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Pope Francis

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Introduction

On the evening of March 13, 2013, a plume of white smoke curled into the damp Roman sky above the Sistine Chapel, signaling a decision had been reached. Shortly after, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran stepped onto the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to utter the traditional Latin phrase, "Habemus Papam"—"We have a Pope." The name he announced, however, was one few had anticipated: Jorge Mario Bergoglio. The Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, a Jesuit, became the 266th Bishop of Rome. It was a moment laden with firsts. He was the first pope from the Society of Jesus, an order whose members typically vow never to seek high office. He was the first pope from the Americas, the vast continents largely shaped by Catholic missions yet never before represented at the Church's apex. He was the first from the Southern Hemisphere, shifting the Church's center of gravity away from its traditional European core. And he was the first to choose the name Francis.

This book chronicles the life and papacy of the man who became Pope Francis, from his birth in Buenos Aires in 1936 to his death in Vatican City on April 21, 2025. It explores the journey of a figure who ascended to the papacy at a time of profound challenge and change for the Catholic Church, an institution grappling with internal scandals, dwindling influence in secularized societies, and the shifting demographics of global Catholicism. His predecessor, Benedict XVI, had taken the almost unprecedented step of resigning the papacy, citing failing strength, leaving behind a Church that seemed adrift to many observers, both inside and out. The conclave that elected Bergoglio was seeking not just a successor, but perhaps a reformer, a pastor, someone capable of navigating the turbulent waters of the 21st century.

Jorge Bergoglio's election represented, in many ways, a departure. He was not a Vatican insider, though he had served on various Roman congregations as a Cardinal. His background was firmly rooted in the pastoral realities of a large Latin American archdiocese, marked by stark social inequalities and complex political histories. He was known in Argentina for his simple lifestyle – eschewing the archbishop's palace for a modest apartment, riding public transport, cooking his own meals – and for his direct engagement with the poor, particularly those living in the sprawling slums, or *villas miserias*, of Buenos Aires. This reputation as a "slum bishop" would foreshadow the priorities he brought to the papacy.

His early life, explored in the opening chapters, was shaped by his family's immigrant experience – his parents arrived in Argentina from Italy escaping Mussolini's regime – and by a severe illness in his youth that led to the removal of part of a lung. These experiences, perhaps, fostered an early awareness of vulnerability and resilience. His decision to join the Jesuits, a path chosen after a moment of spiritual clarity during

confession, set him on a course defined by intellectual rigor, missionary zeal, and a particular emphasis on discernment – finding God's will in the concrete circumstances of life. The Society of Jesus, with its unique blend of obedience to the papacy and a history of sometimes pushing boundaries, provided the crucible for his formation.

His years as a Jesuit priest and later as provincial superior in Argentina coincided with one of the darkest periods in the nation's history: the military dictatorship and the "Dirty War" of the 1970s. This era would cast a long shadow, leading to later accusations that he had not done enough to protect priests under his authority who were targeted by the regime. These controversial episodes, examined in detail, reveal the complexities of leadership under extreme pressure and the difficult choices faced by Church figures navigating treacherous political terrain. Bergoglio himself maintained he worked quietly behind the scenes to save lives, a claim supported by some but questioned by others. This period undoubtedly shaped his understanding of power, ideology, and the Church's role in society.

His subsequent appointments as Auxiliary Bishop, then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, saw him become a prominent voice in Argentine public life. He clashed at times with political leaders, particularly Presidents Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, over issues ranging from economic policy and poverty to social questions like same-sex marriage. His leadership of the Argentine Bishops' Conference solidified his national profile, though his focus remained largely pastoral, emphasizing popular religiosity and direct outreach. His elevation to Cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 2001 brought him into the College of Cardinals, making him a participant in the 2005 conclave that elected Benedict XVI, where he was reportedly a significant contender himself.

The 2013 conclave occurred against a backdrop of the "Vatileaks" scandal, which had exposed infighting and alleged corruption within the Roman Curia, and the ongoing, painful reckoning with the global clergy sexual abuse crisis. The cardinals sought a leader who could bring transparency, accountability, and a renewed sense of purpose. Bergoglio's election was seen by many as a mandate for change. His choice of the name "Francis," evoking the humble saint of Assisi known for his love of the poor and creation, signaled a deliberate break in style and emphasis. He famously began his pontificate by asking the crowd in St. Peter's Square to pray for him before he offered his blessing, a gesture of humility that resonated widely.

