



Most Reverend George Leo Thomas, Ph.D.
Diocese of Las Vegas
Chrism Mass
March 25, 2021

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Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born on December 17, 1936, the eldest of five children, son of Mario Jose and Regina Sivori Bergoglio. His father was an immigrant from the Piedmont region of Italy, trained as an accountant and employed as a factory bookkeeper. His mother was a humble homemaker, and a first generation Argentinian, also of Italian extraction. They were married on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, December 12, 1935, and placed their family and future under the mantle of Mary's maternal care.

Mario and Regina raised a close-knit Catholic family, hardworking and intrepid, deeply devoted to one another and equally dedicated to the Church. They bequeathed to their children an uncommon spirit of gratitude for all blessings great and small, and that spirit has remained strong and steady throughout their lives.

Their eldest son, Jorge Mario, was baptized at the Salesian Shrine of Maria Auxiliadora, in the culturally diverse Flores District of Buenos Aires, Argentina. His playmates were Armenian, Ukrainian, Southern Europeans, and Eastern European Jews. Theirs was a neighborhood of struggling lower middle class immigrants, a potpourri of cultures, customs and cuisines, helping to explain the future Pope Francis's inordinate comfort and natural rapport with leaders of the world's great religions.

The Bergoglio children were educated in the public schools of urban Buenos Aires, as their parents struggled to keep bread on the table and a roof over their heads.

All the while, Mario and Regina stirred in their children an ardent love for Latin music and dance, a taste for international cooking, uncommon appreciation for the arts and humanities, and an irrational love for soccer.

Jorge's paternal grandmother Rosa resided in in the parental home, and played an unparalleled role in the formation of her eldest grandson's religious formation. All of this coincided with Juan Perón's rise to power, giving Argentina's working class a surge of optimism, and struggling families like the Bergoglio's desperately needed temporal relief.

At the age of 20, after he completed a course of studies in chemistry and science, the young Jorge Mario entered the local diocesan seminary of Villa Devoto, under the tutelage of the Society of Jesus. Within the year, he transferred to the Jesuit community, just as the College of Cardinals elected Angelo Cardinal Roncalli, the Patriarch of Venice, to the Chair of Peter on October 28, 1958.

As the young Jesuit novice remained sequestered in the cocoon of the seminary formation, the Universal Church was undergoing seismic change under the watchful eye of Pope John XXIII and the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

Eleven years after he entered the Society of Jesus, Jorge Bergoglio was ordained to the priesthood on December 13, 1969. It was a time of tumult and transition, in both the Church and society at large.

Bergoglio's biographers are nearly unanimous in their opinion that the influence of Pope John and the documents of the Second Vatican Council were slow to take root in the life of young Bergoglio. But with the passage of time, Pope John's example and the writings of the Conciliar Fathers became the prevailing themes in the life and leadership of Father Bergoglio.

There were other pivotal players in his intellectual development, most especially a number of noted theologians -- Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, Romano Guardini, and Rafael Adolfo Tello. His outlook on things political, social, economic, and ecological were influenced by prominent South American prelates, noted for their capacity to, in the words of Martin Marty, "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Among the most notable of those bishops was the beloved and beleaguered Brazilian Archbishop Hélder Pessoa Câmara, OFS, who once wrote, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

As a young and inexperienced Jesuit, only six years ordained, Father Bergoglio became Provincial Superior of his Jesuit community. His tenure was a period marked by conflict, resistance, and outright rejection by some within his own community, most especially an avant-garde wing of the Argentinian Jesuits. His leadership coincided with unparalleled violence on the streets of his native Argentina, resulting in the perfect storm for the young Provincial.

Much of Bergoglio's spirituality, most especially his identification with the passion of Christ and the sufferings of his people, was formed within the crucible of personal struggle and painful rejection.

In 1992, much to the dismay of certain elements of the Jesuit Community, Father Bergoglio was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires, and chose as his episcopal motto a highly self-revelatory quote drawn from the writings of St. Bede and the vocational call of Matthew -- "*miserando atque eligendo*" -- He saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him.

Five years later, Bishop Bergoglio became the Coadjutor Archbishop of Buenos Aires, where his radical identification with slum dwellers of the city and the themes of mercy and conciliation became the major hallmarks of his episcopal office.

As Archbishop Bergoglio prepared to leave his homeland, he departed as a public icon of Catholic Social Teaching and a much beloved father of the poor.

