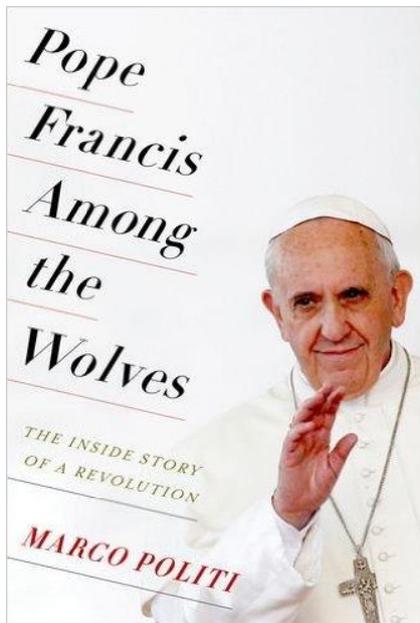


Pope Francis Among the Wolves

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Marco Politi speaks in Dublin and Carlow
Report by Noel McCann

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Marco Politi, well known author and Vatican correspondent, was a guest of the Association of Catholics in Ireland [ACI] from the 15th - 18th October 2016. Politi was on a tour to promote his most recent book - 'Pope Francis Among the Wolves: The Inside Story of a Revolution'. Having spoken at three venues in the UK, he arrived in Dublin on Saturday 15th October and spoke in the Chapel in Trinity College in the afternoon, travelling to St. Patrick's College, Carlow, on the Monday evening and speaking in the Loyola Institute, Trinity College, on the Tuesday evening. The format for each event saw the author speak for approximately forty minutes about Pope Francis and the opposition to his reform agenda followed by a Q&A session.

The attendance at the initial event in Trinity College on the Saturday afternoon was lower than expected, however, Politi attracted a 'full house' in both Carlow and in the Loyola Institute.

Politi's comments and his most recent book are based on almost four decades of observing Vatican affairs. He has written books on the last three popes. He has also met Pope Francis and interviewed the Pope Emeritus, Benedict.

Background

The closing lines of Politi's book suggest that Francis had a vision which he hinted at in words addressed to his fellow cardinals at a meeting a few days before the

last conclave. He said to the assembled cardinals who would within days elect him as the new pope - "I have the impression that Jesus has been shut up inside the church and that he is knocking because he wants to get out". You could say the book and Politi's three talks trace the efforts of Francis to 'release Jesus' and the struggles he has faced since being elected pope in March 2013.

By way of introducing Francis, Politi spoke of the uniqueness of John Paul II's papacy, in the latter years in particular, describing it as a form of martyrdom intended to send a specific message to the world. Clearly John Paul was not in control of church affairs for a number of years prior to his death.

In the case of Benedict he came to the conclusion after a few years in office that he was no longer able to lead the church in the way that 21st Century developments and circumstances demanded. He saw the extent of the task before him and made the decision to resign in 2013 and allow another pope to take on the momentous task of addressing the many critical issues facing the Roman Catholic Church. He was the first pope to resign of his own 'free will' and, Politi feels, that he has established a precedent which his successors are very likely to consider should they suffer from physical or mental challenges which impair their capacity to fully discharge their papal responsibilities.

Never again, in Politi's opinion, could the church have a pope who is incapable of functioning as the leader or captain of the ship - 'holding the rudder', to quote Francis, who has actually stated that he will resign if he feels that he is not capable of operating with his full capacities - mental and physical.

Francis - on the evening of his election- said his fellow cardinals had chosen someone 'from the ends of the earth' to replace Benedict.

This wasn't true at all, Francis isn't from the 'ends of the earth' - he comes from a major metropolis- Buenos Aires. A city with a population of approximately 3 million people but within a region of up to 30 million people and Politi placed great emphasis on the stark contrast between this background and that of other popes, particularly those elected in recent decades.

The Buenos Aires region is a very mixed one - with very rich neighbourhoods, middle class districts, poor areas and 'Shanty Towns' inhabited in some instances by 50/60,000 people. On being appointed Archbishop of Buenos Aires Francis declined to use his car and driver. He travelled by bus and the train and visited the 'Shanty Towns' on a weekly basis. He became very familiar with all the social issues which were a reality in these very deprived areas, particularly in relation to crime of all sorts - prostitution, sex slavery involving women & children, drugs, assassinations, extortion, robberies, etc.

