

## RELIGION

# The Final Conversion of Pope Francis

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**O**n March 12, 2013, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires entered the Vatican papal conclave in Rome with a heavy heart. He had just resigned as Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires and had already chosen a simple room in an Argentine retirement center for Catholic clerics when he was suddenly summoned to the Vatican following the shocking resignation of Pope Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger. Instead, he would now be sequestered with 114 other cardinals until they reached a divinely inspired consensus about who would be the next spiritual and political leader of an estimated 1.2 billion Catholics, 40 percent of whom live in Latin America.

Two days before the opening of the papal conclave, Cardinal Bergoglio took a solitary walk through Rome's historic district dressed incognito in the black cassock of a simple village priest. On seeing an old friend, Father Thomas Rosica, Bergoglio grabbed his hand saying, "Please, pray for me." When the acquaintance asked Jorge Mario if he was nervous, the future pope replied that, indeed, he was.

Crisis in the Roman Catholic Church had led to the abdication of Pope Benedict/Ratzinger, a scholarly and fiercely conservative prelate who owned up to being a poor administrator. He and his close friend, Pope John Paul II/Karol Józef Wojtyła, were Central Europeans who came of age during World War II and rose to preeminence in the church during the cold war. Both popes had participated in Vatican II, which was led by Pope John XXIII who sought to "open the window and let in fresh air" and to reposition the church in the modern world. However, the future popes, caught up in European cold war politics against the "evils" of a godless, Soviet Communism, became obsessed with the "errors" and "excesses" unleashed by Vatican II, in particular, the rise of Latin American liberation theology.

Although liberation theology was never the dominant or hegemonic Catholic theology in Latin America, it was a strong and visible social movement that realigned clergy and nuns in support of the poor and those who spoke on their behalf during civil wars in Central America and

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Pope Francis presides at a general audience.  
(Photo courtesy of the Catholic Church of England and Wales.)



The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in 1962.

military dictatorships in South America in the 1970s and 1980s. At the 1968 Medellín Conference of Latin American bishops, liberation theologians took their message further into what this might mean in terms of everyday pastoral practice. The bishops pledged themselves to a new spiritual/social contract called a “preferential option for the poor,” which required the Latin American Church to detach itself from its colonial moorings and its favoritism toward the power elites, the landowning and industrial classes. The practitioners of liberation theology called for the growth of “ecclesiastical base communities” in *favelas*, poor *barrios*, and shantytowns where Catholic clergy and nuns working closely with lay people would read and discuss the scriptures as political as well as theological texts. Poverty and hunger were recast as “structural violence” and as social sins to be challenged and expunged. Liberation theology reconciled Christianity and social Marxism at a time when right-wing dictators overthrew democratic socialist political leaders with the help of the CIA and the U.S. Congress.

While in some circles, liberation theology was seen as a theoretical shift in the cultivation of a critical, sociological, spiritual imagination, in Nicaragua and Guatemala during the 1980s liberation theology became

a call to arms against oppressive dictators. This feet-on-the-ground, “barefoot” theology introduced new exemplars in a generation of beloved “red bishops”: Dom Hélder Câmara in Recife; Samuel Ruiz in Chiapas; Sergio Méndez Arceo in Cuernavaca; and the martyr-bishop of El Salvador, Óscar Romero.

Less recognized was the central role of Latin American women theologians, such as the Argentine Marcella Althaus-Reid and the Brazilian eco-feminist Ivone Gebara, and women catechists, often illiterate, almost invariably poor, who organized, led, and mostly populated the ecclesiastical base communities. The feminist theologians, while in sympathy with the liberation theology of Leonardo and Clodovis Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez, identified a lacuna in the failure of the progressive theologians to recognize and acknowledge the suffering of women that included those who were designated as “sinners” and “indecent” because they were single mothers, traditional midwives, or sex workers who had nowhere else to turn during times of extreme scarcity and crisis. Many of these same women became prominent leaders in liberation base communities.

In response to the wars on “indecent” by the military juntas of the 1960s-1980s, Argentine liberation

theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid proposed an “indecent theology” that confronted the political trinity of Pope, Nation, and Catholic family that provided the ideology of right-wing military regimes in Latin America. She wrote: “The resurrection [of Christ] was not a theme for our generation ... *Los desaparecidos* [that included kidnapped women and their babies] was our theme.”

