

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8991>



Catholic Church

The Unexpected Pope

- Features -

Publication date: Monday 12 May 2025

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

With the death of Jorge Bergoglio, Pope Francis, a rare figure has passed away. In an Italy ruled by neo-fascists and an increasingly reactionary Europe, he distinguished himself with a surprising ethical, social, and ecological commitment.

Ever since Pius XII excommunicated the communists, the left could only expect damnation from the Vatican. Didn't John Paul II and Ratzinger persecute liberation theologians, accused of using Marxist concepts? Didn't they try to impose a "submissive silence" on Leonardo Boff? It's true that, since the 19th century, there have always been leftist currents within Catholicism, but they have only encountered hostility from the Roman Catholic authorities. Moreover, clerical currents critical of capitalism have tended to be quite reactionary. Criticising feudal or clerical socialism in The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels noted its "total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history,"; but they recognized in this mixture of "half an echo of the past, half menace of the future" a "bitter, witty and incisive criticism" that could sometimes "strike the bourgeoisie to the very heart's core."

Max Weber offers a more general analysis of the relationship between the Church and capital: in his works on the sociology of religions, he noted the "deep aversion" (tiefe Abneigung) of Catholic ethics toward the spirit of capitalism, despite adaptations and compromises. This hypothesis must be taken into account to understand what happened in Rome with the election of the Argentine Pope.

Jorge Bergoglio: Pope Francis

What could we expect from Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, elected Pontifex Maximum in March 2013? It's true that he was a Latin American, which in itself meant quite a change. But he had been elected by the same conclave that had enthroned the conservative Ratzinger and he came from Argentina, a country where the Church is not known for its progressivism, as several of its dignitaries actively collaborated with the bloody military dictatorship of 1976. This wasn't the case with Bergoglio: according to some accounts, he even helped people persecuted by the Military Junta go into hiding or leave the country. But he didn't oppose the regime either: a "sin of omission," one might say. While some left-wing Christians, such as Argentine Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, always supported him, others considered him a right-wing opponent of the government of the "left-wing Peronists" Néstor and Cristina Kirchner.

Be that as it may, once elected Supreme Pontiff, Francis—a name he chose in reference to Saint Francis, the friend of the poor and of birds—immediately distinguished himself by his courageous and committed stance. In some ways, he is reminiscent of Pope Roncalli, John XXIII, who was elected as a "transitional pope" to ensure continuity and tradition, but initiated the most profound change in the Church in centuries: the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In fact, Bergoglio had initially considered taking the name John XXIV, to honour his predecessor from the 1960s.

The new pontiff's first trip outside Rome was in July 2013, to the Italian port of Lampedusa, where hundreds of illegal immigrants were arriving, while many others were drowning in the Mediterranean. In his homily, he wasn't afraid to go against the Italian government—and much of public opinion—by denouncing the "globalisation of indifference" that makes us "insensitive to the cries of others," that is, to the fate of "immigrants who die at sea, on those boats that, instead of being a path of hope, were a path of death." He would later return several times to this criticism of the inhumanity of European policy toward immigrants.

A notable change also occurred in Latin America. In September 2013, Francis met with Gustavo Gutiérrez, founder of liberation theology, and the Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano* published an article sympathetic to the thinker for the first time. Another symbolic gesture was the beatification—and later, canonisation—of Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero, assassinated in 1980 by the military after denouncing anti-popular repression, a hero celebrated by the Latin American Catholic left but ignored by previous pontiffs. During his visit to Bolivia in July 2015, Bergoglio paid a passionate and vibrant tribute to the memory of his fellow Jesuit Luis Espinal Camps, a Spanish missionary priest, poet, and filmmaker who was murdered on March 21, 1980, under the dictatorship of Luis García Meza, for his commitment to social struggles. During his meeting with Evo Morales, the Bolivian socialist president presented him with a sculpture made by the Jesuit martyr: a cross resting on a wooden hammer and sickle...

During his visit to Bolivia, Francis participated in a World Meeting of Popular Movements in Santa Cruz. His speech on this occasion illustrates the "profound aversion" to capitalism of which Max Weber spoke, but to a degree never achieved by any of his predecessors. Here is a now famous passage from his speech:

The earth, entire peoples and individual persons are being brutally punished. And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea – one of the first theologians of the Church – called "the dung of the devil". An unfettered pursuit of money rules. This is the "dung of the devil". The service of the common good is left behind. Once capital becomes an idol and guides people's decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socioeconomic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home, sister and mother earth.