From the outset, Pope Francis cultivated a different papal image. He rejected the ornate papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace, choosing instead to reside in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, a Vatican guesthouse, where he could maintain more direct contact with visitors and staff. He often spoke off-the-cuff, employed simple language, and utilized gestures – washing the feet of prisoners (including women and Muslims) on Holy Thursday, embracing the disabled, making spontaneous phone calls – that emphasized closeness and compassion over hierarchical distance. This "Francis effect"

captured global attention, generating enthusiasm among many Catholics and non-Catholics alike, though it also unsettled traditionalists wary of departures from established protocol.

His pontificate, spanning just over twelve years, was marked by a series of ambitious, and often contentious, initiatives. He embarked on a significant reform of the Roman Curia, aiming to streamline its bureaucracy, improve financial transparency (particularly concerning the troubled Vatican Bank), and foster a culture of service rather than careerism. This involved establishing new advisory bodies, like the Council of Cardinal Advisers, and appointing individuals from diverse backgrounds to key positions. These reforms faced internal resistance and proved complex to implement, but they represented a clear effort to address longstanding criticisms of Vatican governance.

A central theme of his papacy was the concept of a "synodal Church," one that listens to and involves all its members - clergy, religious, and laity - in its discernment and decision-making processes. He convened major Synods of Bishops on the Family, Youth, and the Amazon region, culminating in the multi-year global Synod on Synodality, intended to embed this collaborative approach more deeply into the Church's structure. This push for decentralization and greater participation aimed to move away from what he often criticized as "clericalism," an overemphasis on the authority and status of ordained ministers.

Francis's writings became key reference points for understanding his vision. His first major apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), laid out the programmatic themes of his pontificate: a Church that goes out to the peripheries, a focus on mercy, and the imperative of social justice. His landmark encyclical *Laudato si'* (Praise Be to You) brought environmental concerns and climate change to the forefront of Catholic social teaching, linking the "cry of the earth" with the "cry of the poor" and calling for an "integral ecology." Later, *Fratelli Tutti* (All Brothers) explored themes of fraternity and social friendship in a world fractured by nationalism, populism, and indifference. These documents spurred dialogue but also drew criticism for their perceived political implications or departures from traditional formulations.

Perhaps no area generated more discussion, and often division, than Francis's approach to moral and pastoral issues. While upholding traditional Catholic doctrine on matters like abortion and the male priesthood, he often shifted the emphasis. His famous "Who am I to judge?" remark regarding gay individuals seeking God signaled a more welcoming pastoral tone towards LGBTQ+ people. His apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), following the synods on the family, opened pathways for divorced and remarried Catholics to potentially receive communion after a process of discernment, sparking intense debate and accusations from some conservative quarters that he was undermining doctrine. The later declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*, permitting non-liturgical blessings for couples in "irregular situations," including same-

sex couples, further inflamed these tensions, leading to open resistance from some bishops' conferences.

Francis also made notable efforts regarding the role of women in the Church. While firmly ruling out female ordination, he appointed women to increasingly prominent positions within the Vatican, including as undersecretaries and voting members of synods. He established commissions to study the historical role of women deacons, though these did not result in a definitive decision during his lifetime. These moves were seen by some as incremental progress and by others as insufficient to address deeper questions of gender equality within the Church.

The shadow of the clergy sexual abuse crisis loomed large over his papacy. Francis inherited a situation demanding decisive action. He convened a global summit of bishops on the issue, introduced new laws (*Vos estis lux mundi*) requiring bishops to report abuse and establishing procedures for holding them accountable, and abolished "pontifical secrecy" in abuse cases to facilitate cooperation with civil authorities. However, his handling of specific cases, such as that of Chilean Bishop Juan Barros or the initial response to allegations against former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Father Marko Rupnik, drew sharp criticism from victims' advocates and others, who felt he sometimes moved too slowly or failed to apply his own standards consistently. He issued apologies, including a significant one in Canada for the Church's role in the abuse of Indigenous children in residential schools, acknowledging it as "cultural genocide."

On the global stage, Francis sought to position the Vatican as a voice for peace, dialogue, and the marginalized. He played a behind-the-scenes role in the rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. He engaged in extensive interreligious dialogue, notably signing the Document on Human Fraternity with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Abu Dhabi and making a historic visit to Iraq, meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. He consistently advocated for the rights of migrants and refugees, often clashing implicitly or explicitly with restrictive immigration policies in Europe and the United States. His attempts to mediate or call for peace in conflicts like the Syrian civil war and the war in Ukraine met with limited success, and his careful diplomatic language, particularly concerning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sometimes drew criticism for appearing overly cautious or ambiguous. His pursuit of a controversial agreement with China regarding the appointment of bishops aimed to unify the Church there but was condemned by critics, including Cardinal Joseph Zen, as a betrayal of underground Catholics loyal to Rome.

