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Pope Francis and the Modernization of the Catholic Church

Since taking office in March 2013, Pope Francis has done nothing less than revolutionize the way the world views the Catholic Church. He has facilitated and supported a new era of religion in which science and religion must coexist. He has also rejected many of the time-honored patterns of the papacy to live a more simple life that he believes God intended for him. Many of his followers sum up his reign as pope from the statement he made in an interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica*, "If one has the answers to all the questions that is the proof that God is not with him." This humble stance and his dedication to the poor has identified with the younger base of Catholics. Pope Francis has modernized the Catholic Church in ways no other pope has by making changes to not only scripture, but also to the way Catholics think, and this been key to the revitalization of the church. Thus far Pope Francis has made major changes to the leadership of the church, has held bishops more accountable for their actions, and has made a push for climate change. First to understand the magnitude of these changes, we must first revisit the history of the papacy as well as Pope Francis' humble beginnings.

The word *papae* ("pope") originally referred to any bishop but it wasn't until Pope Gregory VII in 1073 formally prohibited the use of this title by anyone other than the bishop of Rome. That is when Rome claimed the primary authority of Western Christianity, and this was generally accepted on the grounds that Rome's bishop was the successor of Peter. Peter is

considered the “prince of Apostles” and is known for being the early leader of Christianity. In *The Bible*, Jesus describes Peter as the “rock” in which he will build his church on, and Peter is widely considered to be the first pope, even though at that time the term did not exist. It wasn’t until Innocent III came into power in 1160 and asserted his authority of the papacy, that the development of an ecclesiastical government was promoted. At that point the papacy really became a “king” who maintained communication with his churchmen all over Europe.

After many years of abuse of the papacy, a man named Marsilius of Padua stood up to the papacy, and he claimed that the pope could teach salvation but did not have the right to demand obedience. His argument was that the power of God did not flow from the papacy to the people but from the people to the papacy. Prior to this the model was that God had given both spiritual and worldly authority to the pope and it would flow through him. The Council of Constance finally declared that itself was the supreme authority within the church and then used its new power to elect a successor by eliminating competing popes. The council did not eradicate the papacy it simply just promoted and broadened the sharing of power. Unfortunately, by the mid-fifteenth century, papal monarchy had been revived and crushed this movement. Even though the Council of Constance did not last, it still had a lasting influence on the development of representative governments and religious reformers both inside and outside the church. Ideals like these shook the foundation at the time and have helped shaped the papacy to what it is today. The way Pope Francis is modernizing the church today is very similar due to the fact that he is challenging the foundation of the position, and one might say that his upbringing in Buenos Aires had a lot to do with this.

Pope Francis was born on December 17, 1936 in Buenos Aires and was baptized as Jorge Mario Bergoglio. His Italian grandparents and father immigrated to Argentina in 1929 in a wave

of Italian immigrants trying to escape poverty. Bergoglio's parents met at Mass in 1934 and married a year later and had 5 children. As a child Bergoglio had a very standard upbringing, he went to school and was very interested in sports. He became very close with his grandparents who took him most days to alleviate the burden for his mother who had four other children to look after. After Bergoglio completed his primary education, he decided he wanted to pursue a secondary education in food chemistry. He worked a part time job while attended secondary school and often had 12 plus hour days; later he would go on to state that he valued this experience because it taught him how to work hard.

Bergoglio's first encounter with God came when he was seventeen as he was about to celebrate with friends and classmates, which included one that he was in love with. At this time, he was a practicing Catholic who tried to relate his daily activities to his faith and his Italian ancestors. He decided to visit a church before joining his friends and asked a priest to hear his confession. "During his confession, Bergoglio experienced a moment of grace in which God came to him, and after receiving absolution he knew that his vocation in life was to become a priest" (Aguilar 41). A few years later, he joined the Society of Jesuits because he saw them as a "force for progress within the church and society" (Aguilar 42) and admired their obedience and discipline. The Society of Jesuits helped form who Bergoglio is today. They focus heavily on education, which helped him become the director of theology and philosophy at the Jesuit Colegio Maximo in Cordoba. They also require members to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to Christ and the pope. These vows as well as the dedication to education are echoed through the decisions Pope Francis has made thus far.

It was very clear from the beginning that Bergoglio was going to be different than any other pope before him and this became apparent when he chose the name St. Francis of Assisi,

who is a saint known for his humility, simplicity, and care for the poor. He is the first pope to pick this name and is the first to revolutionize the church in this new era. His commitment to the poor is unwavering, which was first seen when he rejected the papal living corridors in the Apostolic Palace, stating that it was “large enough to house three hundred people.” Instead he has chosen to live at the Casa Santa Marta, which is a Vatican boarding house for visiting prelates. This was the first of many changes he made to the papacy life style, but the biggest effect he’s had on the church has been his new ideals on social issues such as gay marriage. It is very unlikely that there will be any changes to the “nonnegotiable values” (Flamini) that the church holds sacred, but Pope Francis is now using rhetoric that suggests a softening of these values. When asked about a gay priest in July of 2013, he responded with the powerful statement “who am I to judge?” Comments like these have rocked the very foundation of Catholicism and suggest that it is ready to join the world on certain issues such as gay marriage and global warming.

In June of 2015, Pope Francis published his second encyclical of his reign as pope and named *Laudato si'*. This document speaks to many issues in the world today but one of the main focuses of the encyclical was climate change. He is not the first pope to recognize climate change as a serious problem; actually in 1990 Pope John Paul II addressed the issue of the destruction of our ecosystem but did not directly reference climate change. What makes Pope Francis so special is that in his *Laudato si'* climate change is the first and main issue. Since the beginning of science and religion there has always been a rift but recently that rift has begun to shrink. Times are changing and Pope Francis is taking the lead by calling for these global changes to fight climate change. “Climate change is a global problem with serious implications, environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods; it represents one of

the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” (Francis 25). Action on climate change has been slow moving and what science is missing are the hearts and minds of the people, which religion can provide. Pope Francis has made it a point for the church to work directly with scientists to help resolve this global issue, but before he can put his full attention on this matter, there are still issues within the church itself that need to be resolved.

The Catholic Church is an establishment that promotes many things from social work with the poor to now climate change, but the one negative aspect that has hung over the organization’s head is sexual abuse scandals. In 2004 a report was done by John Jay College that outlined the magnitude of these scandals. From 1950-2002, there was a reported 10,667 allegations against 4,392 priest. Many people felt the Vatican tried to cover up many of these cases, so Pope Francis is trying hard to change this image of the church more than any other pope has done before. One of the first things he did as pope was to set up the Vatican Sex Abuse Commission to deal with these cases and hand down punishment to priests that are convicted. Pope Francis knows that this issue is not going to be solved overnight, but to give more transparency to the public about this issue and the commission itself, he appointed a former sex abuse victim named Marie Collins. This has been an issue with Catholics for many years and now something has finally been done to correct this sick problem. The fact that Pope Francis is the first pope to set something up like this really speaks volumes to how he is trying to turn around the Catholic Church as a whole.

The papacy has been around for thousands of years and has seen it ups and downs throughout, but right now it appears that Pope Francis is leading the charge for a new modernized Catholic Church. Pope Francis came from humble beginnings and this really shows through his work with the poor and the changes he has made in papal traditions. He has gone

where no pope in history has gone before by trying to unite religion and science together to stop climate change and preserve our planet. He has also started the first Vatican Abuse Commission to punish priests as well as provide transparency, which the public desperately wanted. So far Pope Francis has modernized the church like no other pope before him, and he will continue to do so until his reign as pope comes to an end.

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