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## Book Review: Francis of Rome & Francis of Assisi: A New Spring in the Church

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Francis of Rome & Francis of Assisi: A New Spring in the Church

Boff, Leonardo, Translated by Dinah Livingstone

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014

168 pages; \$18.00 (paperback)

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Reviewed by Ronald R. O'Dwyer, S. J., St. Peter Claver Parish

Never before has a pope chosen the name Francis. This is significant because a pope's name often signals a direction for his pastoral program, observes Leonardo Boff in his book *Francis of Rome & Francis of Assisi*. As the title suggests, Pope Francis cannot be understood apart from his namesake, the twelfth century mendicant widely known because of his subversive message of poverty, simplicity, and sensitivity toward the entirety of God's creation. Written in forty accessible, concise chapters (each roughly three-pages in length) this text will appeal to educators seeking the historical and theological background necessary to appreciate the style and rhetoric of Francis of Rome.

Boff, an accomplished Brazilian theologian, is a trustworthy authority on the life and times of Saint Francis of Assisi and on the theology that influences Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis. A former Franciscan priest, Boff's chief academic contributions have been in the theology of liberation, a system originating from Bergoglio's Latin American homeland. Liberation theology maintains that the Christian message is inseparable from the struggle for justice and liberation of poor and oppressed peoples. Boff leverages this unique background in both theology and Franciscan history to help ordinary readers grasp nuances in the Pope's Christian vision: "a church that is poor, simple, evangelical, and stripped of all trappings" (p. 36).

*Francis of Rome & Francis of Assisi* originated from a series of essays in preparation for World Youth Day in Brazil in 2013. It is part history of the papacy, part papal profile, part theological summary, and part self-revelation of the author's hopes for a church of the future. Along the way Boff explains the meaning of the Pope's more colorful remarks—like the time Francis rejected the

mozzetta, the traditional papal shoulder cape (lined with ermine), remarking: “The carnival is over. Keep this garment.” Or the time Francis exhorted pastors to “smell of the sheep” or when he chided preachers who seemingly “just came back from a funeral” or those who act like “querulous and disillusioned pessimists, sourpusses.” Boff tackles more sensitive comments as well—“Who am I to judge?”—and he explains Francis’ preference for a church which is “bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets.” Readers also gain the necessary background for understanding Francis’ simplicity—his choice to live in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the papal apartment, why he arrived to the White House in a Fiat rather than the Popemobile, and the significance of his preference for the title Bishop of Rome over Supreme Pontiff.

Despite the attention given to the Pope’s most popular sayings and doings, the book maintains the theological sophistication expected from a scholar like Boff. Of particular note is the treatment of who Jesus Christ is for Pope Francis: “...the poor Nazarene, the humble Mediterranean artisan and peasant, who was persecuted, executed on the cross, and rose again to rise up against all those seeking power and yet more power, even within the church” (p. 16). Boff includes a chapter, “The Tradition of Jesus and the Christian Religion,” wherein he summarizes the core principles of Jesus’ teachings and practice. “What then is the attraction of Pope Francis?” Boff asks. “It is that he is closer to the tradition of Jesus than to the Christian religion” (p. 116). Indeed, Francis has proclaimed that “the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives” (p. 116). But one wonders if the pope would recognize the sharp divergence Boff draws between the teachings of Jesus and the religion of his followers. Perhaps here the author tips toward his own inclinations, suggesting that the Pope is more sympathetic to revolution than is likely the case.

Except, that is, when it comes to the poor. The first Jesuit pope explained his name: “Francis, the man of poverty, peace, who love and takes care of creation, a man who gives out a sense of peace, a poor man” (p. 3). Here again readers benefit from Boff’s vast knowledge of Franciscan heritage: Francis did few things for the poor, but he did a lot with the poor (p. 73). This insight—just one of many that Boff offers—explains what Francis meant as he opened his papacy by expressing a hope: “Oh! How I would like a church that was poor and for the poor.” For Pope Francis, a church for and with the poor means taking solidarity and dialogue and listening as the starting points.

Francis’ vision for a church which stands beside not above the world is also evident in his ecological teachings. Boff links the Pope’s environmental

stances to classic Franciscan texts, among them the *Canticle of the Creatures*, in which a “the paradigm of domination” gives way to a “paradigm of care” (p. 63). Educators will be intrigued by Boff’s intimation that a theory of “multiple intelligences” undergirds Francis’ environmental campaign. Intellectual reasoning alone, Boff rightly argues, is insufficient if we are to grasp the logic beneath Francis’ ecological ethic; the Pope’s “emotional” and “spiritual” genius must be studied if he is to be properly understood.

Catholic educators will also be interested in Pope Francis’ understanding of evangelization. Here Boff assigns a reading list to help us become acquainted with the pope’s pedagogical style: first, the Latin American Bishops “Aparecia Document,” edited by then-Cardinal Bergoglio, which treats the aforementioned themes such as the historical Jesus, the option for the poor, encounter, closeness, and dialogue (103-04); second, Francis’ speech to African refugees at the Italian island of Lampedusa where he entered the homes of ordinary people and denounced “the globalization of indifference and our inability to cry” (104); and finally, the 2013 interview he gave to the Jesuit journal *Civiltà Cattolica* where Francis reiterated, “The most important evangelization is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you” (105). Indeed, Pope Francis teaches by means of style—his manner of relating to crowds, embracing disabled children, and making phone calls to the grieving. Thus Francis embodies both the content and method of Christian evangelization.

Educators will find the book beneficial for explanation of Francis rather than the author’s conclusions. It is curious, for instance, that Boff chooses to end with a call for a new ecumenical council—one that includes participants from among the “churches, religions, and techno-science” (148). Although the structure is loose and at times repetitive, it is easy to imagine school administrators using this book to study the Pope’s warm and collegial leadership style.

Professional development reading groups will find the length of chapters ideal for short discussions. Boff’s clarity could be helpful to high school theology departments as they write curricula and identify learning outcomes. And given the seemingly universal appeal of Pope Francis, this book could be shared with board members, benefactors, and parents as an entre into what is distinctive about Catholic education. This pontificate suggests a shift in emphasis, the inspiration for which, as Boff explains, came during the Pope’s election when one of the cardinals whispered: “Don’t forget the poor.” This book offers the background necessary for a more informed discussion about what the name Francis—and remembering the poor—could mean for Catholic education.