

Catholicism: The New Communism?

December 21, 2014



Last week, as yet another mega-typhoon laid waste to the Philippines, the leaders of 183 capitalist governments met in Lima, Peru to face the imminent threat of climate catastrophe at a U.N. Climate Conference called COP20. (Yawn.) In case you missed the headlines (they were small), the world leaders agreed to nothing.[1]

Since the fiasco of the Helsinki Summit, it has become obvious that the U.S. and the other governments, all of them dominated by mega-banking and energy corporations, are quite simply unwilling to make actual commitments to reduce carbon emissions. This year at Lima, with the human race spinning at an ever more accelerated rate towards extinction, the U.N. chose to invite Shell and other big energy corporations to participate *inside* the conference, while keeping protesters (indigenous, climate refugees, peasants, climate justice activists) miles away under military guard in U.S.-style 'free speech zones.'

Bishops: End Fossil Fuels Now!

The only voice within the Conference that dared to call for an end to the use of fossil fuels was that of Catholic Bishops from every continent. The Bishops also urged nations to keep the rise in global temperatures below 1.5°C (rather than the proposed 2°C). Moreover, they explicitly pointed to capitalism as the basic cause of impending global catastrophe and called for a new economic order:

The main responsibility for this situation lies with the dominant global economic system, which is a human creation. In viewing objectively the destructive effects of a financial and economic order based on the primacy of the market and profit, which has failed to put the human being and the common good at the heart of the economy, one must recognize the systemic failures of this order and the need for a new financial and economic order. [2]

In other words: "System Change, Not Climate Change!" What more could one ask for? This slogan happens to be the name of the minuscule, far-left, ecosocialist coalition I am active in. The only difference is that the Catholic Church has 1.2 *billion* members.

Unfortunately, the Bishops' remarkable declaration was not reported in any major media that I could find. And even Amy Goodman, who broadcasted her progressive 'War and Peace Report' www.democracynow.org live from Lima all boring week, failed to note it. However, it is not really a surprise in the context of the rapid changes in Catholic attitudes in the less than two years since the ascension to the Throne of Saint Peter on Feb. 28, 2013, of Pope Francis, of whom more in a moment.

"While this is a first by some markers," writes Jeff Spross of *Climate Progress*, "the Bishops' statement also continues a long tradition of engagement with environmental issues and climate change by the Catholic Church." Pope Francis himself has made the religious case for combating

climate change, warning that “if we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us!” Francis has also singled out the destruction of the rainforest as a “sin,” and is working on an official papal encyclical tackling the environment and humanity’s relationship to it. ”[3]

Catholicism and Communism

These radically anti-capitalist Catholic positions have got me wondering: “Is Catholicism the new Communism?” “Rome the new Moscow?” “The Church the new Comintern???” What a paradox! Growing up as a ‘red diaper baby’ during the Cold War, Catholicism seemed to me synonymous with militant anti-Communism (not to mention militant virginity). New York’s powerful Cardinal Spellman was a virulent McCarthyite, and the martyrdom of Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary (persecuted first by both fascist and then communist regimes) made folks forget the complicity of Pope Pius XII with the Nazis – based on their common hatred of Communism.

Then, in 1958, things changed radically with the election of Pope John XXIII. The Vatican Council proclaimed the Christian doctrine of ‘a preferential option for the poor.’ Liberation Theology, which affirmed the right to resist oppression, spread all over Latin America. I was privileged to witness it in action in Nicaragua in 1984 during the U.S.-sponsored Contra war. Indeed, my years of activism in the Latin America solidarity movement had convinced me that Liberation Theology Catholics were consistently more revolutionary than Leftist of all stripes.[4] But sadly by the 80s my comrades among activist priests and nuns were being side-tracked and persecuted by the new dispensation in the Vatican after the election of fervently anti-Communist Polish Pope in 1978.

Reaction and Disgrace

John-Paul II put the Church firmly back on the side of the privileged. Then the 2005 election of former Hitler Youth Josef Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI set the Church on an even more reactionary course, turning back the clock on women and reproductive rights, offending Moslems, trying to cover up major scandals over pedophile priests and Vatican finances, and launching an inquisition of progressive U.S. nuns, accused of feminism and meddling in social issues.