On March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected as the 266th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. On that memorable day, still etched in our collective memories, his choice of the name Francis, his prayerful plea for the people's blessings on the loggia of St. Peter's, his relocation from the papal apartments to the Casa Santa Marta, and his first official pastoral visit to Lampedusa portended that a new and qualitatively different style of papal leadership was in the wings.

Today, at this Chrism Mass 2021, I would like each of you gathered here to prayerfully examine your own life and ministry through the lens of Pope Francis's papal leadership.

At the end of the day, I hold that his life and teachings have the power both to upset our spiritual apple carts and to invigorate our ministries, leading us closer to the heart of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).

Francis's first clarion call to us is the universal call to holiness, powerfully articulated by the Council Fathers, a call from which no one is exempt. Each of us has heard that call in his or her heart, and responded to it in varied and wonderful ways. Holiness of life is our common DNA, shared among clergy, religious and laity alike, and for priests, the mortar that binds us to the people we are ordained to serve.

Pope Francis is a trained expert in Ignatian spirituality, the system of prayer built upon the invitation to encounter Jesus personally and profoundly, always in the particular circumstances of our lives.

Throughout his writings and exhortations, he is asking us to embrace with a spirit of joy, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the title of his first Apostolic Exhortation.

It is Gospel joy rather than theological acuity that leads to what Father Bernard J. Lonergan, SJ, describes as "affective conversion" that best leads others to Christ. In a word, affective conversion is a heady phrase that describes love calling out to love, attracting people to the love of Jesus and into the heart of the Christian community.

Pope Francis has challenged us to move intentionally from maintenance to mission, activating a new spirit of mission discipleship, and apostolic boldness, mandates directed to the ordained and laity alike. This movement was first articulated by Paul VI in his 1975 exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiande*, often described as Pope Francis's "magna carta" and roadmap into the future.

This Holy Father insists that our vocation is most authentic when marked by the spirit of humble servant leadership. He is challenging each of us, and most especially the priests, to be on the pavement, walking among the people, leaving the safety and security of sacristy

and sanctuary, to bring the Gospel of Jesus to those who live on the periphery, and among those still untouched by the transforming power of Christ.

Pope Francis is unabashed about warning priests to be ever on guard against siren calls of entitlement and creature comfort, temptations that eventually dilute and diminish the efficacy of our mission and ministry. In the words of the late Father Henri J. Nouwen, we do well to cultivate the spirit of "downward mobility," sinking deep roots in our assigned community, and pouring out our hearts in selfless love for the people we are sent to serve.

Pope Francis describes his desire for us to be a Church that listens intently, discerns deeply, plans prayerfully, always with an ear attuned to the voices of the people. Consistently, he encourages us to dispense the medicine of mercy copiously and generously.

The themes of Ignatian discernment, synodality, collegiality, collaboration, and consultation permeate the writings and leadership style of Pope Francis, and should inspire us to follow suit.

In 1802, the romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote, "The child is father of the man." If you will recall the childhood history of Jorge Bergoglio, you will not be surprised that Pope Francis holds a special place in his heart for the immigrants and refugees across the globe, especially those whose daily bread is suffering and uncertainty.

The Church, he says, must call out the "globalization of indifference," which deadens and desensitizes hearts toward those drowning in misery and squalor. The Church must never allow her maternal heart and prophetic voice to be silenced to the cry of the poor.

As we look at our parishes and dioceses, Francis has cautioned us never to mistakenly confuse unity with uniformity, but rather to celebrate the vast and varied ways of being part of a Church that is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."

As we look at the beauty of the Church's multicultural makeup in the Diocese of Las Vegas, a Church that praises God in 58 languages, I want to raise up and applaud the beauty and goodness of our international priests and diverse ethnic and cultural communities, living symbols of the universality of the Church, and living expressions of her blessed diversity and hallowed unity.

Our Chrism Mass 2021 is a special time to reflect deeply, and to affirm resolutely our desire to be the best we can be, priests, deacons, religious and laity, God's holy people, a people already anointed in Sacred Chrism, and co-missioned to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now is the time, now is the hour, to reclaim, to renew, to resolve to proclaim Christ anew, Jesus who is our savior, Jesus who is our Lord, Jesus our Master, Jesus who is here, ever in our midst "as one who serves." Amen!