As expected, Francis's approach met with considerable resistance in the more conservative sectors of the Church. One of the most vocal opponents is American Cardinal Raymond Burke, an enthusiastic supporter of Donald Trump, who also came into contact, during a trip to Italy, with Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Lega Nord [Northern League]. Some of these opponents accused the new pontiff of being a heretic, or even a... Marxist in disguise.

When Rush Linebaugh, a reactionary American Catholic journalist, called him a "Marxist Pope," Francis responded by politely refuting the adjective, adding that he was not offended since he knew "many Marxists who were good people." In fact, in 2014 the Pope received in audience two prominent representatives of the European left: Alexis Tsipras, then leader of the opposition to the right-wing government in Athens, and Walter Baier, coordinator of the Transform network, formed by cultural foundations linked to the European Left Party (such as the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Germany). On that occasion, it was decided to initiate a process of dialogue between Marxists and Christians, which took shape in several meetings, including a joint Summer University on the island of Syros, Greece, in 2018. In 2024, the Pope received a delegation of participants in this dialogue (Christians and Marxists), including the author of this article.

It is true that when it comes to a woman's right to control her own body and sexual morality in general—contraception, abortion, divorce, homosexuality—Francis adhered to conservative positions within Church doctrine. But there were some signs of openness, of which the violent 2017 conflict with the leadership of the Order of Malta, a wealthy and aristocratic institution of the Catholic Church, was a striking symptom. The Order's arch-conservative Grand Master, Prince (!) Matthew Festing, demanded the resignation of the Order's Chancellor, Baron de Boeselager, for the terrible sin of distributing condoms to poor populations threatened by the AIDS epidemic in Africa. The Chancellor appealed to the Vatican, which ruled in his favour against Festing; however, Festing—supported by Cardinal Burke—refused to obey, and was therefore removed from office by the Vatican. This did not imply the adoption of contraception as part of the Church's moral doctrine, but it was a change...

It is clear that there was nothing Marxist about Pope Francis, and that his theology was far removed from the Marxist form of liberation theology. His intellectual, spiritual, and political formation owes much to the theology of the people, a non-Marxist Argentine variant of liberation theology, whose main inspirations were Lucio Gera and the Jesuit theologian Juan Carlos Scannone. The theology of the people does not claim to be based on class struggle, but it recognises the conflict between the people and the "anti-people" and supports a priority option for the poor. It also shows less interest in socioeconomic issues than other forms of liberation theology and pays more attention to culture, particularly popular religion.

In a 2014 article ("Pope Francis and the Theology of the People"), Juan Carlos Scannone rightly underlines how much the Pope's early encyclicals, such as *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), owe to this popular theology, denounced by his left-wing critics as "populist" (in the Argentine and Peronist sense of the term, not the European one). However, it seems to me that Bergoglio, in his criticism of the "idol of capital" and the entire current "socioeconomic system," goes further than his Argentine inspirations. Especially in his latest encyclical, *Laudato si'* (2015), which merits a Marxist reflection.

Laudato si'

Pope Francis's "Ecological Encyclical" is an event of global significance from a religious, ethical, social, and political perspective. Given the enormous influence of the Catholic Church, it is a crucial contribution to the development of a critical ecological consciousness. While it was enthusiastically received by true environmentalists, it also aroused concern and rejection from religious conservatives, representatives of capital, and ideologues of "market ecology." This is a document of great richness and complexity, proposing a new interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition—breaking with the "Promethean dream of world domination"—and a critical reflection on the causes of the ecological crisis. In certain aspects, such as the inseparable association of the "cry of the earth" and the "cry of the poor," it is evident that liberation theology—particularly that of the eco-theologian Leonardo Boff—was one of its sources of inspiration.

In the brief notes that follow, I would like to highlight one aspect of the Encyclical that explains the resistance it encountered from the economic and media establishment: its anti-systemic character.

For Pope Francis, ecological disasters and climate change are not solely the result of individual behaviour—although these play a role—but of "current models of production and consumption." Bergoglio is not a Marxist, and the word "capitalism" does not appear in the encyclical. But it is very clear that for him the dramatic ecological problems of our time are the result of the mechanisms of today's globalised economy, mechanisms constituted by a "structurally perverse global system of commercial and property relations" (section 52 of the document).

