

An Autobiographical Glimpse of Pope Francis **by Cindy Wooden, OSV News osvnews.com [an extract]**

“Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina’s capital city, Dec. 17, 1936. His father was an immigrant from northwestern Italy and his mother an Argentine of Italian origin. He was especially close to his paternal grandmother, whom he later credited with inspiring his “journey of faith.”

As a teenager, the future pope swept floors in a factory, ran tests in a chemical laboratory and worked as a bouncer in a bar. When he was 21, he suffered a severe infection, and doctors removed the upper half of his right lung. He earned a chemical technician’s diploma from his high school and entered the Jesuit novitiate in March 1958. After studying liberal arts in Santiago, Chile, he returned to Argentina and earned his licentiate in philosophy from the Colegio San Jose in San Miguel. Between 1964 and 1965, he was a teacher of literature and psychology at Inmaculada high school in the province of Santa Fe, and, in 1966, he taught the same courses at the prestigious Colegio del Salvador in Buenos Aires.

Society of Jesus

In 1967, he returned to his theological studies and was ordained a priest Dec. 13, 1969. He later recounted that he wanted to serve as a missionary in Japan, but that his superiors refused because of his medical history. After his perpetual profession as a Jesuit in 1973, he became master of novices at the Seminary of Villa Barilari in San Miguel. Later that same year, he was appointed superior of the Jesuit province of Argentina, a role in which by his own account he proved a divisive figure.

“I was only 36 years old. That was crazy. I had to deal with difficult situations, and I made my decisions abruptly and by myself,” he recalled four decades later, in an interview as pope. “My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultraconservative.”

Controversy later arose over his stance during Argentina’s 1976-1983 military dictatorship, which cracked down brutally on political opponents. Estimates of the number of people killed and forcibly disappeared during those years range from about 13,000 to more than 30,000. Citing a case in which two young priests were detained by the military regime, critics said then-Father Bergoglio, as Jesuit provincial, did not do enough to support church workers against the military dictatorship. Others countered that he had negotiated behind the scenes for the two priests’ release.

During this period, the future pope ran a clandestine network that sheltered or shuttled to safety people whose lives were in danger because of the nation’s military-backed dictatorship. According to witnesses, the future pope never let on to anyone what he was doing, and those who helped him find rides or temporary housing for “guests” never realized until years later that they had been part of his secret strategy.

After his term as provincial, he returned to San Miguel as a teacher at the Jesuit school, a job rarely taken by a former provincial superior. In 1986, following a few months of study in Germany, he was sent to serve as spiritual director to Jesuits in the central Argentine city of Cordoba, where he went through what he later called a “time of great interior crisis.”

Bishop and Cardinal

In May 1992, Father Bergoglio was called back to Buenos Aires to serve as one of the archdiocese’s three auxiliary bishops. He kept a low profile in the job, spending most of his time in ministry at the local Catholic university, counseling priests and preaching and hearing confessions.

He was named coadjutor archbishop in 1997 and became archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998; Pope John Paul II named him to the College of Cardinals three years later.

As leader of an archdiocese with more than 2.5 million Catholics, Cardinal Bergoglio strove to be close to the people. He rode the bus, visited the poor, lived in a simple apartment and cooked his own meals. Many of his flock continued to refer to their cardinal-archbishop as “Father Jorge.”

The cardinal reached out to leaders of other religions in his multicultural city, most notably Rabbi Abraham Skorka, with whom he co-hosted a television show and co-authored a book addressing a range of moral, cultural and social topics. Rabbi Skorka and Omar Abboud, a Muslim leader from Buenos Aires,

later became the first non-Christian leaders to join a papal entourage when Pope Francis had them accompany him during his May 2014 visit to the Holy Land.

As cardinal, he was one of the presidents of the 2001 Synod of Bishops, which focused on the role of bishops in the church, and was elected to the synod council, bringing him to the attention of fellow bishops around the world.

His international reputation was enhanced by his work at the 2007 assembly of the Latin American bishops' council, CELAM, and particularly by his role as head of the committee that drafted the gathering's final document on reforming and reinvigorating the church's evangelizing efforts on the continent.

A Surprise Choice

Cardinal Bergoglio was a known and respected figure within the College of Cardinals, so much so that no one disputed a respected Italian journal's report that he received the second-highest number of votes on all four ballots cast in the 2005 conclave that elected Pope Benedict XVI.

In retrospect, that result made him an obvious candidate at the conclave after Pope Benedict's resignation eight years later, yet few commentators focused on him in the run-up to the event, particularly because of his age.

While Pope Benedict cited his declining energy in his resignation announcement, many people speculated that it also was tied to the scandal that had erupted over revelations of corruption and incompetence at the Vatican. At the cardinals' meetings prior to the 2013 conclave, the need to reform the Vatican bureaucracy was a common theme of concern.

But Cardinal Bergoglio's concerns were broader and more fundamental than problems of administration. In a speech to the gathering, he warned against "self-referentiality and a kind of theological narcissism" in the church and argued the next pope "must be a man who, from the contemplation and adoration of Jesus Christ, helps the church to go out to the existential peripheries" to spread the Gospel.

His election March 13 came on the second day of the conclave, on its fifth ballot, a surprisingly quick conclusion to an election that apparently had begun with no clear favorite."

