

Who is Pope Francis?

Jack Tollers, Argentina

Well, for what it's worth, here goes my effort in trying to translate for the average American reader who is the Pope, what it means to be an Argentine, why it's so difficult to understand one and the other...

Did I say "translate"? Yes, after all that's my business (even when it's always easier to translate from a foreign language and not the other way round) as anyone can check out if only by [visiting my web page](#), though I'm obviously using the term in a wider sense, the differences between Argentina and America being so deep that it takes more to it than meets the eye...

Let's start with Argentina.

Please don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't love my country, but it sure makes you want to cry now and again (as Jesus did for His, if I got my Gospel right). And Simone Weil has aptly explained that there's no other way of loving your own country—with compassion, that is.

Having said that, *this country is pretty much a disaster*. In the way Argentines perceive things, talk, behave - or misbehave - it's an anomalous country, a place where one cannot take words at its face value, where unpunctuality is the norm, where the rule of law is pretty much disdained; a place full of double talk, where people seldom come out with a straight answer, where "tomorrow" doesn't refer to the day after, but to the present day: it only means not today.

It's a difficult place to live in: flimsy logic, inconsistency, lack of seriousness, nearly non-existent courtesy, false modesty, dishonesty, dirty habits and general unfairness make up the usual fare.

We're sort of used to all this (and much more) in a way that your average American could never understand unless you happened to do some time over here.

There's a whole bunch of Argentine words that anyone foreign (be it someone from Spain, say, or even Mexico) would be hard put to explain: words like "piola", "macanedor", "chanta", "trucho" and so many more depict a people who find it laughable to cheat, to trick, to swindle, to get away with anything - that enjoy nothing so much as breaking the rules. As a rule, Argentines *hate* rules, and that's why the propensity to anarchy keeps showing up in the public sphere. Usually, Argentines love to

pretend and have no time for uprightness, fair play or straight talk. Lying is common, words mean nothing unless they are put to work for cunning purposes, for a ruse, for any scam, to put one over you. It is a make-believe country.

Okay, I know that you think I'm exaggerating (that now it's me, the Argentine, who's pulling your leg); that no society could survive such habits and customs, that there must be more to the country than my dreary depiction.

And you're right. There is. Except for a bunch of thoroughly decent Argentines the country would have all but disappeared decades ago. To my mind, this is especially true about Argentine women, but no, you can also find lots of engaging people among the men. Hospitable, good mannered, well brought up, brave, sprightly young Argentines can be found in every job, in every college, in every corner of the country (if anyone's interested, I've written a novel on the better Argentines I've come to know, and that you can find [at this link](#)).

They are, however, a minority (and, as I see it, always have been), which goes a long way to explain the financial, economical, institutional and moral mess which characterizes us as a country—and I'm weighing my words.

Enter Perón. As you may know, he ruled the country thrice and established a political movement (called, of all things, 'Peronism') that has run the place on and off for the better part of the last sixty years. Now Peronism is not only a very popular movement, it's a way of playing politics, of handling power, of doing business, of looking at the world, which is very much made up of those horrible Argentine traits which I've been telling you about. Peronism reflects the lower classes' ethos of the country... and Perón himself was quite a nasty piece of work, mark my words (for anyone interested there's a good, if rather long, [article on him in Wikipedia](#))

Now to Jorge Bergoglio. He's a typical *peronista*: his ways, language, style (or lack of), social and ideological background is *peronista* through and through. Coming from the lower classes he was studying chemistry when he decided to join the Jesuits and was ordained in the years just after Vatican II.

Enter the Argentine Catholic Church, and especially, the Jesuits in this country. If the country, as a rule, is an unreliable one, you cannot begin to guess what a mess the Catholic Church was even before Vatican II, let alone afterwards.

But here, a short aside is necessary. I have dedicated most of my life to promote, translate, and publicize an Argentine Jesuit's work, Father Leonardo Castellani (1899-1981), who comes out like something of a mighty exception: a very clever scholar, a

serious and devout priest, who made it the job of his to denounce the terrible circumstances, the ruinous state of the Argentine Catholic Church of his time (on my Smashwords page you'll find some of his works translated into English by me, as well as a short Introduction which should more or less put you into the picture of the class of priest I'm talking about).

Well, to cut a long story short, in 1949 he was expelled from the Jesuits Society in a scandalous way—precisely because of his complaints and public denunciation of the local Church's state of affairs. He was especially sharp and bitter when referring to the seminaries curricula, terrible teachers, worst books, and complete lack of scholarship—and all that, back in the Forties! In his time, it was very difficult to find in this country a well-read priest, a properly trained one (like himself, the great exception as I have already noted).

The after-effects of Vatican II in such circumstances could only make matters worse, and that's exactly what happened. It was a perfect debacle.

Take Bergoglio, for example. His studies amount to nothing substantial. The Jesuits over here have no professors worthy of the name, the subjects were tossed about in an unscholarly manner, the philosophy would never be properly taught (and, it would only be crassly digested Suárez in the best of cases). The theology seats had been all but captured by badly trained Jesuits who were prone to repeat the last of Teilhard's work, or Rahner's, when not divulging the Liberation Theology's tenets (the *Nouvelle Theologie* never made it over here, few people could read French or German, and St. Thomas was all but perfectly ignored).

The liturgy was perfectly awful, no one knew Latin, Scriptural Studies were little less than a sham. (Let me tell you, I know what I'm talking about, the main Jesuit College is a very short way from where I'm writing, a Jesuit uncle of mine studied there, I've been there dozens of times, and have done part of my research on Father Castellani at their library—isome library!, one of the poorest I've seen in the country, and that's saying quite something).

So what does Bergoglio know? With that sort of training, *pretty much nothing*. No Latin, no languages at all, for that matter. His Italian is awful, not a word of English, no French, let alone his clumsy Spanish! (I wonder what on earth he studied in Germany for a couple of months, as is reported, because, for that matter, he knows no German either. And he certainly did not earn a degree over there.)

Well, then, how come he was elected Pope? Search me.

All I can tell you is that he's the *perfect example of an Argentine, Peronist, Jesuit of the second half of the Twentieth Century*. A ruthless double-dealer, he made his way up the ranks of the Society of Jesus with surprising speed: consider that he was ordained in 1969 and only four years later was ruling all Argentina's Jesuits as a Provincial Superior! After six years, he became the Rector of the College I was telling you about ("Colegio Máximo"), and that occurred from 1980 to 1986. It was then that he fell badly with nearly every Jesuit in this country because he played his part against Arrupe and the General Congregation No. 34—and into John Paul's hands. That's how he eventually was finally rehabilitated by the Vatican, and with the help of Buenos Aires's bishop (Mons. Quarracino) he became his auxiliary (1992) and, in the end, bishop himself of Buenos Aires (1997). In 2001 he was made Cardinal and Primate of this country.

So, yes, he has played his hand carefully and, in the long run, won the day. Which doesn't mean a thing if it weren't for the fact that his election is very telling about the current condition of the Catholic Church.

Bad news, eh? Yeah, well, I know that you'll think I've been exaggerating, that things couldn't be that bad, that there must be something in this man, our new Pope.

So I've failed to convince you, O.K., my fault.

All the same, an Argentine Pope! And a Peronist one!

It is all, I haste to recognize, quite unbelievable, but, for that matter, so is Benedict's abdication... and subsequent deportment. These are strange times indeed.