So severe was the disgrace to the Church’s reputation, that Benedict took the unprecedented step of resigning more or less in disgrace in Feb. 2013, but by then even the most loyal Catholics had given up on the rigid, self-protective, seemingly immovable Church hierarchy. ‘New Pope? I’ve Given Up Hope’ headlined Gary Wills in the *N.Y. Times*. In my own analysis (‘Pope Quits: So What?’[5]) I contrasted the history of popular movements inspired by Christianity’s radical social content and the Church’s vast potential for good with the apparent death-grip of the geriatric, reactionary hierarchy on the institution. But my conclusion was nearly as despairing.

A Miracle?

I didn’t dare dream that a mere twenty months later Benedict’s successor, Pope Francis, would have called a World Meeting of Popular Movements and invited to the Vatican organizations of the marginalized and excluded of all ethnic and religious origins — landless campesinos, urban workers from the informal sector, recyclers, struggling native peoples, women demanding their rights, etc. (Oct. 2014) There, in the presence of Bolivia’s radical President Evo Morales, Francis declared that “solidarity with the poor is the very grounding of the Gospels” and that “Agrarian reform is not only a political need, but also a moral one!” These sound like the words of a popular leader, reaching out to his base.

“It was the direct involvement of Pope Francis that drove the event,” according to Canadian delegate Judith Marshall reporting in *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal*. Her amazing report is

definitely worth reading in full.[6] “As the newly installed head of a major institution of the global establishment, Pope Francis has arguably made the Papacy the most radical and consistent voice in pointing to the profanity of global inequality and exclusion. He has also repeatedly named the inordinate power of multinational corporations and finance capital as key factors in reproducing global poverty and destruction of the planet [...] The meeting was built on the strength of the Pope’s long-standing connections with these key popular movement leaders in Argentina.”

Who is Pope Francis?

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1936. After working briefly as chemical technician and a night club bouncer, he joined the progressive Jesuit order, became a priest during the heyday of Liberation Theology and got involved in social movements.

As a bishop, Bergoglio had already developed an incessant but discreet support for workers and their organizations. The anecdotes are without number: solidarity with persecuted militants, support for campesino organizations, protection for peddlers, promotion of “shanty town priests”, accompanying factor workers who had reopened closed factories and a forthright attitude of struggle against exploitation and exclusion, traffic in persons, drug-trafficking and the consumer culture. All of this, added to his legendary austerity and simple life style, his constant interpolation against the self-satisfied life style of the petty bourgeoisie, postmodern consumerist hedonism and “elite progressivism”, had made him an uncomfortable figure, not only for the reactionary right but also for the liberals of the centre.”[7]

Francis is the first Jesuit pope, the first from the Americas, the first from the Southern Hemisphere and the first non-European pope in over 1,000 years. These ‘firsts’ signify a major shift in the power equilibrium within that vast Internationale of the global poor. The Catholic (‘Universal’) Church is the only actually existing organized world-party. Its vast wealth and influence are now in Francis’ hands. Imagine, for example, that this Jesuit remains true to his Order’s mission and devotes some of the billions salted away in the Vatican to promoting Catholic education on a global scale, teaching billions of poor children how to read, write, think for themselves in a world organization that affirms the right to resist oppression. If the Church truly stands for ‘System Change Not Climate Change,’ this it itself would be a revolutionary development, and we have only just seen the beginning.

How Did this ‘Miracle’ Happen?

How did such an openly radical priest manage to get elected? Francis’ absolute authority at the apex of the hierarchy is a major defeat for the old power brokers who would rather see the living Church wither on the vine than compromise, as witness their circling the wagons during the pedophile priest scandals, their adamant refusal to allow priests to marry or to give women a sacerdotal role of some sort in order to keep the parishes alive, and their unwillingness to fund Catholic education — once the Church’s proud monopoly and major source of its ideological influence. The Catholic hierarchy (like the military, the world of finance, and the Communist *nomenklatura*) has long functioned as a closed corporation, a state within a state, impenetrable, opaque, a law unto itself, protected by its intimate ties with other corrupt hierarchies in politics, the military, banking, law enforcement and the Mafia.

The Vatican bureaucracy sits on a pot of gold equal to the wealth of many nations, and one can only imagine the silent struggles going on right now behind the closed walls of the Curia over control of that wealth as Francis and his allies conduct their purge of the apparatus. These developments may take time.

Excluding Divine Intervention, what made this revolution within the Church possible? The most obvious answer is that the Church had reached a dead end. The faithful were leaving in droves, the priesthood was dying out with few new recruits, especially among 'Europeans,' and the laity were in despair. Another reason is the demographic shift among practicing Catholics. There is also the solid organization and discipline of the international Jesuit Order whose attempts to take over the Church and influence in Latin America go back centuries. (Not for nothing did members of the Communist International think of themselves as 'red Jesuits.')

