

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century

Public Affairs

George Weigel, Joanne J. Myers

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I would like to welcome our members and guests to this Public Affairs Program.

Our speaker, George Weigel, is recognized as one of the leading authorities of the Catholic church. For many years now, George has been writing and speaking on issues that, in one way or another, address the state of Christianity, with a focus on Catholicism. George's previous [visit](#) to the Carnegie Council was about eight years ago, in September 2005. Coincidentally, it was just as the last pope was [elected](#), [Benedict XVI](#). We're happy to have him back again.

When here, he discussed [The Cube and the Cathedral](#), in which he expressed his concerns about the secularization of Europe, an issue which, even with the [election](#) of Pope [Francis](#), still remains a concern for the Catholic church. You can find his remarks by visiting our website at [www.carnegiecouncil.org](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org).

It is said that timing is everything. One can't argue with the fact that the release of George's recent book, [Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church](#), proves this to be so. Although this book was written long before Pope Benedict made his surprise [announcement](#), [Evangelical Catholicism](#) is a timely guide to the issues that this new pope must confront and is being hailed as a framework for the church's mission in the centuries ahead.

If I had to guess, I bet many of you are curious about the title of this book and what it implies. Let me just point out—and as George will shortly tell you—this is not a book that means to suggest a relationship to evangelical Protestantism. Instead, George writes that he sees this as a rich response to the particular challenges of modernity, both one rooted in tradition—which is to say, in the fundamental realities of Christian ecclesial life—and one that is open to a serious and confident conversation with the modern world. It is an agenda for Catholic reform and mission in the future.

George writes that he doesn't imply they change traditional doctrines or other aspects of the divinely ordained constitution of the church, but, as he sees the church embarking on a new era in its 2,000-year-old history, he contemplates offering an alternative to what he calls "the soul-stifling self-absorption of post-modernity." One hopes that Pope Francis will fill this need.

At a time when the church is facing numerous challenges, whether it is increasing lack of trust, still reeling from the horrendous [sex abuse scandals](#), or a secular society aggressively opposed to

religion in general or the lure of Pentecostalism and fundamentalist Protestantism in Latin America and the increasing number of attacks on Christians in China and the Middle East, one thing is clear: The church is on the brink of a new historic moment. The question is whether evangelical Catholicism is a solution for the future.

As a person whose analysis of Catholic affairs is invariably described as insightful, incisive, clear, and always hopeful, our speaker, George Weigel, may just have the answer. Please join me in giving him a very warm welcome.

## Remarks

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** Thank you very much, Joanne. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

In the presence of my good friend Father [Jerry Murray](#), let me make one modest correction to Joanne's introduction. It would be rather too much for me to claim to be an authority of the Catholic church. I may be an authority on the Catholic church, but the Catholic church is ordered in a different way than I have any claim to authority within it.

Let me organize these remarks in three sections here this morning. First, I want to talk to the historic shift that Joanne indicated. Secondly, I want to say a word about the character of this new mode of Catholicism that is coming into being at this moment in history. Third, because of the intense interest that many people have in the new pope, whom I had the pleasure of spending an hour with in Buenos Aires last May, I want to say a few words about him and what I perceive about his person and what may be his program.

First of all, the historical shift. The Catholic church understands itself to be the same reality throughout history, but that doesn't mean that it maintains the same historical form or the same strategic approach throughout history. Those of you who know the history of Christianity know that the church of the [New Testament](#), the church we read about in the [Acts of the Apostles](#), eventually, through its encounter with Greco-Roman civilization, gave birth to the church of what we call the [Patristic era](#), the church of [Augustine](#) and [Ambrose](#) and [Basil the Great](#) and [John Chrysostom](#) and [Maximus the Confessor](#). That church, in its turn, over a period of some 500 years, gave birth to what we remember as medieval Christendom—the Christianity, the Catholicism of [Thomas Aquinas](#), [Bonaventure](#), [Duns Scotus](#), [William of Ockham](#), [St. Francis of Assisi](#).

