



## Episode 1,141: The Dictator Pope: The Inside Story of the Francis Papacy

Guest: Henry Sire

WOODS: Let's begin with a bit of the background here. This book, *The Dictator Pope*, originally came out under a pen name, and now here it is appearing in the United States via Regnery Publishing under your given name. Can you just explain those circumstances?

SIRE: Well, the name under the book is still the pen name, Marcantonio Colonna. The only thing is that my real identity has been revealed.

WOODS: I see. I see. Okay, because of course I am looking at the cover right now. I thought there might be a newer version or something. So how did that happen? You didn't disclose it on your own, I presume.

SIRE: No, Regnery disclosed it to Amazon about a month ago. It was always intended that my real identity should be disclosed when the print edition came out.

WOODS: Ah, okay. So what was the idea behind the pen name to start with?

SIRE: Well, you know, a lot of people in Rome have suffered retaliation for criticism of Pope Francis, and I wanted to avoid that. But more particularly, I wanted to avoid retaliation on people who have been associated with me or people who the Vatican might think have been associated with me, because I'm no longer living in Rome and some of those people are.

WOODS: This is quite astonishing. And of course, this runs contrary to the whole narrative about Pope Francis, the idea that you would live if not in terror, then certainly in great discomfort at the prospect that he might, or he or his people or sympathizers might come after you. That's very much contrary to the smiling man who sets aside some of the traditional perks of the papal office. So anyway, we'll have time to talk about that. Let's talk about -- I guess we should start in Argentina. I do want to focus primarily on his years as pope, but I did find it interesting to read the story about the pope -- of course, before becoming pope, a Jesuit in Argentina who is being considered to be an auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires, and he needs a special dispensation for that as a Jesuit. And there is a report that is written up about his character that has since disappeared, but what we have is the recollection of somebody who saw this report, and it is extremely unflattering and could help shed light on the kind of character we're observing in the Vatican today.

SIRE: Yes, well of course, the duty of the Superior of the Jesuits, Father Kolvenbach, was to give his opinion on whether Bergoglio would be a suitable bishop. It wasn't to flatter him or to

be unflattering. He was just called upon to show the character traits which would indicate whether Bergoglio was fitted to be a bishop or not, and his decision was absolutely contrary.

WOODS: And some of the personality traits that are described, I mean, use of foul language, things like this just seem so unbecoming.

SIRE: Oh, let's be precise: use of vulgar language.

WOODS: Vulgar language, all right.

SIRE: Let's not exaggerate things.

WOODS: Okay, and I don't want to. I want to be as fair as I can, even though I find this whole experience to be so utterly exasperating. It's very difficult to maintain composure when discussing it. But in this story of Bergoglio as eventually Archbishop of Argentina, we're observing a man who I guess earlier in his career, because of what you call his populist theology, was not viewed as a traditional leftist in the mold of some other churchmen at the time, and apparently his appointment was viewed with reasonable pleasure in conservative circles, and then he moves leftward. Can you describe how and why that happened?

SIRE: Well, how it happened, he was appointed Archbishop of Buenos Aires and gradually he began to abandon the defense of traditional Catholic orthodoxy for which he'd been known before and present himself as a more liberal figure. Now, if you ask me why it happened, this is the great enigma of Bergoglio's career. The only explanation that I can think of, which is the one that I give in the book, is that it was the last years of Pope John Paul II. It was assumed that the next pope was going to be a liberal, and you know, moving into the liberal camp would put Bergoglio onto the winning side. If that's not the right explanation, I don't know of any more plausible one.

WOODS: And yet he has filled these shoes so expertly, so effortlessly. It seems as if he's lived his whole life this way. But of course there have been other books written about Pope Francis by conservative Catholics who have complained about his political leanings or they've complained about his movements in doctrine. Your focus -- I want to make sure I don't drift too much into the subject matter of these other books. I do want to focus on his leadership and his style and things of that nature. So let me ask you about the question him, Bergoglio as *papabile*. Presumably, he was on the table, so to speak, as a candidate back when Ratzinger was elected. Were there people pushing for him even then?