Francis has a background which is completely different to that of his immediate predecessors. John Paul II was a product of a Polish village, while Benedict grew-up in a small Bavarian town. The human turmoil which Francis was exposed to as Archbishop of Buenos Aires was also in stark contrast to the traditional Italian popes who were generally brought up and ministered in the relative comfort and stability of Italian towns and cities. Francis is very familiar with the issues and

difficulties which are part of everyday life in a major urban area, particularly for those living on the 'margins' of society in the 21st Century.

Buenos Aires - A 'religious melting pot'

Francis also differs from his predecessors in that his home base, Buenos Aires, is a city characterised by support for a wide range of religions not just Catholicism. There are significant numbers of Jews, Muslims, followers of the Reformed Churches, Pentecostals, as well as a very strong support for Freemasonry. Francis was accustomed to living in such an environment and had developed strong friendships with the leaders of some of these religious movements.

Possibly because of his exposure to these different religions and cultures Francis has also brought to his papacy a real respect for those who hold atheistic views and since becoming pope he has held a very well publicised meeting and discussion with a well-known Italian journalist who is an atheist. He was apparently struck by this man's views on loving and respecting his fellow men and women. He doesn't ever say that atheists are condemned and cannot be saved.

What Kind of Papacy is this?

Francis set the tone when he appeared on the balcony shortly after being elected pope on that famous night in March 2013. His refusal to wear the traditional red cape, his informal greeting of 'Buena Sera' followed by a request to the people to pray for him before he extended his first papal blessing to the assembled congregation sent a clear message of 'change'. He referred to the cardinals who had elected him not as "signori cardinali" [lord cardinals] - the term used by previous popes - but as "brothers". He used the term bishop in reference to himself, not Pontiff. His behaviour represented a dramatic shift from previous papacies, clearly flagging that his papacy would not in any way be characterised by imperialist or monarchical language or behaviour.

'Pillars' of the Papacy of Pope Francis

In his addresses Politi identified the issues which Francis has prioritised and described how the pope has gone about introducing and implementing change. It is worth noting that, despite the strong opposition to Francis's agenda described below, the need for a change in the way the church operated was to the forefront in the pre-conclave meetings of the cardinal electors. In these discussions, which were longer than usual because of the timing of Benedict's resignation, the Vatican Bank and the Curia were identified as requiring urgent attention. The aspects of Francis's reform agenda highlighted by Politi were:

- **Collegiality:** Francis wants to lead the church with the bishops in the theological context of 'Peter and the Apostles' - not Peter alone.
- Reforming the concept of **synodality**. He wants it to be a 'tool of Collegiality'.
- **New system of Governance** - the selection of eight cardinals from five continents to assist him in governing the church represents a 'ground-breaking' reform of church governance. Politi was at pains to point out that

Francis did not just select his 'cronies' to assist him but very deliberately included both reformers [like Cardinal O'Malley and Cardinal Maradiaga] as well as more traditional and conservative cardinals such as Cardinal Pell from Australia. He wants to listen to all shades of opinion.

- Promoting a new **style of leadership by bishops**. Francis doesn't want 'self-centred', narcissistic leaders. Using the image of the shepherd - he talks about the shepherd sometimes leading the flock, sometimes being in the middle of the flock but [most significantly] sometimes following the flock. A clear acknowledgement that at times the sheep [faithful] know best which direction to take on certain issues.
- The image of the church as a '**Field Hospital**' not a 'Custom House'. The imagery is very deliberate - in a 'Field Hospital' people are treated first and questions are asked afterwards.
- **Reform of the Curia**. Francis has introduced **new dicasteries**, e.g., Social Issues and the Laity. These are being headed by newly appointed cardinals, including Irish-born Cardinal-Designate Farrell in charge of the Dicastery for the Laity.
- **The Role of the Laity**. Francis is determined to address the issue of the involvement of the laity in the governance of the church. While cardinals still lead the various dicasteries he has already placed lay people in very senior positions within the Curia.
- **The Role of Women**: He is the first pope to make a really serious statement of intent with regard to women in the church stating clearly that "women must come to positions in the church where they take decisions and exert authority".
- **Commission on Women Deacons**: He has established a commission tasked with examining the issue of women deacons in the early church.
- **Liturgical Decree** - In a further signal of his positive attitude to women he issued a Liturgical Decree celebrating Mary Magdalene as the 'First Evangelist' and the 'Apostle of the Apostles'.

