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[Andrea Estrada](#)

New Pope May Signal Some Change, Say UCSB Religious Studies Scholars

With the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as its new leader, the Roman Catholic Church has achieved a number of firsts: Pope Francis I, as Bergoglio is now known, is the first pontiff from Latin America -- and the Americas, in general; he is the first from the Jesuit order; and he is the first to choose the name Francis.

"The symbolic significance of a non-European pope is huge," said Ann Taves, professor of religious studies. Taves holds UC Santa Barbara's Virgil Cordano OFM Endowed Chair in Catholic Studies. "A little over a century ago, the majority of the world's Catholics were still in Europe. Today, the situation is just the reverse. There are more Catholics in Asia and Africa than in Europe, but Latin America is the powerhouse when it comes to numbers of Catholics."

In the United States, the Church would be shrinking -- as it is in Europe -- were it not for the growing numbers of Latino Catholics, Taves continued. "The election of Francis I reflects the globalization of the church, as well as the increasing clout of the church in what is referred to as the 'global south.' But it also demonstrates the enormous role of Catholicism in Latin America, and in an increasingly Latino church in the U.S.," she said.

Commented Mario T. García, a professor of history and of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB: "We are witnessing not only the 'browning' of the worldwide Catholic Church but the 'browning' of the U.S. Catholic Church. And the selection of

Pope Francis represents this change."

At the same time, Taves noted, Bergoglio is a bridge figure of sorts who eases the church into this global reality while maintaining close ties to Europe. "Argentina is very closely connected to Europe, and Bergoglio's parents immigrated to Argentina from Italy," she said. "Bergoglio is fluent in Italian, and like Pope Benedict before him, he completed his theological training in Germany. In addition, he's held various offices at the Vatican."

How Pope Francis will differ -- or not -- from his predecessor remains to be seen, Taves said. She noted that both Benedict and Francis are theologically conservative, and very similar with regard to church doctrine and some of the issues of great importance to many U.S. Catholics, such as contraception, married priests, ordination of women, and gay marriage. "But for all the theological similarities, I think we'll probably see a shift in emphasis from a focus on the secularization of Europe to issues of social justice -- the challenges of globalization, the growing divide between rich and poor -- that loom large in Latin America and the global south more generally," she said.

Stefania Tutino, a professor of history and of religious studies at UCSB, concurs with Taves regarding Francis's conservative theology. However, she added, he is considered a very charismatic pastor, which was evident in the way he addressed the throng of people in St. Peter's Square when he was introduced yesterday

In terms of issues facing the church, Taves noted the general feeling going into the conclave that the church needs someone who has the administrative skills to more effectively handle the various scandals that have plagued the church. "I don't think anyone has a clear sense of Francis's abilities in this regard, although he does look to be more of a natural administrator than Benedict was," she said.

Tutino also is optimistic. "Francis is an outsider with respect to the Roman Curia, since his major ecclesiastical appointment was as archbishop of Buenos Aires," Tutino said. "So in this regard, we should expect him to be a 'reformist,' insofar as the Curia issues are concerned. I wouldn't be surprised to see him more be decisive in dealing with the sexual abuse scandals, the financial questions regarding the

Vatican bank, and the Vatican leaks." The Roman Curia refers to the Vatican's administrative offices in Rome.

"I suspect that Francis will continue Benedict's -- and John Paul II's -- emphasis on evangelism, but, again, with some possible shifts," Taves said. "Under Benedict, the declining numbers of Catholics in Europe received a lot of attention. But the church faces challenges from other religions and from secularism elsewhere as well."

Although the percentage of the population that is Catholic is very high in Latin America as compared to the rest of the world, the last few decades have seen precipitous losses, Taves noted. "I imagine the new pope will be wrestling with this reality when he promotes evangelism," she said, "and perhaps infusing it with a new emphasis on social justice, on concern for the poor, and on the economic effects of globalization."

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