

## The Odd Catholic Couple: Review of *The Two Popes*

Andrés Sánchez

It is no wonder that the lead actors in *The Two Popes*, Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce, have been nominated for Golden Globes, Oscars, and British Academy Film Awards. After all, the 2019 film, by director Fernando Meirelles, is a character study, the very kind of movie that relies on actors' skillful portrayal. At the center of the film are Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, who represent the two sides of the coin that was John Paul II. It is no wonder, either, that the movie starts with Francis, then the cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, as he receives the news of John Paul's death in the middle of an evangelizing mission in a poor *vil-la miseria* (slum) of the city.

Facing *The Two Popes*, just like facing the history of the Catholic Church in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, necessarily means facing John Paul II. His two sides, the popular—almost populist—leader who kissed the ground as soon as his Alitalia flight landed at any airport and the zealous conservative who strove to remove any leftist influence from the Church, especially in Latin America, existed alongside one another. They were masterfully held together by his charm, his soothing voice, his knowledge of several languages, and his unrelenting schedule of global travel, which only ceased when his fragile health kept him

confined to the rooms of his Vatican apartment.

And who are Francis and Benedict XVI but the incarnations of those two sides? First, the dutiful and delicate Joseph Ratzinger. Born in conservative Bavaria, raised with an elder brother who is also a priest, and possessed of a lifelong desire for the priesthood, he allowed himself to be led by a sense of pastoral and intellectual duty from the Second Vatican Council to a professor's chair at the University of Tübingen, the same place where Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, and Friedrich Hölderlin co-founded the German Idealist philosophical movement. There Professor Ratzinger transformed from a young reform-minded priest into a conservative guardian of tradition after witnessing the global youth rebellions of 1968. It was a transformation that occurred much to the chagrin of those around him, including his colleague and intellectual rival Hans Küng.

While 1968 turned Ratzinger into a conservative, it bore different fruits on the other side of the Atlantic. In Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who was a chemical technician and a bouncer before heading to the seminary, was ordained as a priest in 1969 and began his training as a Jesuit. It was an era when Liberation Theol-



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ogy, a theological movement that emphasizes social and economic justice as anticipatory of our ultimate salvation, flourished in Latin America. The year prior to Bergoglio's ordination, the Medellín Conference met in Colombia to debate the application of Vatican II in Latin America. This gathering of liberal and progressive bishops and priests from throughout the region is widely considered to have been one of the founding moments of liberation theology. At first opposed to liberation theology, the future Pope Francis came to embrace its call for a political and socially engaged Christian faith, dedicated to seeing justice done in this world, not only the next. This change of heart was the result of very specific events in his life and the life of his country. In 1973 he was named the Provincial of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in Argentina. Three years later, a military junta took power in the country through a coup, beginning a period of political repression and state violence. Argentina's was a not uncommon story in South America, and this period of oppression and fear left a mark on Bergoglio.

It is the events of this era on which Fernando Meirelles, the film's Brazilian director—whose work has always been grounded in social and environmental issues (*Cidade de Deus*, *Blindness*, *The Constant Gardener*, and the opening ceremony of the Rio 2016 Olympics)—focuses as he explores how Father Bergoglio became Pope Francis. First, there was the assassination of Carlos Mugica, an extremely popular priest in the *villas* of Buenos Aires, by paramilitary forces in 1974; and then, with even more relevance for Bergoglio's biography, the kidnapping of two Jesuits, Franz Jalics and Orlando Yorio. Their imprisonment and torture, and Bergoglio's role in it, according to the movie, is what led Bergoglio to become the down-to-earth cleric who, even after becoming Cardinal and Archbishop of Buenos Aires, took the *subte* through the city and walked in the most dangerous areas.

After John Paul's death, Benedict XVI finds rotten fruits in the Vatican. The scandals of sexual abuse have appeared all over the world (and were portrayed in an Oscar-winning movie, *Spotlight*). The calm, traditional, and introverted Pope decides it is

imperative to shake the Church. The final straw are the revelations involving the Mexican priest Marcial Maciel, a powerful figure in the Church and a darling of John Paul II. Maciel's legacy as the founder of the Legion of Christ, a fundraiser, and a friend of powerful leaders in the Hispanic world was tainted by revelations of sexual abuse, which led Benedict to discipline him and to confine him to a retirement house in Florida, where he died in 2008.

These events are all true. The fictional element added by the screenwriter, the Oscar-nominated Anthony McCarten, is how Benedict seeks out Cardinal Bergoglio to become the next pope and entrusts him with his planned resignation. It seems as though Benedict, shown at the beginning of the film as a shrewd politician who wants to continue John Paul II's path towards a conservative church, makes the shrewdest move

of all by flipping the coin, from his own reserved and intellectual style to the popularity of Francis, the priest from the end of the world. The scenes where the styles of Francis and Benedict merge are not only the most amusing, but also the most revealing, using Benedict's passion for orange soda and Francis' well-known love of football and pizza as metaphors for the unexpected path that the Catholic Church has followed since that day when the German pope announced his intention to be the first pope to resign in six centuries. In this way, *The Two Popes* reveals with shocking clarity the fraught battle lines that divide not only twenty-first century Catholicism, but all of Christendom, progressive and conservative, reformist and traditionalist, humanizing the crisis through the humanity of the two "princes of the Church" whose leadership personifies the two sides of the battle. ✱



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