

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Cover to Cover with Pope Francis

While people may have different opinions about Pope Francis, we can all agree on this one fact: He's been very good for the publishing industry.

In the few weeks of his election and inauguration, publishers rushed to market with books about him. I have pored over three of the new volumes about Francis. Collectively, they compliment each other nicely and manage to give a fuller portrait of a man who, until recently, was mostly a mystery.

Probably the most straightforward one is *Pope Francis* by Dr. Matthew E. Bunson (One Sunday Visitor Publishing). This biography relies heavily on news reports and extended quotes from some of the new pontiff's speeches. It also delves into the last days of Benedict's papacy, which helps provide a context. But this book has some sidebar features that, while interesting, give it a padded-out feeling. (I'm not sure we needed a list of all the popes in Catholic history.) I might also quibble with the prominent quote posted on the back cover, "Make me an instrument of your peace—St. Francis of Assisi," a line even devoted Franciscans concede the saint never really wrote. Nonetheless, the book is a helpful introduction to the new pope from the New World. It makes for engaging, sometimes absorbing reading.

Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words by Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin (Penguin Group) holds the distinction of not only being absorbing, but also remarkably prescient. The book was first published in Spanish in 2010, and stands now as a prophetic portrait of a man poised to make history. It's a series of interviews—more like conversations, really—that capture Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in moods that are thoughtful, prayerful and even playful. We learn about his family history: how his parents met in church, how his mother taught him to cook and how he continued cooking himself until recently. (When the authors ask if he's any good at it, he replies: "Well, no one ever died...")

The conversations give a glimpse of the man who would be pope, when he describes one of his predecessors:

John XXIII was a priest who went out onto the street. As the patriarch of Venice, he would usually go out around eleven to Saint Mark's Square to perform the so-called rite of the show, which entailed sitting in the shade of a tree or outside a bar, drinking a glass of white wine, and spending a few minutes speaking with parishioners. He did this like any Venetian, and then continued with his job. For me, this is a true pastor: someone who goes out to meet people.

Finally, there's another book of conversations, *On Heaven and Earth* (Doubleday Religious Publishing Group), a series of talks between Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Rabbi Abraham Skorka, a scholar in Buenos Aires. This book, also first published in 2010, delves more deeply into matters theological, and covers a spectrum that includes God, abortion, atheism and same-sex marriage, among other topics. But far from being academic, the book is accessible and even captivating. Insights pop off the page. Here's the future pope touching on the topic of death and what we leave behind:

To think that we have to leave an inheritance is an extremely serious anthropological and religious concept that speaks about dignity. It is to say to oneself: I do not want to close in on myself, I do not want to fence in my life, what is mine will at least be passed on to my children, to those whom I will leave my inheritance. Inheritance is developed over time through the pilgrimage of humanity: man receives something and has to leave behind something better.

These three books are just the first trickle of what will no doubt become a tsunami of studies on Pope Francis. We can expect books of his own, too, as he begins to publish encyclicals. Gradually, a Franciscan worldview will emerge; a papacy will take shape; another chapter in Church history will be written. If these three works are any indication, it's a story that will ultimately make one of the most interesting and surprising books in any library. Generations to come will love to read it. I can't help but think how lucky we are to be living it.

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