



## I Am The Pope

Donna Chirico (March 25, 2013)



Enter Francis with an opportunity to identify once again according to religious affiliation and the public has seized this opportunity.



The United States is becoming less and less religious, not just in the traditional go to church every Sunday and don't eat meat on Friday ways, but also in purging religious affiliation. The General Social Survey, funded by the National Science Foundation, monitors notable social and cultural trends and has tracked the data about religious affiliation since 1972. Whereas then only 5% of Americans claimed to have "no religion," today more than 20% say they have none. Contrast this with the reaction to the new leader of Roman Catholics. People everywhere are declaring renewed religious interest and extolling the virtues of Pope Francis. He is humble, authentic, a man of the people and for the poor. He likes dogs.

The Pope blessed journalist Alessandro Forlani's guide dog and soon a photograph of the event circulated widely often accompanied by images of the original Francis, of Assisi, holding the paw of a wolf equating the two in character. These images call to mind another dog lover and the photographs with his beloved shepherd Blondi.

This seems a callous response, or perhaps I missed something. I could have sworn that this insider was elected by his fellow cardinals who share a narrow-minded view of the world and of religion. This is the same confederacy of autocratic oligarchs who have turned a blind eye to the pedophiles, opposed gay marriage and abortion rights while generally limiting the freedoms of women on a grand scale. Then why have so many expressed their liking for this sovereign? I attribute this instant connection to the fact that people want to identify with Jorge Mario Bergoglio. He is a reminder that a simple person can rise to great authority. He is a reminder that I can rise to great authority.

Given that religion is missing in our lives, missing too is the opportunity to identify with a cohort of like-minded journeyers who can offer encouragement and support. Whereas religion provides an all-embracing system of belief linked to practice, the structures of community created to fill that void are insubstantial. Individuals grasp at creating self-identity with choices that are becoming fewer and are often ephemeral. Even though we denounce religious affiliation, Francis provides a double take, another chance to fill in the blanks of self. This is the critical element.

Identification by race used to be simple: Black or White. Race then became more complicated in our multiracial landscape and has been put aside for the refuge of ethnicity. But, as ethnic identification becomes vulnerable, other ways to create that needed sense of self must be found. Those who are now unto the 3rd and 4th generation of immigrants are so far removed from the primogenitor of ethnic identity that they have to search for their roots. It is no surprise that we end up defining ourselves through media interpretations of ethnicity. The characters who portray Italian Americans, who may or may not be Italian American, tell us how to be Italian American.



Enter Francis with an opportunity to identify once again according to religious affiliation and the public has seized this opportunity. I can identify with the Pope, I am the Pope. In the years ahead, the Church led by this Pope of the people will also have to re-create itself and decide what identity to put forward. Let us just keep in mind that even seemingly gentle dogs will bite.

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