

Pope Francis' Latin Lessons

How Latin America Shaped the Vatican








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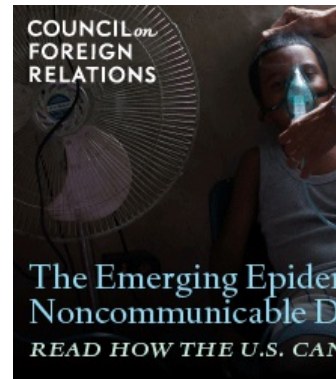
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Pope Francis, then bishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio, visiting the Villa 21-24 slum in Buenos Aires, 1998. (Parroquia Virgen de Caacupe / Courtesy Reuters)

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Pope Francis has adorned the cover of *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, and even *The Advocate*, a magazine for gay news. World leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, have lined up to praise him. The pope's rise to global popularity has been quick, boosted by a surprising and often blunt message of economic and social justice. Many observers have attributed that message to a self-conscious embrace of his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, the thirteenth-century Italian friar who was famous for choosing a life of poverty, and his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI's perceived lack of attention to economic and social concerns. But Francis' roots in Latin America, and the political and social currents of his home country, Argentina, have played a major role as well.



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At the time of Francis' election as pope last year, the hope was that his papacy might

revive the church in Latin America, which is home to the world's largest Catholic population, almost 500 million people, but one that has been in steep decline. According to the Latin American Public Opinion Project, in 2012, the overall percentage of Catholics in the region stood at 65 percent; in the early 1980s, Catholics made up nearly 90 percent of Latin American's population. For now, there is no hard data showing that Francis has accomplished his mission, but the early signs are encouraging. Last July, as Brazil was rocked by protests against government corruption and poverty, Francis visited -- his first international trip as pope -- and some three million people, including the presidents of Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil, gathered for mass at Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana beach. It was the largest crowd estimated to have ever gathered there.

Francis' popularity around the world, and particularly in Latin America, reveals something else about his papacy, one year in: his relationship with the region runs both ways. Even as he has tried to buoy the church there, his experiences in Latin America have helped transform the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, particularly when it comes to economic and social justice and support for gay rights. From the radicalism of Latin American Catholicism to a wave of social progressivism making its way through the region, often on the heels of populist, left-wing governments that have taken power in recent decades, Latin America has increasingly influenced Francis' papacy.