Francis significantly reshaped the College of Cardinals, the body that would elect his successor. Over ten consistories, he appointed cardinals from geographically diverse regions, particularly the developing world and areas previously unrepresented in the College. He often bypassed traditional "cardinalatial sees" in Europe and North America in favor of appointing pastors from the peripheries, reflecting his desire for a

less Eurocentric Church leadership. His choices generally favored cardinals with strong pastoral experience and a perceived alignment with his emphasis on mercy and social justice, subtly altering the likely trajectory of the Church after his death.

Throughout his papacy, Francis faced recurring health issues, particularly sciatica and knee problems that increasingly necessitated the use of a wheelchair or cane from 2022 onwards. He underwent abdominal surgery in 2021 and 2023. Despite these challenges, he maintained a demanding schedule of travel and public appearances. In early 2025, however, his health declined sharply following hospitalization for bronchitis, which developed into severe pneumonia and respiratory complications. After a period of critical illness and partial recovery, Pope Francis died on Easter Monday, April 21, 2025, at the age of 88. He had previously indicated his wish to be buried not in St. Peter's Basilica, but in Rome's Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, a testament to his lifelong devotion to the Marian icon housed there, *Salus Populi Romani*. He also simplified the traditional papal funeral rites, opting for a single wooden coffin.

Pope Francis was a figure of profound consequence and complexity. Admired by millions for his humility, compassion, and efforts to reform the Church and refocus it on the poor and marginalized, he was also a source of deep concern and criticism for others who saw his pontificate as undermining tradition, causing confusion, or intervening inappropriately in political matters. He sought to lead a global institution through a period of intense internal and external pressure, leaving behind a Church arguably more focused on pastoral outreach and social issues, but also more openly polarized than it had been in decades. This book seeks to provide a comprehensive account of his remarkable life, exploring the forces that shaped him, the decisions he made, the impact he had, and the legacy he leaves behind, inviting the reader to understand the man, the Pope, and the era he defined.

CHAPTER ONE: From Buenos Aires to the World: Early Life and Family (1936-1958)

The story of Pope Francis begins not in the hallowed halls of the Vatican, nor even in the traditional heartlands of European Catholicism, but thousands of miles away, in the vibrant, sprawling metropolis of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was there, on December 17, 1936, in the Flores neighborhood – a district known for its tree-lined streets and solid middle-class homes – that Jorge Mario Bergoglio entered the world. He arrived just over a week before Christmas, the firstborn child of a family whose roots stretched back across the Atlantic to the rolling hills of Piedmont in northern Italy.

His parents were Mario José Bergoglio and Regina María Sívorí. Mario, his father, was an accountant who had arrived in Argentina just a few years earlier, in 1929. He hailed from Portacomaro, a small town near Asti in the Piedmont region. Unlike many Italian immigrants of the era who sought economic opportunity abroad, the Bergoglio family's departure from Italy was driven by political necessity. They were escaping the tightening grip of Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. This detail, often emphasized by the family, particularly Pope Francis's only living sibling, María Elena, paints a picture of a family seeking not just prosperity, but freedom.

Regina Sívorí, Jorge's mother, was born in Buenos Aires, but her family also originated from northern Italy, specifically from the neighbouring region of Liguria, near Genoa. She was a dedicated housewife, managing the home and raising the growing Bergoglio brood. Jorge Mario was the eldest of five children. He would eventually be joined by Oscar Adrián, Marta Regina, Alberto Horacio, and María Elena. Growing up in a bustling household, surrounded by siblings, likely instilled in young Jorge an early understanding of community, shared responsibility, and perhaps, the need for patience and diplomacy in close quarters.

The Bergoglio household was steeped in the culture of Italian immigrants, a blend of Piedmontese and Genoese traditions adapted to the rhythms of Argentine life. Faith played a central role, as did a strong work ethic and a commitment to family. They spoke Italian at home, particularly the Piedmontese dialect, alongside the Spanish of their adopted homeland. Young Jorge grew up bilingual, absorbing the nuances of both cultures. His grandmother Rosa, his father's mother, was a particularly influential figure in his early religious formation, teaching him prayers and sharing stories of faith.

His formal education began close to home. In the sixth grade, Jorge attended Wilfrid

Barón de los Santos Ángeles, a school run by the Salesians of Don Bosco in Ramos Mejía, a nearby suburb of Buenos Aires. The Salesians, an order founded by St. John Bosco with a particular mission to educate young people, especially the poor and working class, would leave an imprint on his spiritual development. He later spoke fondly of his time there, indicating it was a formative experience.