What, for Francis, are these "structurally perverse" characteristics? First and foremost, a system dominated by "the narrow interests of corporations" and "a questionable economic rationality," an instrumental rationality whose sole objective is to maximise profits. Consequently, "the principle of profit maximisation, which tends to isolate itself from all other considerations, is a conceptual distortion of economics: if production increases, it matters little whether it occurs at the expense of future resources or the health of the environment" (section 195). This distortion, this ethical and social perversity, is not more characteristic of one country than another, but of a "global system, dominated by speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which tend to ignore all context and all effects on human dignity and the environment." It seems, therefore, that "environmental degradation and human and ethical degradation are intimately linked" (56).

The obsession with unlimited growth, consumerism, technocracy, absolute domination of finance, and the deification of the market are perverse characteristics of the system. In a destructive logic, everything is reduced to the market and the "financial calculation of costs and benefits." However, it must be understood that "the environment is one of

those goods that market mechanisms are unable to adequately defend or promote" (190). The market is incapable of taking into account qualitative, ethical, social, human or natural values, that is, "values that exceed all calculation" (36).

The "absolute" power of speculative financial capital is an essential aspect of the system, as the banking crises confirm. In this sense, the encyclical's commentary is demystifying:

Saving the banks at all costs, making the population pay the price, without a firm decision to review and reform the entire system, reaffirms an absolute dominance of finance that has no future and can only generate new crises after a long, costly, and apparent recovery. The financial crisis of 2007-2008 was an opportunity for the development of a new economy more attentive to ethical principles and for a new regulation of speculative financial activity and fictitious wealth. But there was no reaction that led to a rethinking of the obsolete criteria that continue to govern the world. (189)

This perverse dynamic of the global system that "continues to rule the world" is the reason for the failure of the World Summits on the Environment: "There are too many particular interests and economic interests very easily prevail over the common good and manipulate information so as not to have their projects affected" (54). As soon as the imperatives of powerful economic groups predominate,

One could only expect some superficial declamations, isolated philanthropic actions, and even efforts to show sensitivity towards the environment, when in reality any attempt by social organisations to change things will be seen as a nuisance caused by romantic dreamers or as an obstacle to be overcome. (54)

In this context, the Encyclical denounces the irresponsibility of those "in charge," that is, the dominant elites or oligarchies interested in preserving the system, in relation to the ecological crisis:

Many of those with the greatest resources and economic or political power seem to focus primarily on masking the problems or hiding the symptoms, trying only to reduce some of the negative impacts of climate change. But many symptoms indicate that these effects could become increasingly worse if we continue with current production and consumption patterns. (26)

Faced with the dramatic destruction of the planet's ecological balance and the unprecedented threat posed by climate change, what do governments or international representatives of the system (World Bank, IMF, etc.) propose? His answer is so-called "sustainable development," a concept whose content is increasingly empty, a veritable flatus vocis, as the scholastics of the Middle Ages said. Francis harbours no illusions about this technocratic mystification:

The discourse of sustainable growth often becomes a diverting and exculpatory resource that absorbs values from the ecological discourse within the logic of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of companies is often reduced to a series of marketing and image actions. (194)

The concrete measures proposed by the dominant techno-financial oligarchy are completely ineffective, as are the so-called "carbon markets." The Pope's criticism of this false solution is one of the Encyclical's most important arguments. Referring to a resolution of the Bolivian Episcopal Conference, Bergoglio writes:

The strategy of buying and selling "carbon credits" may give rise to a new form of speculation and may not serve to reduce global emissions of polluting gases. This system appears to be a quick and easy solution, with the appearance of a certain commitment to the environment, but it in no way implies a radical change commensurate with the circumstances. Rather, it may become a diversionary resource that allows the overconsumption of some countries and sectors to be sustained. (171)

Passages like this explain the lack of enthusiasm in "official" circles and among supporters of "market ecology" (or "green capitalism") for *Laudato si'*.

By linking the ecological question with the social question, Francis insists on the need for drastic measures, that is, for profound changes, to address this dual challenge. The main obstacle to this is the "perverse" nature of the system: "The same logic that makes it difficult to take drastic decisions to reverse the trend toward global warming is the same one that prevents us from achieving the goal of eradicating poverty" (175).

