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A Uniter

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Op-eds are the opinion of the author and do not reflect an official University of Dayton position. This piece is by Ramon Luzarraga, a lecturer in religious studies and theologian-in-residence in the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives.

People expressed surprise with the election of a cardinal from Argentina as the world's new pope, but it's a shrewd move.

This election embraces the future of the Catholic church in South and Latin America, where the majority of Catholics live. However, it does not leave Europe behind either. Argentina is the most European of Latin American countries. The people of Argentina have Spanish, Italian, German, English and Welsh ancestry and maintain strong cultural and intellectual links with Europe, too.

Many people view Pope Francis as a bridge between the historic base of the church and its future in the Global South.

The cardinals wisely elected a pope experienced in handling scandal. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio dealt with the church's collaboration with the Argentine military junta that ruled the country from 1976 to 1982. During that dark period, Argentina's government waged a war against its own citizens in the name of "national reorganization" to restore a poorly run country and stem the spread of Communism. An estimated 30,000 people were killed during the so-called "Dirty War," and even more suffered torture. Clergy and lay Catholics actively participated in the disappearance, torture and murder of their fellow citizens.

This was not a bright moment in church history. Some Catholic priests in the torture centers heard confessions from prisoners as a means of gathering information for the military to round up more victims, many of whom were guilty simply of holding political views contrary to the junta or working with the poor. (I hasten to add that Catholic clergy and laity bravely resisted the junta, too, sometimes at the cost of their lives).

As Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Bergoglio faced a monumental task, and he was even accused of collaboration with the Dirty War, which he strenuously denied and was ultimately cleared. He led the efforts to restore the church's credibility with the people. This included public acts of apology and contrition, a denouncement of the Dirty War, and allowing the jailing and prosecution of priests who participated in helping the military. Bergoglio helped hide people targeted by the regime — or helped them leave the country. He intervened with government officials to request that people be released from custody.

Bergoglio's stature in Argentine society, and his election, show he succeeded overall in that task of reconciliation. If he could heal the effects of that scandal in Argentina, perhaps he can do the same for the global church.

As an intellectual with deep pastoral experience, he can bring people together in other ways, too. Today, sadly, there is a gulf between the intellectual life of the church and the people in the pews who, when exposed to the Catholic intellectual tradition, want to learn more about it. Pope Francis can teach in a way that is clear and accessible, without insulting the intelligence of well-educated Catholics or losing the support of those not blessed with much formal education. He's shown a common touch and has sided with the poor and disenfranchised.

Pope Francis, in many ways, can authentically represent a truly global church because he is a bridge between its diverse peoples and can unite them in a commitment to faith in God. It's appropriate that the title "pontiff" comes from a Latin word that means — among other things — "bridge builder."

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