Ivone Gebara, a Brazilian nun and one of Latin America’s leading theologians, wrote from the perspective of ecofeminism and liberation theology. For nearly two decades, Gebara was a professor at ITER, the liberation theology seminary in Recife. Gebara’s theology emerged directly from her intimate work with poor women in the slums and favelas of Recife in the late 1960s during the military dictatorship years. In her first book, “Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation,” Gebara articulates what she called a theological anthropology embedded in the struggles of everyday life. The garbage in the street, the non-existent or inadequate health care, and above all, the reproductive crises faced by poor women led Ivone Gebara to argue for a “religious biodiversity” that was inclusive of women’s suffering and needs. She saw reproductive rights for women as linked to environmental and economic sustainability and to the creation of a dignified human life.

Ivone Gebara in 2011.



Photo by Jorge A. Ramirez Portales/AP Images.

Not surprisingly, the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI fought tooth and nail against this Latin American theological “heresy.” The two previous popes saw the new Latin American radical theology as a threat to Papal authority. They argued that liberation theology was no theology at all, but a political project that focused on the “here and now,” rather than a spiritual project concerned with the soul and its afterlife. However liberation theology’s greatest threat to papal authority was its empowerment of women as theologians and at the grassroots level as community leaders, catechists, and pastoral counselors and representatives of the new church.

Working in tandem, Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger, later as Pope Benedict, actively dismantled liberation theology. In 1984, just as the Brazilian military dictatorship was ending, Cardinal Ratzinger issued his “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation,’” which listed the many doctrinal errors and excesses, including its dedication to building a church of the poor.

In 1985, the Vatican silenced Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, and Dom Hélder Câmara was forced into retirement, along with other radical bishops, and theological and political conservatives replaced them.

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When in October 1989, Ratzinger closed ITER, Dom Hélder's liberation theology seminary, several hundred seminarians, nuns, laypeople, and peasants traveled by foot from the impoverished, drought-ridden interior of Pernambuco to protest, and one of us [Jennifer] joined the demonstration. The powerful social movement that was called liberation theology was eventually destroyed, as theologians were disciplined, if not silenced, and young clergy were encouraged to take up a populist and artificial charismatic Catholicism to contest the growth of Pentecostal churches in Latin America. One of the last straws was the attack on the feminist theologians who had never really been incorporated within the male-dominated hierarchy of liberation theology. They were marginalized even by their male colleagues who, with the exception of Dom Hélder, found them to be scandalous in addressing in public the sexuality of women in the context of a kind of "green" feminist theology.

Professor Gebara achieved notoriety when the Vatican silenced her for two years in 1995. Her difficulties began in 1993 with an interview she gave to the Brazilian news magazine, VEJA, in which she said, rather off-handedly, that abortion was not necessarily a sin for poor women. Given the extreme poverty of many women in Brazilian favelas, too many births would only result in more hardship for the mothers and their other children. Moreover, Gebara said to the journalist, overpopulation puts increased stress on natural resources, including decreased access to potable water, one of the feminist theologian's main concerns. For these reasons, Gebara called for greater tolerance for women's reproductive rights and needs. The article in its day went viral via television rather than the social media. Complaints were raised, and following many discussions throughout 1994, the President of Brazil's Catholic Conference of Bishops of Brazil,

Dom Luciano Mendes de Almeida, judged the case against Gebara as a heretic was closed, citing her deep commitment to, and understanding of, the suffering and pain of poor women. However, the Vatican's Congregation of the Doctrine and Faith disagreed and began an investigation of Gebara's theological writings, interviews, and teaching modules. On June 3, 1995,