That form of being Catholic, that mode of being Catholic, if you will, shattered in the 16th century, with the fracture of Western Christendom in the [Reformation](#). As a response to that fracture, yet another mode of Catholicism emerged. It's the Catholicism that everyone in this room over 50 grew up with—what we call counter-Reformation Catholicism. It seemed to us, growing up in it, that it was immutable, unchangeable, set in its patterns and expressions, good to go for the foreseeable future.

Yet, like every other previous mode of being Catholic, this counter-Reformation Catholicism, too, reached the end of its natural historical life and is giving birth to yet another mode of being Catholic that, in some respect, reaches back to that earlier biblical and patristic way of being Catholic. This new mode of the church itself understanding and action in the world has been called by [John Paul II](#) and [Benedict XVI](#) the church of the new evangelization, and it's what I am calling in this book evangelical Catholicism.

It's important to underscore that this transition did not begin 50 years ago at the [Second Vatican Council](#). There's a tendency, because of certain media preoccupations—I say this with trepidation in the presence of my good friend [Andrew Nagorski](#) here, former luminary of *Newsweek*—because of

certain media preoccupations, there's a tendency to imagine that all of contemporary Catholic history begins on October 11, 1962, when the Second Vatican Council opens.

As all of you surely understand, the Second Vatican Council did not just happen. The Second Vatican Council was the product of a long period of churning and rethinking in the Catholic church. It's the description of that churning and thinking in the first third of this book that is perhaps the most original, if I may say, part of the book. I trace the beginnings of this new form of third millennium, or 21st century, Catholicism, this evangelical Catholicism, back to 1878 and the pontificate of Pope [Leo XIII](#), who was [elected](#) in 1878 as a 68-year-old placeholder who would keep the [Chair of Peter](#) warm for a younger man and who proceeded to have then the second longest reign in papal history, dying at age 92, in 1903.

There's a charming story about that that I'll pause on for a moment. About a year before Leo's death, an American bishop was visiting him. At the end of their half-hour conversation, the bishop got a bit teary-eyed and said to the 91-year-old pope, "Holy Father, I expect this is the last time we'll see each other on this earth."

The 91-year-old pope reached over and patted him on the arm and said, "Dear man, you didn't tell me you were feeling poorly." Game to the end.

Leo XIII began the process of the Catholic engagement—critical engagement, to be sure, but engagement—with modern culture, society, and forms of political life. Over that 25-year pontificate between 1878 and 1903, he laid the foundations of what we call the social doctrine of the church. He set in motion the process by which the church came to develop its thinking on issues of church and state, on matters of religious freedom.

Leo XIII is, in a sense, the pope who made possible John Paul II and that great pope's enormous influence on world affairs as a human rights advocate, which role he simply could not have played had the Catholic church still been wedded to the altar and throne arrangements that had characterized medieval Christendom and counter-Reformation Catholicism. Leo XIII set in motion a new Catholic rediscovery of the [Bible](#), new forms of Catholic intellectual life, and a recovering of the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, unencumbered by centuries of commentaries that, in some fashion, had often distorted St. Thomas's thinking.

If you go to the the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome, where Leo XIII is buried, and you look at his tomb, you can see his program and his significance embodied in the funerary sculpture. Right across the apse from him is [Innocent III](#), the most important pope of the Middle Ages, probably the most powerful political pope in history. He is lying on his back, his hands folded, in the hope of a glorious resurrection. That's a normal posture for papal funeral monuments.

Leo XIII, by contrast, is standing up, his right hand raised, his right foot thrust forward, as if to say to the then-borning 20th century, "We have something to talk about. We have a proposal to make. Let's have a conversation here."

Those processes that Leo XIII set in motion continued to unfold throughout the 20th century, under very difficult circumstances, of course, because of the enormous turmoil of European life in the mid-20th century. But those reform processes that Leo XIII set in motion—intellectual reform, spiritual reform, theological reform, a reform in the church's thinking about its relationship to worldly power—eventually were all focused through the four dramatic years of the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council, as you know, met from 1962 to 1965, in four periods, in the fall of 1962, 1963, 1964, and 1965, concluding on December 8, 1965.