SIRE: Absolutely. The St. Gallen Group chose him as their candidate back in 2005. They didn't succeed then, but they did succeed in 2013. It was the same people working for him both times.

WOODS: What was his role in that? Now, he wasn't a member of this so-called St. Gallen mafia, as it came to be known --

SIRE: No, because they were Europeans, and you know, he couldn't go to St. Gallen once a year as the others could to take part in their meetings.

WOODS: But nevertheless, we must presume he's familiar with the existence of this group and sympathetic?

SIRE: Well, certainly familiar with the individuals. I don't know to what extent he was aware of the goings on of the group, but there were cardinals such as Murphy-O'Connor who quite openly said that they were supporting him for the papacy, and Bergoglio was well aware of that and accepted the candidacy.

WOODS: Were there -- I seem to recall, and I think it's in your book too -- I seem to recall the impression that Bergoglio at the time was giving the impression that it was very much against his will that he would go to Rome and this and that, while at the same time he seems to have been engaging in machinations of his own behind the scenes. What's the truth to that?

SIRE: Yes, well, this is one of the things I quote from a very revealing book, *El Verdadero Francisco* by Omar Bello, an Argentinian. He quotes a priest who's a friend of Bergoglio in the run-up to the 2013 election, saying Bergoglio is saying he can't be bothered to go to Rome, he's old, he's tired, and I know that he's plotting like mad. "Well, that's Jorge," says his friend. And you know, this is the response of somebody who knows him well.

WOODS: When we start to talk about the papacy, the pontificate of Francis and we look at some of the decisions made, sometimes personnel decisions, for example, in some of the Roman dicasteries, it seems as if sympathizers of the old regime -- and in this case, the old regime is the Benedict XVI regime, which by the standards of Cardinal Ottaviani, even the Benedict XVI regime would have been considered liberal. But he's removing people, particularly like around the Congregation for Worship, and replacing them with obvious sympathizers. Do you feel as if the leadership style of Bergoglio is driven simply by his, frankly, authoritarian nature? Or is it authoritarianism linked with an ideology?

SIRE: Yes, the latter. It is authoritarianism linked with ideology. Clearly he wants to surround himself with people who are going to support his revolution in the Church.

WOODS: Now, what about some of the cardinals who voted for him who were not -- of course the vast bulk of them were not in this small St. Gallen Group. I am inclined to think that a number of these cardinals probably voted for him because maybe they are a bit to the left of center or they just heard that he is very concerned about the poor and that appealed to them. But I wonder how many of them -- it's impossible to know -- may feel like they have a case of buyer's remorse at this point.

SIRE: Oh, I think most of them have. But no, I don't think it was a question of concern for the poor. The real concern in 2013 was reform in Rome. There had just been a secret report that had been delivered to Pope Benedict showing an appalling state in the Roman Curia, and everybody knew that the finances of the Vatican badly needed reform. And basically, the people who voted for Bergoglio saw him as a reformer. I don't think the question of concern for the poor came into it much.

WOODS: So when he becomes pope, of course we have the highly unusual situation of having Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. This whole situation is extremely bizarre, and it got much more so probably within the past month or six weeks with that whole episode where the Vatican had doctored a photograph of a letter Benedict had written appearing to endorse the

Francis papacy far more than he actually had. This is very disturbing. And yet, even though Francis is clearly moving very systematically and, if I may say so, mercilessly to undo much of the Benedict legacy, it's interesting that, although Benedict feels like he can occasionally say a little something, he's been mostly silent. And all he would have to do, if you ask me, is somewhere offer the Mass according to the liturgical books of 1962, and that would say to the world all that needs to be said. And yet he won't do that.

SIRE: I don't know about that. Do you know that Pope Benedict doesn't say the Old Mass?

WOODS: I think he probably does in his private quarters, but certainly he's not going to be disapproved to say a Mass publicly wherever he wants to. If he had a big public Mass in the Old Rite -- and as I say, I think in his private Masses, he does use the Old Rite -- that would be saying something in an age of a pope who has sympathy and mercy for everybody in the world except traditional Catholics who want the Old Mass who are attached to a fad and whom he takes none of the pastoral care to understand that he extends to everybody else on earth.