The Vatican Bank

The Vatican Bank has been an embarrassment and a source of scandal for the church for many years. During recent decades there have been media stories and insider 'leaks' about links to the Mafia and widespread reports of 'money laundering'. Francis has brought in external experts to review the workings of the bank and to lead the reform of the institution. Politi described how these external experts sat in the bank "with their computer screens watching and examining transactions". Approximately 18,000 accounts have been scrutinised and thousands closed on the advice of these external auditors. A number of bi-lateral agreements have been signed committing the Vatican to fight financial corruption and recently the Vatican signed the UN Convention against corruption in the banking sector.

Sexual Matters

Francis has tried to take the focus away from the church's obsession with matters of a sexual nature such as birth control, gay relationships, etc. He met a trans-

sexual person in the Vatican with his partner and while in the USA he met a former pupil of his who was accompanied by his gay partner. Politi stressed that Francis tries to see people for who they are not what they are.

Sex Abuse

- Francis has taken a very hard line on this issue. He sacked a Papal Nuncio, a Polish Archbishop [based in Santa Domingo] and brought him before a Clerical Court where he was 'defrocked'. Francis then proceeded to bring him before the Civil Court in the Vatican where the world press would be present. Politi pointed out that the Archbishop was spared the civil trial as he died before the civil court case opened. Politi contrasted this approach with that of John Paul II and Benedict in high profile cases of sex abuse, e.g., Marcel Marcial [Head of the Legionaries of Christ].
- He has set-up a special court to deal with bishops who fail in their duty and neglect to properly manage sex abuse cases.
- He also set-up the new Commission of which the Irish survivor, Marie Collins, is a member. A disappointment, highlighted by Politi, is that up to now there hasn't been a majority within the commission in favour of the mandatory reporting of sex abuse cases to the civil authority.

Ecumenical Issues

Not surprisingly Francis has a very open approach to matters ecumenical. He met the Russian Orthodox leader - the first such meeting in 500 years. In late October he is going to Sweden to participate in the celebrations associated with marking 500 years since the Reformation.

The 'Wolves'

So where is the opposition to Francis coming from? Politi described how opposition comes from every area of the church - the Curia, e.g., Cardinal Muller, Head of the CDF and it comes from bishops and priests across the world. Cardinal Muller, in response to Francis describing the church as a 'Field Hospital' countered by describing the church as the 'House of God' and asks what is there to celebrate about the Reformation!!

Survey - in a "rough poll" carried out by a prestigious Italian publication [Corriere della Serra] in May 2015 the figures showed that 20% of the Curial officials 'polled' supported Francis, 10% opposed him and 70% *are waiting for the next pope!!* In the last 100 years no pope has faced such opposition, according to Politi.

Cardinals - so far Francis has appointed 44 out of 120 cardinals so he doesn't have 'his own' majority amongst the College of Cardinals, at least not at this stage.

Politi explained how Francis has been described by one of his senior supporters [an Italian, Monsignor Brigantini] as being like a footballer out on the pitch with lots of people watching with admiration from the stands but nobody being prepared to join him on the pitch. His detractors, in some cases, have been compared to the Pharisees and their treatment of Jesus - they try to catch-out Francis on 'points of

law'. They point out that he is not a theologian - but none of the most recent popes were theologians, with the obvious exception of Benedict, according to Politi.

Some bishops and cardinals who oppose Francis have apparently gone to Benedict to complain about developments under Francis but Benedict has steadfastly refused to entertain them and is completely loyal to Francis.