Unlike, however, every other previous ecumenical council in Christian history, the Second Vatican Council did not provide the keys to its own interpretation. The [Council of Nicaea](#) in 325 A.D. wrote a [creed](#). If you want to know what the Council of Nicaea was about, you read the creed. The [Council of Ephesus](#) in the early fifth century defined the [Blessed Virgin Mary](#) as *Theotokos*, God-bearer or Mother of God. If you want to know what the Council of Ephesus was about, there's a dogmatic definition you can refer to. The [Council of Trent](#) in the 16th century, the council called in response to the Reformation, condemned certain heresies, wrote certain canons into the law of the church, created a catechism. If you want to know what Trent was about, there are the keys to its interpretation.

Vatican II did none of that. It wrote 16 documents, but in none of them was there a key or keys to understanding what the great intention or the great strategic focus of Vatican II was. That is what has been provided, I suggest in the book, by the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. These two men, who were both influential figures at Vatican II, have provided the church with the authoritative keys for interpreting this council, and out of that interpretation has come this new self-understanding of the church:

- That it is a communion of disciples in mission.
- That the central reality of the Catholic church is discipleship, what Benedict XVI called hundreds of times during his eight-year pontificate "friendship with [Jesus Christ](#)."
- That that discipleship forms a distinctive community that is unlike any other community of which the members are a part. That's why we call it a communion, not simply a community, a *communio* in Latin.
- And that all of those disciples are called to mission.

The most limpid expression of this shift in self-understanding, I think, came at the end of the [Great Jubilee](#) of 2000, when, on January 6 of 2001, the Feast of the Epiphany, John Paul II issued an apostolic letter called [Novo Millennio Ineunte](#), "Entering the Third Millennium," to close the Jubilee. The antiphon throughout that apostolic letter addressed to the whole church was the injunction of Christ to his disciples in the fifth chapter of [Luke's Gospel](#) to "Put out into the deep." Two thousand years ago, that injunction meant, "Get out there in the lake and catch some fish." Today that's a metaphor for "Get out into the world and catch some disciples."

Everyone in the church, John Paul II suggested, has a missionary vocation. The church itself must cease thinking in terms of institutional maintenance, which was largely the self-concept of the counter-Reformation church—although it, too, had a large missionary thrust to it—but to understand that those institutions are the platform from which all of the people of the church, not just those brave souls, men and women whom we call missionaries, who go to distant and exotic parts of the world and end up in the pages of *National Geographic*—often undergo very unpleasant forms of death.

Everyone in the church is baptized into a missionary vocation and every place the people of the church go is mission territory. Missions are not out there in some place that has never heard the Gospel. The missions are also right here. Missions are right here in families, neighborhoods, business, culture, society, politics, the media, the arts, et cetera.

This emergence of evangelical Catholicism, as I have been describing it, has been internally driven, beginning with Leo XIII. But there's also a set of external pressures, realities that I think have compelled this transition. Fifty-five years ago, in the Baltimore in which I grew up—a very Catholic

city—the cultural air helped transmit the faith. The cultural air you breathed helped transmit the faith. Many of you who are Catholics had this experience in many other parts of America. That is no longer the case today. Not only does the cultural air not transmit the faith; the culture is actively hostile to Biblical religion in all of its manifestations, unless those manifestations of Biblical religion conform themselves to the spirit of the age.

Under those circumstances, institutional maintenance doesn't work. The institution is not going to maintain itself by itself. The institution is going to collapse by itself, unless it is actively seeking to proclaim the Gospel, to challenge the ambient public culture, to be a kind of culture-reforming counterculture, as I describe it in the book. Unless it does that, it will suffer the fate of the European Catholicism that, as Joanne mentioned, I described here some years ago—a Catholicism in which, at best, there is 7 percent mass attendance on Sunday in major European cities today. Lots of money, lots of institutions, lots of history, lots of culture in the internal sense, zero dynamism. Defense does not produce dynamic Catholicism.

So the message of these last two pontificates interpreting the Second Vatican Council has been that the church has to go on offense; the church has to be constantly offering the possibility of friendship with Jesus Christ as the answer to the question that is every human life; the church has to get back into the mission business full-time and everywhere.

Finally, what does this have to do with Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Pope Francis? It is difficult to imagine a possible pope who would have embodied this dynamic and this transition in the history of the church better than Pope Francis. His approach to the life of the church in Argentina was entirely congruent with this transition I'm describing here.