While *Laudato si'*'s diagnosis of the ecological crisis is impressively clear and coherent, its proposed actions are more limited. It is true that many of its suggestions are useful and necessary, for example: "Forms of cooperation or community organisation can be facilitated to defend the interests of small producers and preserve local ecosystems from depredation." (180) It is also very significant that the Encyclical recognises the need for the most developed societies to "slow down a little, to set some rational limits and even to go back before it is too late," that is, "to accept a certain decline in some parts of the world while providing resources so that healthy growth can take place in other parts" (193).

But precisely what is missing are "drastic measures," such as those proposed by Naomi Klein in her book *This Changes Everything*: breaking away from fossil fuels (coal, oil) before it is too late, leaving them in the ground. We cannot change the perverse structures of the current mode of production and consumption without a set of anti-system initiatives that challenge private property, for example that of the large fossil fuel multinationals (BP, Shell, Total, etc.). It is true that the Pope speaks of the usefulness of "major strategies that effectively halt environmental degradation and foster a culture of care that permeates the entire society," but this strategic aspect is poorly developed in the Encyclical.

Recognising that "the current global system is unsustainable," Bergoglio seeks a global alternative, which he called "ecological culture":

Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the problems that arise around environmental degradation, the depletion of natural reserves, and pollution. It should be a different perspective, a way of thinking, a policy, an educational programme, a lifestyle, and a spirituality that constitute a resistance to the advance of the technocratic paradigm. (111)

But there are few signs of the new economy and the new society that correspond to this ecological culture. This isn't

a question of asking the Pope to adopt ecosocialism, but the alternative for the future remains somewhat abstract.

Pope Francis embraces the Latin American churches' "priority option for the poor." The Encyclical clearly sets this out as a global imperative:

In the current conditions of global society, where there are so many inequalities and an increasing number of expendable people, deprived of basic human rights, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, as a logical and unavoidable consequence, a call for solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest. (158)

But in the Encyclical, the poor do not appear as actors in their own emancipation, the most important project of liberation theology. The struggles of the poor, peasants, and indigenous peoples to defend forests, water, and land against multinational corporations and agribusiness, and the role of social movements, which are precisely the main actors in the fight against climate change—Via Campesina, Climate Justice, the World Social Forum—are a social reality that doesn't feature much in *Laudato si'*.

However, it will be a central theme of the Pope's meetings with popular movements, the first in the history of the Church. At the meeting in Santa Cruz (Bolivia, July 2015), Francis declared:

You, the most humble, the exploited, the poor, and the excluded, can and do much. I dare say that the future of humanity lies, to a large extent, in your hands, in your ability to organise and promote creative alternatives, in the daily pursuit of the "three Ts." [\[1\]](#) Agreed? Work, shelter, and land. And also, in your leading role in the great processes of change: national changes, regional changes, and global changes. Don't retreat!

Of course, as Bergoglio emphasised in the Encyclical, the Church's task is not to take the place of political parties by proposing a programme of social change. With its anti-systemic diagnosis of the crisis, which inseparably links the social question and environmental protection, "the cry of the poor" and "the cry of the earth," *Laudato si'* constituted a precious and invaluable contribution to reflection and action to save nature and humanity from catastrophe.

It is up to Marxists, communists, and ecosocialists to complement this diagnosis with radical proposals to change not only the dominant economic system but also the perverse model of civilisation imposed globally by capitalism. They should formulate proposals that include not only a concrete programme of ecological transition but also a vision of another form of society, beyond the reign of money and commodities, founded on the values of freedom, solidarity, social justice, and respect for nature.

** *

It's difficult to predict what the future of the Church will be after Pope Francis's death: will whoever is elected by the next conclave follow Bergoglio's critical and humanist approach or return to the conservative tradition of previous pontiffs? Many new cardinals were appointed by Francis, it's true, but what are their innermost convictions?

In the coming weeks, we will know whether Bergoglio was merely a parenthesis or whether he effectively opened a new chapter in the long history of Catholicism.

22 April 2025

Translated by David Fagan for **International Viewpoint** from [Jacobin America Latina>
<https://jacobinlat.com/2025/04/michael-lowy-sobre-francisco-el-pontifice-inesperado/>].

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.

[1] In Spanish these “three T’s” are: trabajo (work), techo (shelter) and tierra (land).