



THE ARCHBISHOP OF BRISBANE

REMEMBERING POPE FRANCIS

The surprises kept coming till the end. We held our breath when he was in hospital, but then he rallied and returned to the Vatican. He appeared on the balcony of St Peter's on Easter Sunday and then died early on Easter Monday when none of us was expecting it. Perhaps he saw it coming.

In his final days Jorge Bergoglio must have looked back amazed at how his life had turned out: the boy from Buenos Aires becoming the Bishop of Rome who broke the mould of the papal ministry, though only to recast it in new and liberating ways.

When the cardinals entered the conclave to elect a new pope in 2012, I was asked to help with media commentary. To prepare, I looked through the list of cardinal electors, eliminating those I thought couldn't be elected. One of those I crossed out was Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires. At 76 he was too old, I thought, and they wouldn't elect a Jesuit. The election was quick, and I thought it had to be the Archbishop of Milan who had been much mentioned. So I prepared to comment on him as pope. Then the announcement came that it was Cardinal Bergoglio who would be known as Pope Francis. Both he and the name were surprises.

The surprises continued when he appeared on the balcony of St Peter's. First, he was wearing just the simple white soutane, not the more elaborate dress a new pope normally wears. Secondly, he stood in silence for some moments as if struck dumb, with me thinking, "For goodness sake, say something". Thirdly, when he did speak he said only *Buona sera*, Good evening: from a new pope you expected something more stirring and resonant. Fourthly, before he gave the blessing he asked the people to pray for him as he bowed low, the crowd in the Square falling silent in a way I'll never forget.

This papacy, it seemed, wouldn't be business as usual; and from then on it wasn't. He decided not to live in the Apostolic Palace and chose to be driven around in a small sedan. Audiences with him had a very different feel than they did with his predecessors, much less formal and more relaxed. As one who had worked for a time in the papal court, I was amazed at how he could break free of its age-old protocols. He was very much his own man.

When Pope Francis was elected, the Brazilian cardinal next to him in the Sistine Chapel said to him, "Don't forget the poor"; and he didn't – offering them lunch and even tickets to the circus, visiting prisons to wash feet, taking the part of migrants and refugees. For him, those on the margin were at the centre and any society, he insisted, would be judged on how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable. That sounds like Jesus; and it gave Francis a voice that was heard around the world.

At synods in Rome, he would walk to the synod hall like the rest of us, bag in hand, chatting to other bishops. Then he would enter the lobby of the Paul VI Hall, chat to a few others before taking the lift to the synod hall where he greeted bishops as they entered. This was very different from past protocols; it said that he was not some kind of monarch but one of us, a bishop among bishops. That was a surprise; and it led me to address him in correspondence as both Holy Father and dear brother.

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The overarching vision which drove the pontificate was the unity of all things in God. All creation was one; all humanity was one; all in the Church were one. That sounds rather lofty, but he could communicate the vision in ways both simple and profound, with the gifts and instincts not of a professor but of a pastor and poet. Ordinary people understood him, more so outside the Church at times than inside.

Though he took the name Francis, he was a Jesuit through and through. In true Ignatian style, he set the art of discernment at the heart of the Church; and he struck a typically Jesuit balance between centralisation and decentralisation. St Ignatius Loyola gave his Order the motto, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, To the greater glory of God; and you felt with Pope Francis that it was all for God's glory, not his. He certainly didn't cultivate personal popularity; he was free enough not to worry too much about what others thought or said of him. He knew he was a sinner chosen and loved by a merciful God: that was enough.

At World Youth Day in Rio di Janeiro in 2013, I was chatting to an Argentinian bishop who said that in Argentina they surprised at how Cardinal Bergoglio was turning out as Pope Francis. He said that back home he never smiled and never gave interviews; but as pope he couldn't stop smiling and giving interviews. Something had happened to him, the bishop said.

When a former Archbishop of Canterbury was interviewed for the role, he was asked whether he would find it an imprisonment or a liberation if he were appointed. The same question could be put to a prospective pope. For some, the papacy has been an imprisonment, for others a liberation. For Pope Francis, it seems mysteriously to have been a liberation; and what a gift that has been to the Church and the world.

We pray for him now as he so often asked us to do. With the burdens of office now behind him, may he find ultimate liberation as he comes face to face with the Risen Christ and that when he awakens into eternity he will be not just surprised but deeply astonished by the vision of God in which the joy of the Gospel comes to its fulness. Eternal rest give to Francis, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Coleridge', with a cross symbol to the left.

+Mark Coleridge
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