When we met in Buenos Aires last May, we had a wide-ranging conversation about many, many things. It became clear to me that this was a man who understood that a kept church —kept either in the sense of legal establishment, which had long been the case in Latin America, as you know, or now kept in the sense of cultural habit, a church that imagined that it had a future simply because it had a past and a present—was not going to work. The church had to rediscover its evangelical or missionary dynamic if it was going to prosper in the 21st century. That was one impression.

The second impression, which is connected to the first, is that in 25 years of meeting senior Latin American churchmen, then-Cardinal Bergoglio was the first of that group whom I had ever met who did not at some point in the conversation begin complaining about North American evangelical Protestant and Pentecostalist sheep-rustling or sheep-stealing. On the contrary, I brought the point up, and the cardinal said, "If we are losing faithful, that is our fault. That is because we have not catechized these people, sacramentally empowered them to be the disciples they are called to be." That's a very important sign for the future.

In 2007, the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean met in their fifth general conference at the Brazilian city of Aparecida and produced a rather lengthy [document](#)—concision is not a characteristic of many ecclesiastical documents, I'm afraid; editors are badly needed—that I quote in one of the epigrams for *Evangelical Catholicism*. Here's one of the things the bishops said at Aparecida:

"A Catholic faith reduced to mere baggage, to a collection of rules and prohibitions, to fragmented devotional practices, to selective and partial adherence to the truths of faith, to occasional participation in some sacraments, to the repetition of doctrinal principles, to bland or nervous moralizing that does not convert the life of the baptized, would not withstand the trials of time. We must all start again from Christ, recognizing with Pope Benedict XVI that 'being



Christian is the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

That, ladies and gentlemen, is evangelical Catholicism in two sentences: All Christ, all communion, all mission, all the time. That the bishops of the most culturally kept Catholicism left in the world, with the possible exception of our friends in Poland, would come to this understanding, led by, among others, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, suggests something of what they wish to bring to the world church and he wishes to bring to the world church and to the world.

As Joanne indicated, I spent five-and-a-half weeks with my NBC colleagues in Rome during the papal transition. People asked me how it was different from 2005, when I had done the same drill on the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI.

One of the things that was different was the new assertiveness of the Latin American cardinals. I think that assertiveness has a lot to do with the sense that they had turned a corner, that they had come to an understanding of not only the Catholic possibility in the third millennium, but the Catholic imperative in the third millennium, that gave them a kind of self-confidence. They believed that possibility was not well understood by the central bureaucracy of the church in Rome—what [Ronald Knox](#) used to call "the engine room"—and they were determined that the next pope should do something both to proclaim this vision of possibility and clean up the engine room.

I think that is exactly what is going to happen. It's not going to happen in the twinkling of an eye. But, to continue that maritime analogy of the engine room, of the barque of [Peter](#), the Catholic church is a very big ship. If you bend the rudder 5 degrees—it's not a sports car—you don't turn it on a dime; if you bend that rudder 5 degrees over the next 500 years, you are going to have a very distinctive path taken.

What I'm trying to describe in the book here is not an interpretation of the Catholic situation. It is, I think, the church's own self-understanding of where it's going, although I'm putting it in a distinctive historical analysis.

The second half of the book is replete with suggestions for things that need to be worked on, reformed, changed in the church in order to live out this evangelical possibility more effectively. But this is the church of the future. The old fights, left and right—that's done, because those were fights within the old paradigm. If you take the Catholic left today and the Catholic ultra-traditionalists, they are both fighting within counter-Reformation Catholicism. They are fighting over the remnants of that model of being church.

The church is moving beyond that. The church is moving beyond that, if for no other reason than the church has come to understand that the liveliest parts of the Catholic church in the world today, whether that's in this country or in Latin America or even in those parts of Europe where there is lively Catholicism, certainly in Africa and Asia, are those parts of the Catholic church that have embraced what John Paul II used to call "the symphony of Catholic truth" in full and that are about the business of mission.