After primary school, Jorge's path took a practical turn. Perhaps reflecting his father's pragmatic background or the family's immigrant emphasis on tangible skills, he enrolled in a technical secondary school, the Escuela Técnica Industrial Nº 27 Hipólito Yrigoyen. This was not the typical trajectory for a future priest or academic theologian. He pursued studies in chemistry, eventually graduating with a diploma certifying him as a chemical technician. This scientific training fostered a methodical approach to problem-solving and an appreciation for empirical reality, traits some observers would later note in his papacy.

His technical qualification led to employment. For several years, Jorge worked in the food section of the Hickethler-Bachmann Laboratory in Buenos Aires. There, he worked under the supervision of Esther Ballestrino de Careaga, a biochemist and, later, a prominent human rights activist and founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Ballestrino, a Paraguayan immigrant and committed socialist, became a significant influence, engaging the young Bergoglio in discussions about politics, social justice, and the realities faced by working people. Decades later, Pope Francis would speak of her importance in shaping his social consciousness.

Alongside his work as a technician, the young Bergoglio held other jobs more typical of a student or young man trying to make ends meet. He worked for a time as a janitor, learning the value of humble labor firsthand. Perhaps more surprisingly, given his later calling, he also worked as a bouncer, presumably requiring a degree of physical presence and the ability to handle potentially difficult situations calmly – skills not entirely irrelevant to navigating complex human dynamics later in life. These varied experiences provided him with a grounding in the everyday world far removed from the rarefied atmosphere of ecclesiastical life.

Life, however, threw a major challenge his way when he was just 21 years old. He contracted a severe respiratory illness, initially diagnosed as influenza but quickly escalating into life-threatening pneumonia. Three cysts were discovered on his lung. The situation was critical, requiring urgent surgery. In a procedure that was risky at the time, doctors removed the upper lobe of his right lung. It was a brush with mortality that undoubtedly left a deep mark. Recovering from such a serious illness often prompts reflection on life's purpose and fragility. For Jorge Bergoglio, this period of convalescence coincided with a deepening of his spiritual searching.

The decisive moment in his vocational journey occurred, as he later recounted, not in a dramatic vision, but in a quiet encounter during confession. It was September 21st,

Argentina's "Spring Day" (and also the feast of St. Matthew, the tax collector called by Jesus). He was on his way to meet friends to celebrate when he felt drawn to pass by his local parish church, San José de Flores. He decided to go to confession. The priest he encountered that day, Father Carlos Duarte Ibarra, made a profound impression on him. Bergoglio described the experience as a moment of clarity, a feeling of being unexpectedly "waited for," a sudden conviction that he was meant to dedicate his life to God as a priest.

This powerful spiritual experience solidified his direction. He had felt stirrings towards a religious life before, but this encounter galvanized his resolve. He abandoned his previous plans and ambitions, including, as he later admitted with characteristic candour, a youthful crush on a girl he had met, which had caused him to briefly question his path. The call he felt that Spring Day was stronger. His focus shifted decisively towards the priesthood.

His first step was to enter the archdiocesan seminary, the Inmaculada Concepción Seminary located in the Villa Devoto neighborhood of Buenos Aires. This was the standard route for young men aspiring to become diocesan priests, serving within the structures of the local archdiocese. He embarked on the rigorous program of philosophical and theological studies required for priestly formation. He spent three years immersed in this environment, laying the intellectual and spiritual groundwork for his future ministry.

During his time at the diocesan seminary, however, another path began to attract him. He felt drawn to the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. Founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century, the Jesuits were known for their rigorous intellectual tradition, their emphasis on education, their missionary spirit, and their unique "fourth vow" of special obedience to the Pope regarding missions. They often worked on the frontiers of the Church, both geographically and intellectually. What specifically drew Bergoglio to the Jesuits rather than remaining on the path to becoming a diocesan priest is not fully detailed in public accounts, but the order's combination of intellectual depth, missionary dynamism, and focus on discernment – finding God in all things – likely resonated with his experiences and inclinations.

The decision was made. After three years of preparation at the diocesan seminary, Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose to enter the Society of Jesus. On March 11, 1958, at the age of 21, he began his Jesuit novitiate. This marked the end of his early life in the familiar world of Buenos Aires, his family, his technical career, and his initial seminary training. He was stepping onto a new path, one that would take him far beyond the Flores neighborhood, immersing him in the global network and demanding spirituality of the Jesuit order. The young man who had worked in a lab, swept floors, and faced down death had found his calling, embarking on the long journey of formation that would eventually lead him, decades later, to the Chair of St. Peter. His world was about to expand dramatically, but the foundations laid in Buenos Aires – the immigrant

heritage, the practical education, the brush with illness, the deep sense of faith, and the concern for ordinary people – would remain integral parts of the man he was becoming.

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