theory” of criminology that traces the genesis of crime and the nature of justice back to the structure of the social classes and to inequality.

“There is no democracy with hunger, there is no progress with poverty, there is no justice with inequality”: this is how Francis summarized his vision, to thunderous applause.

[BACK TO RATZINGER](#)

At this point, how to evaluate Francis’s political vision? Among the most persuasive critical voices it should suffice to cite here that of Sergio Belardinelli, professor of the sociology of cultural processes at the university of Bologna and a former protagonist of that “Cultural Project” which occupied the Italian Church during the years of Cardinal Camillo Ruini’s leadership.

Belardinelli says, in the book he wrote together with his sociologist colleague Angelo Panebianco, “At the dawn of a new world,” published by Mulino on the eve of the European elections of 2019:

“We do admit that the magisterium of the pontiffs previous to Pope Francis has been too concentrated on so-called ‘nonnegotiable’ themes, like life and family. But are we sure that the fact of now favoring other themes, like environmentalism, the critique of market capitalism or third-worldism, is to be considered a step forward? [...] I have the impression that the denunciation of the causes of these evils that is coming from the Church today is too ‘human.’ It is a bit as if pointing out the market and laissez-faire as the main culprits - charges that for that matter are rather debatable - attenuates the tremendous, tragic seriousness of the evil that is being denounced. With the result that the prophetic impulse of the denunciation is weakened precisely through the fact of appearing too bound to the logic of the world, too political and not eschatological enough.”

And further on - in the footsteps of Niklas Luhmann, according to whom in a secularized society it is natural that “religion, politics, science, economy, in a word, all the social systems, specialize more and more in their own function” - Belardinelli writes:

“Secular society, as surprising as the thing may seem, has an urgent need that somewhere there should be someone who talks about God in a language that is not too mundane. [...] But of what God must one speak? With Pascal it is certainly

opportune to get out of the unjust perspective of the ‘God of the philosophers’ and get into that of the ‘God of Abraham and of Jesus Christ.’ However, it does not seem reasonable to me that this God who is love and mercy should be conceived of in stark contrast with ‘the perfect being, creator and lord of heaven and earth,’ as recited in the catechism. [...] A God who is not all-powerful and did not create the world cannot be God. As Leo Strauss and Joseph Ratzinger well understood, just to mention two significant names, the world has meaning only because it was created by God. [...] But in order that this God may return to being a concept generative of forms of ecclesial and social life, what is needed above all is faith.”

The citation of Ratzinger is not a coincidence here. One should reread his speech to the Bundestag to understand why.