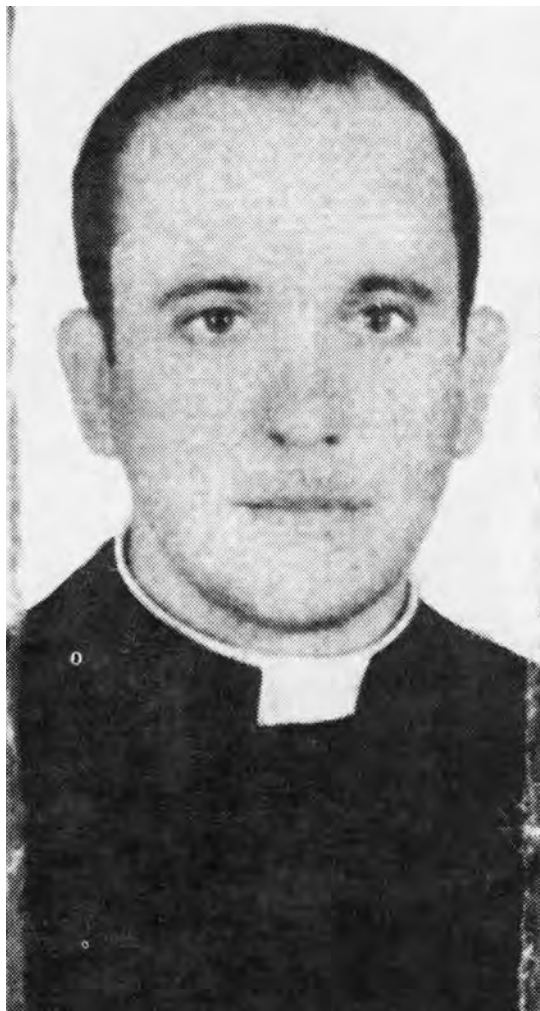
Professor Gebara was instructed to refrain from speaking, teaching, and writing for a period of two years, during which time she was exiled to France for theological re-education. Today, Professor Gebara is struggling with illness, but she remains totally dedicated to her feminist theology.

#### Enter Jorge Bergoglio: A Vatican in Shambles and a Catholic Church Divided

Cardinal Bergoglio approached the 2013 papal conclave with anxiety. He had come close to being chosen as pope in the 2005 papal conclave that elected Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. Bergoglio withdrew from the competition and threw his support to Ratzinger when he learned that opponents in Argentina were undermining his candidacy by circulating critical documents about his history as Provincial Superior of the Jesuits, during Argentina's infamous dirty war (1976-1983). Among the tens of thousands of victims were 150 Catholic priests who refused

to bend, as well as hundreds of nuns, lay catechists, and religious persons who embraced liberation theology.

Bergoglio's complex political history began in 1973 when, as a recently ordained Jesuit priest, he was appointed Provincial Superior of the Argentine Jesuits at the absurdly young age of 36. Jesuits are the muscular scholars of the Roman Catholic Church. Ordination requires more than a decade of intellectual and spiritual training, often culminating in two doctorates, one in theology and one in another chosen field. It was unheard of for a man so young and inexperienced to be appointed Provincial-Superior of the Jesuits anywhere in the world.



Jorge Bergoglio as a young priest.

Photo courtesy of Sergio Rubin and Francesca Antologetti.

The Vatican put pressure on the Superior General of the Jesuits in Rome to stop Argentine Jesuits from following the path of the Jesuits in Central America, Brazil, Chile, and Peru in resisting military regimes. Thus, the left-leaning head of the Jesuits was removed, and Father Bergoglio took his place without the support of most of his religious order in Argentina. At that time in his life, Father Bergoglio was a pious young priest of conservative political views. He was not a popular superior among the Jesuits, and he was eventually removed from office in 1979 and assigned to serve as Rector of the Colegio Máximo in Buenos Aires, where he taught theology. In 1986, he was sent to Germany to finish a second doctoral thesis. On his return to Argentina in June 1990, Bergoglio was again exiled to the city of Córdoba, where he spent two solitary years in the guesthouse at the Jesuit rectory.

This period of exile, we suggest, was the beginning of the conversion of Pope Francis. During his period of enforced solitude, Father Bergoglio barely spoke to anyone. He was even cut off from the other Jesuits with whom he was living. Bergoglio was coming to terms with his (self-defined) rigid, even authoritarian,

personality that had contributed to his decision to dismiss and "let go" of the two "disobedient" liberation theology Jesuits, Father Franz (Francis) Jalics, his former theology teacher, and Orlando Yorio, who had refused to give up their ecclesiastical base community in a poor parish of Buenos Aires. Bergoglio's decision put the men in mortal danger. Once removed from the protection of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits were kidnapped along with several other liberation catechists by the agents of Admiral Emilio Massera and taken to the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA), where for six months they were tortured, interrogated, and rescued at the nick of time by Father Bergoglio's intercessions in person with both General Videla and Admiral Massera. Bergoglio walked out of the second meeting with Massera saying definitively as he left, "I want them to appear." Soon after, the two Jesuits were removed from their cells and dropped by plane in a field on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, where they were found drugged, dazed, and in poor physical condition. The others who were kidnapped with them were dropped into the sea. This story has been told many times.