So Catholic-lite is done. Fantasies about a return to an imagined perfected Catholic past are done. This is the church of the future. It will be a very interesting ride for both the people of the church and for the world that 1.1 billion Catholics inevitably impact as this unfolds.

Thank you.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** Ron Berenbeim.

I was waiting and I finally heard it at the very end, the mention of the word "Africa." I would very much like to know how you think Africa fits into the whole picture.

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** It's the liveliest part of the world church today. Indeed, it's the liveliest part of the world Christian scene today.

Like many, many other talking heads, I regret not talking in the year 2000 more about what really was one of the most astonishing developments in the religious circumstance of the 20th century, and that is the explosion of Christianity in Africa. In 1900, there were about a million Christians in Africa, most of them Copts in Egypt, Nestorians in Ethiopia, Boers in South Africa. By the end of the 20th century, there were well over 350 million Christians in Africa, with a projected growth to 450 million by the middle of this century.

This is the largest and fastest growth of Christianity in history. It is fueled from many sources, some of them Catholic, many of them Pentecostalist. That's another phenomenon of 20th century religious history. There were no Pentecostalists in the world in 1904, until the [Azusa mission](#) in Los Angeles. Now there are 400 million of them all over the world. This is again unprecedented.

What's interesting about African Christianity, as it has been [described](#) by [Philip Jenkins](#) and others, is that it lives a New Testament experience of the church. The Catholic church every year during the Easter season rereads the Acts of the Apostles. You can get that sense of the freshness of the discovery of biblical faith and the enormous enthusiasm it provoked among people who had been living in a very hostile and dangerous world. That experience is the experience of Christianity in Africa today. That gives African Christianity an enormous vitality, almost a charismatic vitality, that will undoubtedly have an impact on the world church in centuries to come.

The task now, it seems to me, for African Christianity, particularly for African Catholicism, which I can perhaps speak with a little more sense about, is to transform all that energy into culture-forming power. The politics haven't changed. The cultural realities have not changed enough to sustain the kind of politics that would lead to a different future. That's the challenge for the next decades and perhaps the next century.

But Cardinal [Dolan](#), whom you all know, here in New York, called me from the Senate of Bishops in Rome last fall, where, like everyone else, he was being bored to tears by endless gusts of ecclesiastical rhetoric, and said there had been a great speech by the Latin rite Catholic [archbishop](#) of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, who got up in this assembly of some 300 Catholic bishops from all over the world and said, "What are all these Europeans doing here? The church is dead in Europe. The church is alive in Africa. There are not enough of us and there are too many of you."

So they're getting a little feisty here. That will eventually show itself over time.

There are lots of problems in Catholicism in Africa. But there is also enormous vitality. That vitality should have a positive impact on the rest of the world church.

**QUESTION:** Allen Young.

To what extent do you think the church is prepared to examine issues like contraception, ordination

of women, and priesthood for married people? These are issues that apparently have not, at least at this point, yet been reexamined in the church.

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** Well, they're not going to be reexamined, with the exception of the third. There already are married priests in the church. They are in Eastern rite Catholic communities, which have been ordaining married men—although not married bishops—since the first millennium.

I said to my friends at 30 Rockefeller Center at the beginning of this whole process in February, "Let us not waste time talking about changing things that are settled."

The Catholic church's teaching on the appropriate way to regulate fertility is settled. The Catholic church's teaching on who can be called to ministry is settled. Those are not things that are going to change.

I said to them it's like saying there's a big argument about whether we should have a unicameral national legislature in the United States. Interesting, theoretically. Get rid of either the House or the Senate, be like Nebraska and have a unicameral legislature. It's interesting theoretically. It's not going to happen. It's not going to happen. And that isn't going to happen here.

Some things are settled in the Catholic church, whether the editors of *The New York Times* or [Maureen Dowd](#) or anybody else likes that or not—[Bill Keller](#). They are settled. You're asking me whether this is going to change. I'm just telling you it isn't. So that's that.

Interestingly enough, again, if you go around the country—I'm going to be speaking in Philadelphia soon to 1,000 young people at a prayer breakfast sponsored by a group called [FOCUS](#), which stands for the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. This is one of the booming things in the church in the United States. These are all kids who have embraced the hardest parts of Catholic doctrine. They are not looking to change the structure or the framework of the church's self-understanding or its moral teaching. They are looking for support in living that effectively.