SIRE: You're absolutely right, yes.

WOODS: So I think Benedict XVI remains a big puzzle and mystery here. Do you have any insights, by the way, into the question of his resignation? Should we really take it at face value?

SIRE: I think basically it was that Benedict had been there in Rome in the last years of John Paul II when he was really not capable of governing the Church properly. And Benedict was determined that the same should not happen again. Now, on top of that came what I referred to just now, this awful report about the dreadful corruption in the Vatican, and Benedict just felt that he was too old to cope with it himself, and he wanted the election of a younger man who would be able to cope.

WOODS: Let's say something if we could about the Synods on the Family, because this is really where so much of the controversy surrounding him has arisen, even though you wouldn't have to be confined to those synods to find material that's objectionable. You can listen to the interviews the pope gives; you can listen to his Angelus addresses. I mean, it's just a font of bizarre statements that wind up half of them have to be clarified by *L'Osservatore Romano* the next day. And I know this sounds flippant, but always say to myself: whoever the official clarifier is at *L'Osservatore Romano*, why don't we cut out the middle man and make that guy the pope and it would be a lot less confusing for everybody? But all the same, these Synods on the Family seem to have been carried out with an iron fist in the background.

SIRE: Oh, yes, it was very much political control, reading the synods so that the liberals were in a majority. And the whole procedure was directed towards relaxing Church teaching on the family and on chastity.

WOODS: I was particularly interested in the story, which I recall at the time, of Cardinal Kasper, who's known to be on the left, who had rather disparaging things to say about the African hierarchy, going so far as to say they shouldn't say too much about what it is we need to do, that they're committed to backward taboos and things like that. And when a journalist reported these remarks and the African bishops were quite horrified that he had been saying such disparaging things, Cardinal Kasper apparently at first denied having said it, and then

the journalist presented a recording of his words and then he had to apologize. So this is a Prince of the Church who openly lies, openly lies. I mean, who knows what he does in secret?

SIRE: Yes, you're absolutely right, but this is typical in liberal superiority. They regard themselves as an elite who are the only ones who properly understand how Catholicism ought to be interpreted, and you know, they are there to dispense their wisdom to the rest of the Church.

WOODS: I'd like to get your thoughts -- I'm sure you're going to run into this question quite a bit -- on Cardinal Burke, who had been in charge of the Roman Rota. So we're talking about the legal system of the Church. This is a very significant position. And then he was clearly and obviously demoted by Pope Francis in what could not possibly be mere coincidence. And now he occupies a very interesting position now, because even though he has been demoted, in a way, all eyes are on him because he has been, well, as outspoken as a cardinal on the right generally has been. I mean, there have been cardinals on the left who have been unhappy with the previous couple of popes, but on the right, they generally stay quiet, so it's a bit unusual for somebody like Burke to have emerged.

SIRE: Well, Cardinal Burke is saying what he has always said. He's speaking out on Catholic doctrine as it's always been understood. The exceptional thing is that under the present papacy, he's regarded as an extremist.

WOODS: And that's what's changed in just a matter of a few years. Now, the concern that I think some people have is that you could imagine, for example, in the American case, maybe you have one bad president -- now, I don't know. I think you have a whole bunch of them. But let's suppose you had one. There's no reason that the next president couldn't undo what the first one did. The trouble here is that the pope chooses the very people who are going to vote to replace him, and the question is the influence that Francis wields over the College of Cardinals. That is to say, how many members of the College of Cardinals are direct appointees of Pope Francis? How many more are coming? And depending on how long this pontificate goes on, as the Francis cardinals pile up, it's, "Katy, bar the door," so to speak.

SIRE: Yes, of course, one can't guarantee who one's successor is going to be. The last similar case was with John XXIII, who managed to appoint more than half the Sacred College in the brief five years that he was pope. Even so -- and he intended Cardinal Montini to succeed him. But even so, the election of Cardinal Montini wasn't a foregone conclusion. Cardinals are not necessarily going to follow the line of the pope who appointed them. Many of them have a mind of their own.