Breaking Through Parish Walls

To these material explanations I would like to add another, less obvious: the Internet and social media. Whereas over the centuries, the hierarchy has had a monopoly of communication, all of it top down. Today, Catholic lay people are no longer isolated, voiceless and passive before immense wealth and influence of the hierarchy. Just as Guttenberg's movable type helped catalyze the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century by making the Bible accessible to the laity, so the Internet in the 21st century may have catalyzed the unprecedented resignation of arch-conservative Pope Benedict XVI and the Church's apparent new course under Francis.

As Internet guru Clay Shirky points out, "social tools don't create collective action, they merely remove the obstacles to it." [8] Shirky cites the example of the campaign among lay Catholics to end sex-abuse of children by priests. It began in the 90s when victims started coming forward and the scandals were exposed in newspapers like *The Boston Globe*, but the Church hierarchy, led by Cardinal Law (himself guilty of protecting pedophile priests by rotating them through new, unsuspecting parishes), was able to squash the victims' movement.

The instigators were denounced via press and pulpit and banned from Church facilities, while lay groups were forbidden to organize outside of their local parish. However ten years later, Cardinal Law was forced to resign in disgrace after Internet tools had enabled victims to aggregate their testimony, post it on line, spread information and organize nationally and internationally. Meanwhile, the revolt against the coddling of pedophile priests has caused the laity to openly question reactionary dogmas like refusing Communion to divorced and LGBT Catholics and maintaining the celibacy of priests.

The Internet did not *cause* this potentially momentous change, but social media and its world-wide reach enabled the smoldering revolt of the Catholic laity to overcome the institutional barriers that enabled the hierarchy to isolate and dominate the rank-and-file movements for reform and renewal. What is striking in today's revolution within Roman Catholicism is the intersection of 'horizontal' and 'vertical' forms of organization. For if horizontal internet networking has given the Catholic laity a chance to come together and express itself, the capture of a powerful vertically-structured Catholic 'world-party' by progressive forces opens huge possibilities for human liberation and perhaps a chance for the planet to avoid climate catastrophe.

Nuns Vindicated

Let us end this hopeful story with the news, released today, of another victory for the progressive Catholic rank-and-file: a Vatican report reversing Benedict XVI's crude attempt to stifle the socially-engaged, self-governing orders of U.S. nuns, accused of preaching 'feminism' and advocating 'social justice.' Catholics across the country had been stunned and outraged by the Vatican's attempt to threaten the women who have been the backbone of this church for centuries. Thousands of faithful Catholics held more than 50 vigils across the country and more than 57,000 people signed a petition organized by the Nun Justice Project in support of the nuns. With these actions, Catholics made it clear that they stand in solidarity with the sisters and their good works among the poor and

marginalized.[9] As of today, they are vindicated.

The report concluded by citing Pope Francis' call "to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the church." [10] Meanwhile, it also transpired today that Pope Francis brokered the agreement between Obama and Raul Castro to resume diplomatic relations after more than a half-century of U.S. sanctions against Cuba, long condemned by the rest of Latin America. Also, it was the Holy Father's birthday. *Mazeltov*, Francis!

[1] I exaggerate. The world leaders formally agreed that each country will prepare its own voluntary goals in preparation for next year's Paris Climate Summit. The Lima conference was thus not a 'failure', but a success (for the corporate agenda).

[2] Matt McGrath, "Global group of Catholic bishops call for end to fossil fuels," BBC News, Lima, Dec. 10, 2014.

[3] Jeff Spross, Catholic Bishops From Every Continent Call For 'An End To The Fossil Fuel Era', Dec. 11, 2014.

[4] For example they supported the distribution of lands abandoned by émigré landowners, while the Sandinistas refused to give legal titles to poor peasant occupiers, thus undermining their own popularity during the Contra war.

[5] Feb. 24, 2013.

[6] Judith Marshall, "Challenging the globalization of indifference: Pope Francis meets with popular movements," *Links*, November 21, 2014.

[7] According to Juan GRABOIS, activist in the Movement of Excluded Workers and as one of the national coordinators of the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers in Argentina, quoted by Marshall, above.

[8] Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, 2008.

[9] Erin Seiz Hanna, The Vatican's Fear Tactics Will Not Work, Room for Debate, *New York Times*, June 12, 2012.

[10] Laurie Goodstein, "Vatican Report Cites Achievements and Challenges of U.S. Nuns," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2014.