Nobody says living this is easy. That's not the claim. The claim is that if you make the effort, living it ennobles you. That's what these kids have embraced. And that's a growing part of the church.

Go to Georgetown, where I lived, where there they are still living Catholic-lite and there is no such enthusiasm.

I think that's the short answer to that.

**QUESTION:** Andrew Nagorski.

George, you talked about the Latin American church, Africa, and now a little bit about the United States. You alluded to, in Europe, some positive signs. Could you expand on that? Is there really a potential for the kind of vision that you're talking about?

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** Maybe. European Catholicism is a disaster area right now. [Ireland](#) is beyond-description bad because of abuse issues, failures of leadership. I wrote a column two or three years ago saying every bishop in Ireland should be fired. Wipe the slate clean, start all over again. None of these guys has any credibility, which happens to be true, unfortunately.

Italy, which was making some progress under John Paul II—there was a measurable increase in Catholic practice—has reverted back to its old patterns of Catholic veneer, but not a lot going on underneath, and very little evangelical energy. There's a sense in a lot of the church in Italy that it's a



very well-funded and well-supported museum system. But there's not a lot of snap, crackle, and pop there.

I am even worried about the church in Poland. I have spent now probably close to three years of my life, when you aggregate it, in Poland over the last 22 or 23 years. While I don't think Poland is going to go the road of Ireland, Quebec, Spain, Portugal—right through the floorboards—it could be Italy. Fifty years out, 100 years out, Poland could be Italy 2.0. That would be a terrible shame, because there was an enormous dynamism and a culture-forming dynamism in Polish Catholicism in the last quarter of the 20th century that suggested the possibility that this could be an engine of Catholic renewal throughout all of Europe. That is not happening. There are a variety of complicated reasons for that.

Where are there signs of hope? I think they come where you find them often in the developed world, in new Catholic communities of various sorts, in renewal movements of various sorts, new forms of Catholic association. These are somewhat off the main drag of Catholic institutional life. They sometimes chafe with the life of parishes and dioceses.

But if you look at Germany, for example, where the church is immensely wealthy, has an extraordinarily highly educated elite, and nobody goes to church, much less talks about evangelizing culture, shifting public life, et cetera, the only juice there is in various of these renewal movements, running from [Opus Dei](#) on the conservative end to the [Sant'Egidio community](#) or the [Focolare](#) people on the other side of the sensibility spectrum.

This is an extraordinary picture of collapse, but it has something to do with the problems we were discussing a moment ago of Catholic-lite. It was Western Europe that embraced the Catholic-lite project most fulsomely. And it has paid the price. There are other dynamics at work as well. [Owen Chadwick](#), as many of you know, suggests that all this began in the early 19th century. Some people would push it back to the 18th century. But it certainly accelerated in the second half of the 20th century in a dramatic way.

What would turn that around in a dramatic way? Something analogous to what this country experienced in the 18th and 19th centuries, with the [Great Awakenings](#), which are not things you can conjure up. That's not program planning or pastoral planning. They either happen or they don't.

Short of that, perhaps a real crisis of the failure of the EU and the implosion of the project of European unification, perhaps beginning with the implosion of the eurozone, would compel something of a reconsideration. But I don't see that coming, frankly, right now. I don't think things have, if you will, bottomed out enough.

One of the things that happened in Italy during the February-March period, of course, was an [election](#), in which a comedian, [Beppe Grillo](#), got 25 percent of the vote. The whole world was obsessed with popes at this point, not Italian prime ministers, thank God. But this is really a sign of trouble.

Interestingly enough, the day I got to Rome, Ash Wednesday, I got a phone call that evening from a very distinguished Italian academic, with lots of high-level political connections, and who plays a significant role in their equivalent of our National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Science Foundation. All that is rolled into one thing in Italy. He said, "We have to meet."

So we met in a far dark corner of a Roman restaurant Friday afternoon. He began by saying to me,

"The first order of business for the next month is no Italian pope."

This is a very senior Italian public figure.

I said, "That's my intuition, too. But tell me what's the logic, what's the argument here."