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A memorial to torture victims in front of Argentina's Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA).



Photo by David A. Wilbanks.

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## Remember the Women: The First Conversion of Jorge Bergoglio

Less noted, however, is the failed response of the former Jesuit superior on learning of the disappearances of three women. Two of them were French nuns, originally catechists (catechism teachers) to the mentally “deficient,” which included their devoted care for Jorge Videla’s young son who had severe and irreversible developmental problems. A third *desaparecida* was Father Bergoglio’s former boss and mentor, Esther Ballestrino de Careaga, a chemist in the factory where the future pope worked as a student in 1953–1954, just before he decided to enter the priesthood. Over time, the spiritual formation of the nuns and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga changed as it was shaped by liberation theology. They spoke of “an option for the poor,” while criticizing General Videla’s option for “power, blood, and fire.” On December 13, 1977, Videla’s secretary general broke the news of their kidnapping a week before all three were drugged and thrown into the Atlantic Ocean. The bodies of two of the women washed up on shore, to be buried in pauper graves. They were later exhumed and identified by members of the Argentine forensic team.

Several weeks before she and her daughter were kidnapped, Esther Ballestrino contacted Father Bergoglio asking for help when she learned that her daughter, a university student, had been targeted by the



Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images.

A building reflects Pope Francis celebrating mass on Copacabana Beach, Rio de Janeiro.

military. Bergoglio agreed to come to the family’s home and to remove and hide any books that might be seen as questionable or subversive. One of the books Bergoglio took away with him was “Das Kapital.” He warned Esther to be prudent, to drive carefully, to wear dark sunglasses, and to be as inconspicuous as possible. This assistance proved to be not so helpful. Both the daughter and, later, her mother were kidnapped. While her daughter was released and survived, Esther was dropped into the ocean.

After his period of seclusion in Córdoba ended, Bergoglio was given another chance and appointed Auxiliary Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1992. He emerged as a strong and popular spiritual leader and as an effective politician. He moved quickly up the ladder from archbishop to cardinal in 1998. A new Bergoglio began to emerge during this time, a more tolerant and humble prelate, not without contradictions but clearly on a different path. He visited poor *villas* and barrios, he

tended to the needs of young clerics, and he became involved in social action on behalf of marginal people, including migrants, street children, and asylum seekers. He collaborated in the founding of an NGO dedicated to the rescue of displaced refugees and trafficked persons. In 2000, Archbishop Bergoglio made the most difficult voyage of his life, when he paid a visit to Father Jalics in Germany. By all accounts, it was an emotional encounter. Both men wept, embraced and (presumably)

forgave each other, and co-celebrated the Mass. However, Pope Francis has not yet made amends to the memory of the Argentine women who died for their faith under his watch.

### The First Latin American Pope

By the time Bergoglio was summoned to Rome for the papal conclave, the political climate had changed. The desire for a new dispensation, a petite reformation of the Roman Church and its Curia, was on the agenda. There was talk of

selecting a pope from the South, Latin America, Africa, or Asia. However, the cardinal from Argentina did not enter the conclave as one of the papal finalists. But after just 24 hours of deliberation the conclave had settled on Bergoglio. When asked if he accepted the vote, Jorge Mario did not give the expected ritualized reply “Accepto.” Instead he said, “I am a great sinner; trusting in the mercy and patience of God in suffering, I accept.”

When he appeared on the balcony of Saint Peter’s Basilica as the new pope, the well-wishers gathered below in Saint Peter’s square were confused. They did not recognize him. But once they heard that the new pope would be known as Pope Francis, they sent up cheers “Viva Francesco! Viva Francesco!”

Like Wojtyła/John Paul II, Bergoglio/Francis was a first: the first Latin American pope, the first pope from the global South, the first Jesuit pope, and the first pope to name himself after Saint Francis, who was never a pope at all. Both of these outsider popes were/are positioned to make decisive public roles in global transitions. The Polish pope, John Paul II, gave his blessing to *Solidarność*, contributing to the end of the Soviet Union. The Argentine pope played a key role in negotiating the dialogues between President Obama and Raúl Castro that promises a long-overdue end to the U.S. cold war in Cuba and U.S. policies of meddling with perceived socialist agendas in other Latin American nations.