One Italian bishop was over-heard in conversation with an aide on a train expressing the hope that the Blessed Virgin would intervene as she had done in the case of the 30 day papacy of John Paul I. Politi was very keen to emphasise that the issue here was that John Paul I, who was in poor health when elected pope, died following a heart -attack, but because he was discovered by a woman [a nun] the Vatican officials were apparently concerned about the implications of revealing this fact thus leading to rumours with regard to the actual cause of death.

Websites - some of the opposition to Francis is orchestrated around various websites across the world. Some of these, according to Politi, are quite vicious in their approach and in their comments as they try to undermine Francis. He is variously described by his opponents on these websites and elsewhere as a populist, communist, socialist or a feminist.

Secret Taping

An example of the type of behaviour faced by the pope is the taping of a restricted speech by Francis by a senior Vatican figure [a Monsignor] who then circulated it to the media. The same individual released to the media 80 passwords protecting confidential Vatican documents in a further effort to undermine Francis.

The Synods on the Family - 2014 & 2015

It is Politi's view that the outcome of the Synods was really a defeat for Francis - particularly on the issues of divorce and remarried Catholics receiving the Eucharist. But the synod process was refreshingly new and freedom of speech was the key characteristic of the proceedings. Francis referred to the practice at previous synods when the final documents were prepared in advance and the bishops were told by senior cardinals what they could, and could not, say. This did not happen in the case of 2014 and 2015 synods.

However, Francis faced an uphill struggle from the start. He tried to engage the laity with the process via the questionnaire on the family but very few bishops made the questionnaire available to the people in their dioceses. Among the honourable exceptions were the bishops in England and Wales who immediately made the questionnaire available 'on line'.

This Renewal Process compared to Vatican II - Politi made some very interesting observations about this reform effort led by Francis compared to the reforms of Vatican II. Unlike the situation after Vatican II when there was a 'mass movement' of cardinals, bishops, theologians and lay people working in support of church

renewal, there is no similar coalition working to support the renewal being led by Francis. This makes the future very uncertain. It is, according to Politi, one of the reasons why Francis, with very little fore-warning, declared a 'Year of Mercy'. In Politi's view it is as if Francis is appealing to the lay faithful to 'live the message'. He is trying to mobilise the lay faithful behind his renewal process at the centre of which is the concept of mercy.

What is Francis's Response to this opposition?

Francis is engaged in a process and considers himself to be in a long distance race rather than a sprint. He is happy to have the opposition speak openly against him - at least he knows who and what he is dealing with.

He has deliberately not removed all opposition from senior church positions - like a newly elected president or prime minister might do on assuming power. He is moving slowly but with purpose. He is, for example, appointing cardinals to dioceses and in countries not previously honoured with such appointments. Conversely, Politi says, he is not promoting some prominent archbishops in traditional Italian and American dioceses to the rank of cardinal - so there is a 'power-shift' taking place 'step by step'.

Francis is not changing doctrine, he tends to pose open questions and provokes discussion on issues. He places great reliance on discernment.

The Future

Politi believes Francis will probably resign after about 5/6 years in office. He will definitely step down if his faculties become impaired, to use his own words "if he cannot control the rudder". Benedict has done a great service to the church - in future retired popes will become the norm.

Quoting directly from his book Politi said if Francis "can succeed in transforming the synod of bishops into an instrument of co-participation in papal government ...that assists the church to chart its course on the ocean of modernity... involving the faithful, lay men and women - the revolution of Jorge Mario Bergoglio will become irreversible" .

According to Politi Francis confided to an Argentine friend as the third year of his papacy loomed that he asks the Lord "that this change which I am pursuing for the sake of the church, at great personal cost, will endure, and not be like a light that suddenly goes out".

Reflections on Politi's commentary on the papacy of Francis!!

What are we as Irish Catholics - bishops, priests and lay faithful - doing to ensure that Francis's changes will endure? Are we supporting him - if so how do we demonstrate this support? On the other hand are we stalling - waiting for that 'light' to suddenly go out - or are we like the 70% of bishops [referred to in the survey] happy to wait for the next pope!!

Perhaps we don't care one way or the other.

If we do care then surely it's time to 'Get off the Fence'!!