

HABEMAS PAPAM, FRANCISCO

By Ronald Blubaugh

Although I am a cradle Catholic and still attend Mass regularly, I long ago lost hope that the election of a new pope would change much. In my lifetime the only pope to inspire me was John XXIII who passed over the Catholic world like a meteor, shedding great light but disappearing far too quickly. The popes who followed John offered a vision of Christianity that to me seemed too strong on what was prohibited and too weak on what we are required to do for our fellow man. It long has been my expectation that things would stay pretty much the same regardless of who became pope.

So as my wife and I embarked on a trip to the vineyards and villages of Chile and Argentina, I had little interest in what the cardinals would do in Rome. For ten days we tasted interesting wines, practiced our Spanish and learned about South American politics. We carried no smart phones or tablets and left the television turned off in our hotel rooms. Then on March 13th, our first day in Buenos Aires, we were surprised when for no apparent reason church bells began to peal and peal and peal. "There must be a new pope," someone in our group remarked.

When we got back to our hotel that evening, for the first time on our trip we turned on the television. What we soon learned was that the cardinal from Buenos Aires had been elected pope. Every station carried nonstop coverage of the new pope from Argentina. On the steps of the cathedral a crowd had gathered to wave Argentinean flags and chant. It seemed more like a great victory in a soccer match than the election of a pope. The next morning, our guide said, "It's more than winning a soccer match. It is winning the World Cup!"

The Metropolitan Cathedral of Buenos Aires faces the Plaza de Mayo, at the opposite end from the Casa Rosada where Evita Peron stood on the balcony to address her adoring followers. A short distance from the cathedral is where the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo walked in their silent demand to learn the fate of their sons and daughters who were taken away by government agents when the country was run by generals during the "Dirty War" of 1976 to 1983. White head scarves are painted on the plaza sidewalks in honor of the mothers.

We visited the cathedral the morning after the election of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio as Pope. I purchased a copy of a local newspaper on which his picture covered all of page one with the headline "Jorge Bergoglio es Francisco" and in larger letters "Papa Argentino." Television trucks occupied the curbside across the street and seemingly every available clergyman was surrounded by reporters and cameras. Inside, liturgical

music was playing through the sound system. Some people were praying but most were walking around taking pictures.

My biggest surprise about the new pope was not that he was from Argentina but that he chose the name "Francis." I find much hope in that choice. Among Catholics the name "Francis" equates with poverty, sharing and humility. Television in Buenos Aires showed pictures of his home which appeared ordinary, certainly not ostentatious. They also reported that he cooked his own meals and rode the bus to work. The local news told of his favorite soccer team and reported that as a young man he danced the tango. I also find hope in the possibility that he may have danced the tango because from what I saw when we were in Buenos Aires the tango certainly is not the dance for a prude.

Since we have been home, I have read that the cardinals who elected Francis have hope that he will be able to reinvigorate the Catholic Church in Europe. That seems a stretch to me. Evangelical houses of worship are found prominently in downtown Buenos Aires and roadside shrines are as likely to be in honor of Gauchito Gil as to any Christian saint. Gauchito Gil, according to the legend, was a Robin Hood figure who was killed by the police in 1878. Many Argentines treat him as a secular saint to whom they pray for help and protection. Red flags and banners fly at all shrines to Gauchito Gil. Our tour guide placed an unopened bottle of Malbec at one of those shrines with the simple explanation, "I don't believe in witches but I know that they exist." Our tour guide, like the few other Argentines with whom I spoke of religion, is a nominal Catholic but no longer practices the faith.

For the Argentines the new pope is a source of great national pride. They now have another point in their continuous game of one-upmanship with the Chileans. Papal flags flew next to Argentinean flags on the balconies of the apartment building directly across the street from our Buenos Aires hotel. A young Jewish woman told us she was greatly moved that an Argentinean had been chosen pope. Her emotion was evident on her face.

Perhaps Catholicism will be reborn in Argentina. But national pride will fade and what happens to the Catholic Church in Argentina, as in Europe and America, will depend on the pope that Francis becomes. There is much to hope for in a pope who cooks his own meals, rides the bus, has a favorite soccer team and used to dance the tango. However, I have read Garry Wills warning that those who hope for change with the election of a new pope are like Charlie Brown running toward Lucy who still holds the football. Yet, just maybe, this time it will be different.