The Catholic world quickly warmed up to Pope Francis who was praised for his simplicity, humility, and his common touch. The new pope refused all the trappings of popery: the throne and the papal palace, the lace and rose slippers. This pope brought well-worn black shoes with him from Buenos Aires.

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In Argentina, the archbishop liked to travel by bus and subway and to cook his own meals. In Rome, Pope Francis refused to live in the Apostolic Palace, but instead moved into a one-room suite at the Casa Santa Marta, the five-story guesthouse that houses cardinals and other visitors in Vatican City. He usually takes his meals in the main dining room on the first floor, although he once surprised Vatican workers by standing in line with a tray at the Vatican cafeteria, where he sat down and joined five clerks from the Vatican pharmacy. He helped himself to a plate with codfish, stewed tomatoes, fusilli, and well why not, he said, "... but just a few French fries." The pope of the people enjoys good food. His tip was a blessing and a photo taken with his delighted tablemates.

His manner is informal, his language colloquial. The new pope soon became famous for his off-the-cuff "zingers," especially when in the air and between his travels.

"I don't know what comes over me," Pope Francis told Antonio Spadaro, the Jesuit editor-in-chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, in August 2013. The pope had just returned from his first and wildly successful international trip to Brazil for World Youth Day. "I did not recognize myself when I responded to the journalists asking me questions [about gay clergy] on the flight from Rio de Janeiro." He famously told the press corps: "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" He spoke in Italian, but he used the English word, "gay," rather than "homosexual." Another papal first.

So, who is Francis? What can an Argentine pope do for Latin America and for the world?

## One Pope for Many Catholicisms

Despite the unifying symbol of the Vatican and its pontiff, Latin American Catholics are an unruly lot, and

Pope Francis drinks *mate* offered by a pilgrim in St. Peter's Square.



Photo from Associated Press.

there are many versions of Catholicism, each with diverse histories and religious traditions. Catholics received the new pope differently in Brazil than in Argentina. Three and a half million Brazilians gathered on Copacabana Beach to watch Francis drive by in his Popemobile. The crowds were euphoric. The pope was seen as *agradável*, personable, intimate, unpredictable, and most of all *animado*, full of vitality. "Did you see how he responded to the crowds? How he accepted a gourd of *chá mate* (yerba mate) and slurped it up?" The pope is a man in love with life. Brazilians from the shantytowns thought that they could teach the new pope about their social needs and realities. He was seen as flexible and teachable. In Argentina, there were also ecstatic celebrations in the streets with cars honking their horns and people shouting "un papa argentino!" Some of his former Jesuit colleagues refused to celebrate the new pope as one of their own, but the initial standoff was fleeting.

## The Final Conversion of Pope Francis

As a political spiritual leader, Francis has negotiated a détente between Cuba and the United States. He has welcomed Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Marxists, and atheists to the table in the task of peacemaking and world repair. He has begun to make peace with former theological enemies. He initiated a rapprochement with 85-year-old Father Gustavo Gutiérrez of Lima, Peru, the father of liberation theology, and he lifted the ban on the beatification of Óscar Romero, the first step to sainthood, describing Romero as "a man of God." Just recently, he initiated the path to sainthood for the beloved Dom Hélder Câmara of Recife. These acts augur well for the global Catholic community and for the family of man.

However, to date there is still a disturbing and glaring absence at the center of his new papacy — the family of women. While Pope Francis has reached out to gay couples who love and support each other, and while he has invited divorced and even remarried Catholics of both sexes to return to the church and to receive the sacraments, and while he has advocated for equal pay and called gender disparities in wages a scandal, he has not yet reached out to women and their reproductive suffering and needs. To the contrary, he has stated many times that he fears "population control" as an underhanded attack on the poor. Nor has Pope Francis reached out to Catholic theologians who have grappled with the multiple existential threats to the safety of all women, poor or affluent, illiterate or highly educated.

Pope Francis is at a critical juncture. Early in his papacy, Francis declared "radical feminism" as one of the

serious dangers facing the modern church. In so doing, Francis was at risk of repeating a dangerous error, the same unreasonable fears he once had of the teachings and social and political engagements of liberation theology priests, nuns, and theologians. Today, he still risks turning works of mercy by nuns and laywomen of conscience — on behalf of raped and pregnant women, overwhelmed and suffering mothers, and homeless children abandoned to the streets and to early death — into theological errors and mortal sins. Without embracing a new covenant with women as equal partners, Francis will be unable to respond adequately to his fellow Jesuit Jon Sobrino's challenges to him: to fix the unbearable and untenable situation of women vis-à-vis the church; to recognize and value the indigenous peoples of world; and to love Mother Earth.