WOODS: Well, that's true, but it seems to me that when you're trying to carry through a revolution, which Francis clearly is, you're not going to be as, let's say -- well, let's think of it this way. John Paul II appointed some people who I just can't understand why in the world he would want to appoint them. And on the other hand, sometimes he appointed perfectly good people. Whereas when you have just a revolutionary who is single-minded, he's not going to be that way. He's going to find people who want to carry forth the revolution. He's not going to say: in the interest of fair play, let me make sure all interests in the Church are represented. I just don't see that happening. I think it's much more likely that he's going to bring about a College that's going to replace him with a Francis II. Now, of course we have to wait and see. We can't know that. A lot of the stuff, though, when you talk about it will seem like, well, this is just some obscure Catholic argument that's going on about the inner

workings of the Church. But I'd like to know, from your book, could you describe maybe two or three incidents that you think most capture, as you put it, the dictatorial nature of this pontificate?

SIRE: Well, as far as the dictatorial nature goes, there was the well-known case of three officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith being dismissed in person by Pope Francis. And in general, you have the atmosphere of fear that exists in the Vatican, because nobody knows when the same may not happen to them. But when I depicted Pope Francis as a dictator, I wanted to draw attention to his background in Argentina, the way he is a political pupil of the dictator Peron, and indeed, he showed his dictatorial tendencies when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires too.

WOODS: I recall an episode -- now I can't remember the name of the journalist, but he's a very, very well-known Italian observer of the Vatican who had written something critical about the pope, and he wound up getting a telephone call from Francis himself in which, according to all accounts, the pope thanked him and said that he needs to hear criticism and he knows that this criticism was offered in a spirit of love for the Church and he appreciates it. So we do have an episode like that. So somebody could cite that against you and say: look, that's very generous act. Maybe previous popes wouldn't have done that with their enemies.

SIRE: Well, if I receive a telephone call from Pope Francis saying that, I'll be extremely edified.

WOODS: [laughing] I'd like to get you back on the show after that call comes in, as a matter of fact.

SIRE: I'll let you into the secret, yes.

WOODS: [laughing] But I hear cases of religious orders being attacked -- and of course we can't know all the circumstances. Sometimes there can just be rot and corruption all the way through a religious order that on the face of it looks very orthodox and vibrant, and so we can't know all the circumstances, so we do have to reserve a bit of judgment in cases like that. But given that there is corruption and rot all over the world and yet it seems as if there's a targeted attack only on or primarily on orders that tend to be most orthodox, it doesn't seem unreasonable to think there's an agenda at work here. Now, can you give us any stories about this kind of thing?

SIRE: Well, what you say is absolutely right. The prime example of a religious order which has suffered is the Franciscans of the Immaculate.

WOODS: Right.

SIRE: Nobody could accuse them of corruption. What they suffered for was their decision to return to the Old Liturgy, and they were treated in a very tyrannical way by the man appointed to visit them. And I draw the contrast between the way they were treated and the treatment of the Legionaries of Christ, who, I mean, there you have a clear case of corruption. The founder of that order was an appalling man, as was discovered towards the end of his life. He was guilty of all sorts of sins, and yet the Legionaries of Christ were handled with kid gloves. The big difference between them and the Franciscans of

the Immaculate is that the Legionaries of Christ have a lot of money, and the Franciscans of the Immaculate were a prime example of a genuine vocation of poverty.

WOODS: What about what happened with the Order of Malta? There was some intervention regarding a personnel matter. I'm sorry I don't remember the details of that incident, but it does seem to fit and I know you treat it in the book. It does seem to fit this mold.

SIRE: Yes, but I mean, there was no real issue of corruption there. There was something that was done wrong, which was the distribution of condoms in the charitable works of the order, and the Grandmaster attempted to correct that, and he wanted to dismiss the official who had been responsible during the years that it happened. What happened was that Pope Francis then stepped in, forced the Grandmaster to resign, and reinstated the man who had been responsible for the condom distribution. Well, this doesn't send a very good signal about Pope Francis' devotion to Catholic moral teaching.

WOODS: Well, that's true. I think it's more the question of the way these things are carried out. I mean, I'm pretty sure that the intervention there was, I don't know, in defiance of established procedure or something like that?

