Cardinal’s sea-change

John Wilkins looks at the life left behind by a penitent pope

Pope Francis: Untying the knots Paul Vallely
Bloomsbury £12.99

In 2005, I learned that the Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, a Jesuit, was emerging as a leading contender with José Ratzinger for the papacy after the death of John Paul II. I knew little of Bergoglio then, so I enquired from contacts I had in or close to the Jesuit order. I was disconcerted by some of the replies. As head of the Jesuit province of Argentina in 1973, he had been authoritarian and divisive, I was told. He was a man who did not settle.

How can such judgements be reconciled with the Jorge Bergoglio now known to the world as Pope Francis, whose style in five months since his election has taken the world and the media by storm? Paul Vallely’s answer, drawn from re-search that included visits to Argentina and Rome, is that Bergoglio has been on a journey of change. This is his golden thread, and it puts this book in a different class from the other instant biographies.

The change was General Pedro Arrupe appointed Bergoglio as Provincial in 1973, as soon as he had taken his final vows, at the age of only 36. He was already seen as a leader, and in that order’s hierarchy at sixes and sevens. Jesuits aim to be ‘contemplatives in action’, but some wanted more contemplation, and some more action. Bergoglio sought to stabilise his men by taking them beyond the lines of duty. He reforms that his predecessor had been unable to reverse. He enumerates in disturbing detail the conservative measures that Bergoglio threatened and loathed or loathed for it: the force of his personality was such that neutrality was out of the question. Politically, too, he was on the right. As Vallely puts it, Bergoglio at that time had a “golden thread, and it puts this book in a different class from the other instant biographies.”

On his career so far. “From a young age”, he told two journalist interrogators in 2007, “I felt that I was destined for the Church, army, and trade union politics together. Peronism had a left wing and a right wing. Many liked it, and a full-sized reproduction now of Knots

Once, that box wasn’t on the form, says Duncan Dormor

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Brent Nongbri
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There is a very high chance that if a reader of this esteemed paper you will be described by others as ‘religious’ — a person who practises a ‘religion’ called Christianity. There are a number of reasons why you may feel uncomfortable with that label: the fact that it is a generic description; the fact that ‘religion’ (as opposed to Christianity); and the implication that it ‘involves a sphere of power, which is largely uncontrollable from the rest of life (social, political, and economic) might be another.

The real strength of Nongbri’s contribution lies in the attention he pays to texts and to the institutional change. Will he be able to deliver? He is “easily tough to the ‘R’ word”

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