Thus far, Francis has not heard the sigh of the oppressed from women who are turned away from public clinics and doctors throughout Latin America by the Roman Catholic bans on contraception enshrined in the laws of most Latin American countries. Some are the victims of domestic violence, others of police brutality against their adult sons; others are living on the edge of a reproductive cliff. We know them all too well in the favelas of Brazil and in the mestizo villages of Mexico, and we know the consequences of coerced births in the headcounts of tiny graves with white wooden crosses and in the municipal ledger books that tally the deaths of mothers and infants.

Pope Francis has said that the church needs to end its obsessive preoccupation with sexuality, contraception, and divorce, as these are negative and divisive issues, and better to put them aside. But in so doing, the pope is ignoring the doctrinal millstone that is still tied around the necks of women and their doctors.

Lastly, in stigmatizing the writings of Latin American feminist theologians, by referring to them as following "radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith," he is not only invalidating the work of serious scholars, he presents them as dangerous thinkers.

The new Prefect (under Pope Francis) of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Gerhard Müller, has declared that "the war between liberation theology and Rome is over" and that liberation theology should be recognized as "among one of the most important currents in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic theology." It's time that Pope Francis begins a much-needed rapprochement with feminist theologians who have been silenced and with Catholic women who have been ordained as Episcopal and Anglican priests. There is Professor Ivone Gebara, ill but feisty, demanding that the Holy Father listen to women. In an interview on her

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thoughts about Pope Francis and the theology of women, posted (originally in Portuguese) on August 28, 2013, she said: “I’d like to reinforce the idea that we are the Church, too ... The reality of faith is inscribed in every person, then it is sustained in the community of people of faith who are able to bring justice, mercy, compassion, and mutual aid to the maintenance of life for each other. ... Seeking collective responsibility in great and small acts is the primary challenge for all of us.”

Can Pope Francis heal the irrational schism between feminist theologians and the Vatican? If so, it could lead to a long-overdue détente between the Roman Catholic Church and its sister churches, Episcopal, Anglican and others, which share the same rituals and sacraments but allow women to share in the priesthood and in the breaking of the bread, and allow married people to become priests.

#### And The Women He Needs

In taking the name of Saint Francis, Jorge Mario might recall the close relationship between Saint Francis and Saint Clare, who shared an intimate intellectual and spiritual relationship in co-founding the mendicant and the cloistered Franciscan orders. Francis’s strong, equitable relationship with Clare as his spiritual *companheira* was necessary to the founding of Franciscan theology in praxis, a dynamic theology, rooted in voluntary poverty, that embraced all creatures, humans and animals. Francis often referred to himself and to his barefoot friars as “mothers” rather than as men. We would like Pope Francis to follow the steps of his patron saint and to think of himself as “la mamma” as well as “il papa.”

St. Francis preaches to the birds, Leicester Cathedral, England. (Photo by Father Lawrence Lew, O.P.)

We have followed Jorge Bergoglio/Pope Francis as he has been remaking himself as a powerful and charismatic religious leader who has one important challenge with respect to the public roles and private needs of women worldwide. There is a solution, one with a long and distinguished pedigree, the ancient tradition of the intellectual, theological and administrative companionship of women to church leaders, beginning with the close female friends and disciples of Jesus, including the three Marys — Jesus’ mother, Mary the mother of James, and Mary Magdalene, the best friend of Jesus who was incorrectly identified as a prostitute rather than the generous and influential woman of means that she was. Saint Francis of Assisi consulted throughout his public life with Clare, the founder of the Franciscan Order of Poor Clares. Like his namesake, Pope Francis also needs the wisdom of strong women to help him navigate the other half of the world, the still-invisible 50 percent, the part of the world that — despite his concern for the smallest and least of us and for the “wounds on the bodies” of the trafficked victims, especially women and children — still perplexes him and without whom he cannot succeed in his invocation of the Catholic Church as a new social movement in Latin America and in the world.

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St. Clare, St. Frideswide’s Church, Oxford. (Photo by Father Lawrence Lew, O.P.)

