

**REVIEW**

Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka

***On Heaven and Earth:  
Pope Francis on Faith, Family,  
and the Church in the Twenty-First Century***

Translated by Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman  
(New York: Image, 2013), xvi + 236 pp.

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What would have been the fate of this book if Jorge Mario Bergoglio, S.J. had not emerged on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica on March 13, 2013 as Francis, the 266<sup>th</sup> bishop of Rome? It might perhaps have gone the way of *His Eminence and Hizzoner: A Candid Exchange* (New York: Morrow, 1989), the book co-authored by the late Roman Catholic Archbishop of New York Cardinal John O'Connor and his Jewish friend, the equally outspoken former mayor of New York Edward I. Koch. In that volume, now long out of print, the two public figures opined in print about a wide range of matters, about many of which they agreed to disagree, modeling both civility and good humor in a city where such encounters by leaders in the public square might have been expected to generate far more friction and heat than light. This new book, *On Heaven and Earth*, was first published in Spanish in 2010, three years before the Archbishop of Buenos Aires became pope. It was quickly translated and rushed onto bookstores' shelves for readers around the world who were eager to learn all they could about the first successor to the See of Peter from the Americas. The book's co-authors are Cardinal Bergoglio and his close friend Rabbi Abraham Skorka, rector of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano "Marshall T. Meyer." Quite unlike *His Eminence and Hizzoner*, where the cardinal and the mayor took on issues such as the press, education, abortion, race, and housing in separate side-by-side portions of the book's chapters, the texture of *On Heaven and*

*Earth* is more cordial but no less candid. Readers are given the impression that they have been invited into the rabbi's office or the archbishop's study to overhear the wide-ranging give-and-take in which each is thoughtfully attentive to what his dialogue partner is saying.

The twenty-nine topics—ranging from God to the devil, from atheists to religious leaders, and including prayer, guilt, death, euthanasia, the elderly, same-sex marriage, science, education, politics and power, communism and capitalism, globalization, money, and poverty—also include considerations of the Holocaust, of Argentina in the 1970s, of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, and of socialism and Peronism. These are introduced with a chapter by Skorka, “How We Experience Dialogue” (pp. vii-xii) and another by Bergoglio, “The Façade as Mirror” (pp. xiii-xvi), in which each shares with readers both the process of dialogue and the product that is the fruit of their close friendship. Skorka explains, “We let the conversations flow spontaneously as opposed to following written agendas. As such, giving expression to our intimate conversations in book form meant that we had to take turns strengthening the bonds between us. We have transformed our dialogue into a group conversation, exposing our souls” (pp. xi-xii).

The book's title is somewhat misleading: it is not as “Pope Francis” that Bergoglio is speaking, because it was written before his election to the See of Rome. Yet those who are seeking to understand both the pope's substance and style will find that it echoes concerns that were shaped during his ministry in Argentina. For example, his recurrent critiques of clericalism and careerism among priests and bishops come to mind when, in the chapter on politics and power (pp. 133-139) he warns, “when the priest imposes himself, when in some way he says, ‘I am the boss here,’ he falls into clericalism” (p. 138). In the same chapter, the future pope muses, “One good thing that happened to the Church was the loss of the Papal States, because it is clear that the only thing that the pope holds is a third of a square mile. But when the pope was

a temporal and spiritual king, there was a mixing of the intrigue of the court and all of that. Do they mix now? Yes, now they still do, because there are ambitions in the men of the Church; there is, sadly, the sin of careerism” (p. 150).

This is an eminently accessible book, not a volume with appeal restricted to academics alone. That being said, the cordial and unaffected quality of the conversations that leave their traces in its pages is as much a matter of substance as it is of style, the informal and straightforward style that has been a signature feature of Pope Francis’ demeanor during his pontificate. For those who will mine the pages of this book for clues to understanding Bergoglio’s agenda vis-à-vis Catholic-Jewish relations, it is not only the depth of his friendship with Rabbi Skorka that is a clear indicator of how much this matters to him, but also the extent to which the archbishop and the rabbi understand how important it is for the Church to reckon with the Shoah (pp. 176-190). To that end, Bergoglio agrees that the Vatican archives pertaining to the Shoah should be opened: “They should open them...and if we were wrong in something we will be able to say, ‘We were wrong in this.’ We do not have to be afraid of that. The objective has to be the truth” (p. 183). For readers who are unfamiliar with the history of Jewish immigration to Argentina, beginning in the 1880s, and with the considerable impact immigrants had in the “stirr[ing] of the social conscience of Argentina” (p. 204), *On Heaven and Earth* offers a suggestive sketch. Skorka and Bergoglio likewise candidly address the antisemitism that characterized the Argentinian church (pp. 203-204).

It is perhaps the rush to make *On Heaven and Earth* available in English translation that explains instances where that translation occasionally fails in terms of its successful rendering of idiomatic ways in which Spanish expresses specific turns of phrase in the realm of religion. For example, in a sentence where Bergoglio is discussing the promise God made to Abraham, the translators render “*se establece una alianza*” as “an alliance is established” (p. 2). “Covenant” would have been the more accurate translation of the Spanish “*alianza*.” In another

case, where in the original Spanish Bergoglio admits to the presence in his own family of “*cierta tradición puritana*,” the English uses “Puritan” to render “*puritana*” instead of the more accurate “puritanical” (p. 72). And anyone familiar with medieval philosophy and theology will be surprised to see “*Santo Tomas de Aquino*” become “Saint Thomas of Aquinas” (p. 6). Yet these are fairly minor quibbles, inasmuch as they do not prevent the reader from appreciating either the tone or the substance of the lively dialogue between the rabbi and the archbishop.

Unlike *His Eminence and Hizzoner*, which is now appropriately relegated to the shelves of those who are curious about an era in New York City’s history that has come and gone, *On Heaven and Earth* deserves the attention of anyone who is seriously interested in the promising state of Catholic-Jewish relations at this juncture of the twenty-first century, during the pontificate of the first Bishop of Rome from the Americas.