He said, "This has become a corrupt culture. It cannot produce the kind of leadership that the world church needs. In fact, some of that corruption, that inability to get anything done, has seeped behind the Vatican walls, with the re-Italianization of the engine room. And so no, zero. That's the base line."

I got the same message the next week from a similarly situated guy.

Pope Francis has got a big job on his hands as bishop of Rome. I think you will see him exercising that part of the papal ministry very assertively. I think he'll go out to the parishes the way John Paul II did. He's going to be a security nightmare. I can't imagine what the Swiss Guard and the other security people are thinking. This guy likes to wander around on his own.

But we'll see if that has the kind of effect of John Paul II had, where you saw a bit of a bump-up in Catholic practice.

There were very striking demographics, if you will, in the College of Cardinals this time. India had five cardinal electives, France had four, and the United Kingdom had nil, as they would say in the Barclays Premier League. So five to four to zip, India to France to Great Britain. Canada had three. So Canada was in the game more than Great Britain. That, in some sense, reflects the realities of the situation.

**QUESTION:** Susan Rudin.

My question is, if the church being a missionary is the objective for the future, will that create intolerance for those who decide not to convert or embrace?

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** No, I don't think so, because the whole theory of mission that animates evangelical Catholicism draws on John Paul II's December 1990 encyclical on Christian mission called *Redemptoris Missio*, "The Mission of the Redeemer," in which the money quote is, "The church never imposes; the church only proposes."

Now, we know that's not true historically, but he's talking about the present and the future, not what was going on in Peru in the 16th century.

The church only proposes. The church proposes; she never imposes.

Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, said the same thing. Coerced faith is no faith. It has to be a free embrace, free acceptance, of the offer of friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ, or it's not real.

Certain forms of evangelical Protestantism are very good at telling you what the precise temperature of the infernal regions is going to be if you don't get with the program. There may be a very small fringe of Catholics who are still doing that, but they are not people who are terribly interested in mission anyway.

No. This is a different understanding. Interestingly enough, as this century and this millennium unfold, particularly as the acids of aggressive secularism continue to eat away at the Western world

and beyond that, you may see a kind of joint evangelical Protestant and Catholic approach to mission in some places, where it's not competitive; it's cooperative. I just got a book from an evangelical Protestant scholar the other day, who wrote his doctoral dissertation at Cambridge University in England on this, the possibility of cooperative evangelism, particularly in Africa.

We'll see. From the Catholic point of view, it's invitation and proposal, not demand and coercion. It has to be, to be true.

**QUESTION:** Richard Valcourt.

Now that we have a Latin pope, how does evangelical Catholicism differ from the anti-establishment [liberation theology](#) that was very popular among Latin bishops and cardinals and so during particularly the reign of Pope [Paul VI](#)?

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** Cardinal Bergoglio was never a great fan of liberation theology, because he understood that the [Marxist](#) philosophical platform was not one on which you could rebuild the Catholic proposal to go back to this world.

I think the parts of that program that he would embrace, and that indeed any sensible Catholic would embrace, are the rediscovery of the Bible in the life of the church—the Bible as the book of the people—a sense that the church really suffered in Latin America over time by being a kept church, to use the phrase I deployed before, that political and economic structures, cultural structures in Latin America have to change—although my hunch is he would be much more pointed in the direction of empowerment, unleashing the energy of the poor, et cetera, rather than "To the barricades, comrades." That's not part of his idea of how this works.

I think he would certainly, as he did when he was the Jesuit provincial in Argentina in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reject the idea of the priesthood as a kind of revolutionary vanguard, which was at least part of the program of some part of liberation theology.

The liberation theology project is over, in part because it was not indigenous. There was this notion that here was this bottoms-up Latin American thing. As I tried to explain to people for 20 years, liberation theology was invented in the faculty lounges in Munich, Paris, and Louvain, brought back to Latin America by Latin American graduate students who had studied in those European centers, and did not really ignite large numbers of people. It was an elite phenomenon.

What it did do was leave both a positive residue and a negative residue, I would say. The positive residue is Bible-centered, Christ-centered—the institution serves community rather than the other way around. The church cannot be a church of the cultural elite, period, if it's to have any future.

