

Some Personal Thoughts on the Election of Jorge Bergoglio as Pope Francis I  
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At the request of a couple of colleagues, I will share some thoughts about the election of Jorge Bergoglio, Pope Francis I. I hope that this might be helpful. First of all I commend to you the brief but positive statement we of the World Union for Progressive Judaism released (on our FB page and at [www.wupj.org](http://www.wupj.org)).

The World Union for Progressive Judaism sends warm greetings to the new leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis I. The election of the first pope from outside of Europe in 1200 years is a strong indication of the changing dynamics within the church. Pope Francis I has shown much empathy with the Jewish community of Argentina and was one of the first leaders to demand justice after the bombing of the Jewish Community Centre in Buenos Aires.

This humble priest brings sincerity and hope to Christianity and all people of faith.

The WUPJ wishes Pope Francis I a long and successful term and continual good relations with the Jewish world.

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(L-R) Rabbi Sergio Bergman, Rabbi Alejandro Avruch and Pope Francis I (Jorge Bergoglio) lighting Chanukah candles at WUPJ congregation NCI Emanuel in Buenos Aires, Argentina

I met Bergoglio a couple of times, and spent a bit of time with him in Buenos Aires in 2004. At the time I was at ADL as Director of Interfaith Relations (having held a similar position in the late 80's thru 95" for the UAHC {URJ}) and program chair of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) which met there with the Vatican's Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews -- together the meeting was called the 18th International Liaison Committee. One of the highlights of that meeting was a trip all the participants took to the shanty-towns to witness Jews and Catholics working together to bring succor to the poor. This is where I first met our colleague Rabbi Sergio Bergman (a very dear friend of Bergoglio who, in fact, wrote the introduction to Sergio's books). I was one of the drafters of the final communique of that meeting, which had to pass muster with Bergoglio (as well as Cardinal Kasper, the head of the Vatican's Commission at the time).

Bergoglio is a mensch. He has a long-standing positive relationship with the Jewish community in BA - he has visited congregations (including ours) on a number of occasions. He is a Jesuit (known for their sense of humour -- which he certainly has). After the bombing of the AMIA (Jewish Community Center) he was one of the first to call for bringing the perpetrators to justice (a sad coda -- as just 10 days ago, the Argentinian congress elected to enter into an agreement with Iran to create a "commission" -- in order to white-wash Iran's complicity and involvement in that sad event). Jesuits are also the kind that challenge authority -- so there is little doubt in my mind that he will clean up the Curia (he might do it himself as he is known for cooking his own meals and caring for himself and taking public transportation) - so the number of monsignori (the Vatican's worker-bees) will diminish (look for the papal limo on ebay soon - he won't be riding in it unless forced to do so).

All of the "red hats" who were appointed by JP II and BXVI are theologically conservative -- so I won't hold my breath on issues like women as priests (and as someone pointed out to me on my FB, he is a homophobe -- but again, what do you expect?). On the other hand, his concern for the poor, the indigent and the needy is real -- and he is a compassionate guy who will listen to his flock (unlike BXVI who cogitated, but didn't really listen).

No question that power, authority and office can change a person -- but we are starting out with a decent guy who has walked in the pauper's shoes.

The mess within and without the Vatican is enormous (banking scandals, political gamesmanship the likes of which we have not seen elsewhere, the sex scandals, pedophilia, etc) - he has his work cut out for him. And frankly while I predicted that we would know on the fifth ballot (ask my wife, she will vouch for me on that one) I thought that they would go with someone like O'Malley (who has gotten his hands dirty in scandal clean-up). But Jorge Bergoglio's election has signaled that they get where their Church is heading -- its growth is in Latin America (though they are losing folks to the Evangelicals and the Liberation Theologians), Africa and the Far East/Pac Rim. And the biggest challenge at the moment (which bested BXVI and JP II) is the hemorrhaging of members under their own windows in Europe - the rise of Islam, the growth of the secular and unchurched, and the frustration of those who still remain in the Church (that is why both JP II and BXVI brought back the most conservative elements that had been jettisoned from the Church before -- they needed a strong traditional flank).

We wish him the best of luck -- at least we still have someone inside who gets the importance of a relationship with the Jewish community, who understands the meaning of the Shoah and has a heart in the right place on a number of issues that concern us as well (and obviously we will vigorously disagree with him on many fundamental issues as well -- but that is part of the game, isn't it?).

I hope this helps -- and I know that some of our colleagues will have other views to share -- the only authority I claim is my own experience here.