SIRE: Oh, certainly. Yeah, clearly, whenever the pope asks the head of a religious order to resign, that will be a completely exception intervention. Actually, what was more illegal, what was totally illegal was the intervention of the Secretariat of State, where they declared the acts of the Order of Malta invalid -- the government of the Order of Malta invalid. Now, you know the status of the Order of Malta was defined by a document issued by the Vatican itself in 1953, and it declared that the authority with competence over the Order of Malta was the Congregation for Religious. It didn't attribute any authority over the order to the Secretariat of State. So Cardinal Parolin, the Secretary of State, was acting completely illegally in intervening in that way.

WOODS: How would you contrast with specific examples the style then of Francis with his two immediate predecessors? I could imagine, again, a casual observer thinking that John Paul II was some kind of authoritarian. Most people believe that, by the way. They believe he was an authoritarian. I don't see that at all. I think he treated almost everyone with kid gloves with relatively few exceptions. But how would you respond to people if you were to try to explain the difference between Bergoglio and not just a whole bunch of his predecessors, but the two most living people today are most familiar with?

SIRE: Well, what distinguishes Pope Francis is his complete disregard for the rules. This applies to law, canon law. It applies to theology. Francis goes in with the attitude: I don't bother about this. And this is what sets him completely apart from Pope Benedict, who was of course very much aware of the doctrinal heritage that he was called upon to uphold, and also from John Paul II, who wanted to do things also in a legal way. So we have a completely new phenomenon in the papacy now.

WOODS: Meanwhile, we have Cardinal Burke, who was part of a group of four cardinals, two of whom I believe are now deceased?

SIRE: Yes.

WOODS: Who were proposing so-called dubia to the pope, that these are statements they want clarification on in light of particularly the document *Amoris laetitia*, and they want an answer because one thing the pope is good at is ambiguity or plausible deniability: I never said X in so many words. *Yeah, but footnote 87 seems to say X. The flowery document seems okay in some particulars, but that footnote.* So they want some clarification on it. I don't know. Now there are only two of them in the whole world. I mean, this is the thing. At the same time, I guess we should recall that at the time of the English Reformation, only John Fisher stood up and said -- alone among the hierarchy, stood up and said something's wrong here. But to see so few cardinals be willing to say we need to get answers on these fundamental questions. I wonder what Cardinal Burke's next move really is. He's been talking about a formal correction of Pope Francis. I don't know. Do you have any thoughts about that?

SIRE: Cardinal Burke is in an extremely difficult situation. Of course, probably the main object in Francis' intervention in the Order of Malta was to undermine Cardinal Burke as patronus of the order. So Cardinal Burke has been left isolated. It's much more difficult for him to act now than it was two years ago. I'm really not in a position to advise Cardinal Burke how to act, but what I would say is all Catholic prelates and clergy who are concerned about the way Pope Francis is behaving need to show that concern when the occasion arises. It may be a document like *Amoris laetitia* or it may be this recent pronouncement of the pope saying there's no such thing as hell, no eternal punishment. Whenever anything like that happens, it is necessary for orthodox Catholics to say: you know, this is completely unacceptable. Because otherwise, Pope Francis is going to think that he can just do whatever he likes.

WOODS: And it doesn't help that both Catholics and non-Catholics alike think papal infallibility means if the pope's favorite color is green, then yours had better be green. This is not even remotely what it means, but I think somebody like Francis has exulted again in the ignorance of the public on questions like this, because when the pope speaks, everybody assumes this is authoritative and this is the very embodiment of Catholic teaching, and that's been the source of -- I mean, that I think is how they carried through the post-Vatican II revolution. They took advantage of the fact that they knew that traditional, normal Catholics would in a spirit of obedience go along with what they were told, because these are their superiors in whom they must repose their confidence. And boy, was a lot of mischief carried out as a result of that.

Now, you have a site up with some interesting bullet points from the book, DictatorPope.com, that people can check out. The book of course is *The Dictator Pope: The Inside Story of the Francis Papacy*. I will also link to it at TomWoods.com/1141 for today's episode. And Henry Sire, thanks for your time today.

SIRE: It's been a great pleasure, thank you.