The negative residue, I think, is an understanding that the only free economy that there is, is what's in Latin America, which, as we all know, is far more mercantilist than capitalist—certainly in the post-[World War II](#) Western European or North American sense of free markets. That's still in place.

This Marxist philosophical underpinning led to certain theories about center and periphery and whatnot. The periphery is never the protagonist of its own history. It's always the victim of somebody. There's a little bit of that left—Latin America is a mess because North America is "El Norte."

I did not sense that in Bergoglio. That statement of his that if we're losing faithful, it's our fault, not somebody else's fault, is very important. He had his hands full with [Cristina Kirchner](#). He wasn't worried about the United States or American banks or whatever these guys usually fret about. If

you're the archbishop of Buenos Aires and your president is publicly channeling her dead [husband](#) in the course of speeches, you're not worried about El Norte. You've got problems right at hand.

So I don't think that's there in him, although it is there in some others. That's a generational thing. So that will move over time.

I was very critical of liberation theology 20 years ago because I thought it was an implausible theological system. But I will say, in retrospect, that there are elements of that, in a distorted way, from my point of view, anticipated some of what I'm talking about here—get away from the kept church habit and go on offense.

Now, it's a different kind of offense that I'm talking about, obviously. But 100 years from now, we may see this as one element in the broader mosaic here.

Thanks for bringing that up.

**QUESTION:** David Hunt.

George, I would like to ask you a question on an issue quite different from those you have been discussing. In April of 1981, the Turk [Ali Ağca shot the pope](#) in Saint Peter's Square. After years of investigations by the United States government, the Italian government, and others, what is the considered view of the Catholic church as to who was behind Ali Ağca, if anybody?

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** I don't know that the Catholic church has a considered view on that. I will give you my considered view on that.

In preparing the second volume of my biography of John Paul II, *The End and the Beginning*, I had access to files from the Polish secret police, the East German Stasi. A lot of KGB material had broken loose since I wrote *Witness to Hope*. Ditto with the Hungarian secret intelligence service, etc. In that book, I went back and revisited the issue of Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II's given name, and communism through the prism of this newly available documentation.

If you add all of that up, the incredible full-court press that was ordered up by [Yuri Andropov](#) within a month of Wojtyla's election, while there still is no paper chain that connects the dots—and I doubt that there ever will be—I think the overwhelming burden of evidence is that Ağca was at the end of a chain of causation that eventually goes back to the KGB. Now, there are a gazillion cutouts between there and here, but I don't know anything else that really answers the question, *cui bono*, who benefits, that fits this other pattern of extraordinary efforts to penetrate the Vatican, some of which were quite successful—not bearing on this incident, but bearing on negotiations with East Bloc governments and what have you.

But I don't think there is ever going to be a piece of paper in which you see, "Shoot the pope. Signed, Andropov," who would probably be the guy. [Brezhnev](#) was in his late vegetative state, I think, at that point and probably not up for such a caper.

There isn't a single serious Polish student of these affairs who doubts that what I said is the case.

But perhaps of far more interest than that is this broader pattern of East Bloc intelligence efforts to penetrate the Holy See, which begin in the early 1960s. It was an extraordinary business—billions and billions of dollars, billions of man-hours of effort, hundreds of agents on the ground. This was really dramatic stuff. After Wojtyla was elected, it was going on both in Poland and in Rome.

To sum up, it has always struck me as very interesting that the two people who immediately understood that the election of this guy, this Pole, as pope was a potential world historical game changer were both Russians. One was [Alexandr Solzhenitsyn](#), who told his housekeeper, Irina Alberti, the day of the election, "This is the most important event since [World War I](#); it will change everything," and Andropov. Two guys got it from the starting gate, and both were Russians.

Thank you all very much.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I hope you won't take me to task for saying that you grace our presence.

**GEORGE WEIGEL:** Great. Thank you.

### **Audio**

In this in-depth, erudite talk, George Weigel discusses the historic shift taking place in the Catholic church; the character of the new mode of Catholicism that is coming into being; his personal impressions of the new pope; and the flourishing church in Africa.

### **Video Clip**

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