

# Papal Bromance



The film's two stars both received Oscar nominations

*Popes Francis and Benedict go head to head in a fictional movie on their vision for the Church*

by Gerard Condon

**D**UBBED a “papal bromance” by film critics, *The Two Popes* (Netflix, 2019) is a fictional account of the momentous events of 2013, when, for the first time in seven centuries, one pope made way for another during his own lifetime.

Saint John Paul II died on April 2, 2005, following an agonising battle with Parkinson’s Disease. His 27-year pontificate had, as the movie’s preamble puts it, ended the “liberalisation of the Church” that followed Vatican II (1962-1965). The 115 cardinals who took part in the subsequent conclave elected Vatican-insider, Josef Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) as his successor. The archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio, was reportedly a distant second.

## Contrasting styles

*The Two Popes* captures the colour and drama of the 2005 conclave, from

the ceremonial entrance of the cardinals to the clicking of the pen that one cardinal uses to make his choice. In discussions outside the Sistine Chapel Bergoglio (Anthony Pryce) protests at having his name put forward. His humility only encourages his supporters, who quote Plato’s dictum, “The most important qualification of a leader is not wanting to be leader.” Another colleague says that it’s time for a non-European pope. Europe has grown tired; its churches are “bellissime ma vuote” (beautiful but empty). During another break Ratzinger (Anthony Hopkins) and Bergoglio meet in the washroom. Ratzinger greets Bergoglio in fluent Latin, enquiring what tune his fellow cardinal is humming. Bergoglio, in broken Latin, replies that it is Abba’s *Dancing Queen*. Their contrasting styles are immediately obvious.

After the conclave, Bergoglio returns to a simple life in Buenos Aires. Just as he is planning his retirement Pope Benedict summons him

to Rome. On arriving at Fiumicino Airport, he is whisked to Castel Gandolfo by a Vatican limousine, though he insists on riding upfront with the chauffeur. At the Popes’ summer palace, just south of Rome, the two men begin a series of dialogues that are the heart of the movie.

Pope Benedict presents as kind, if introverted. He prefers to dine alone on simple Bavarian dishes, though he does permit himself a glass of Fanta. His priority is to defend the Church against the “moral relativism” of our times. On making a joke that falls flat, he reminds Bergoglio that it is a German joke, “it doesn’t have to be funny.”

Cardinal Bergoglio, by contrast, is warm and avuncular, an avid soccer fan and lover of tango. He eschews the pomp and pageantry of clerical life, reputedly having the same pair of shoes for 25 years. He chats easily with the gardener at Castel Gandolfo, who gives him a sprig of oregano to take home. “You are very popular,” comments Pope Benedict. “Oh, I just try to be myself,” Bergoglio replies. “Whenever I try to be myself,” Benedict continues, “people don’t seem to like me very much.”

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## Change and compromise

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Benedict wants to preserve the unity of the Church, and thinks it would reflect badly on him should Bergoglio retire. But he criticizes the Argentinian for reportedly allowing divorced Catholics to receive communion. Bergoglio replies that Jesus dined with sinners in the hope of their conversion. Many Catholics are ignoring Church doctrines they do not agree with. Benedict replies that “change is compromise”; “the Church that marries the spirit of the age will be widowed in the next.”

The film switches to the Vatican, when Pope Benedict is summoned from his vacation to deal with the crisis now known as “Vatileaks” (August 2012). Cardinal Bergoglio joins him, and their conversations continue. The Pope feels overwhelmed and reveals his secret intention to resign. Bergoglio reminds him of the statement of Saint Paul VI, that a pope cannot stop being pope, no more than a father can stop being a father. But Benedict persists, “What damage will I do if I remain?” While he disagreed with Bergoglio’s “style and methods,” he recognises that the Church needs reform and “you could be that change.”

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## Absolving failures

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Bergoglio protests his unsuitability on the grounds of age, health,

**Jonathan Pryce as Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio; he is a critically acclaimed, award-winning actor from North Wales**



and above all his past. The movie digresses to an overlong account of the younger Bergoglio (Juan Minujín) who joined the Jesuits in 1958. By the 1970s he was their provincial leader, but accused himself of complicity with the military junta that was terrorising Argentina. While he was taking tea in the presidential palace, Christ was imprisoned with the leftist priests who were being tortured.

In the 1980s there followed an exile, of sorts, to a remote part of Argentina. In those years he “learned to listen” and develop the theology of God’s mercy that he promotes today. On becoming Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998 he decided not to move into the archbishop’s house. “You were made bishop, but did not live like one,” Benedict wryly observes.

Benedict, too, admits to falling short. In a highly improbable gesture, he makes a sacramental confession to the Argentinian cardinal. “I sinned by hiding away in books,” he tells Bergoglio, and accuses himself of deficiencies in addressing the sexual abuse scandals. The film’s denouement returns the viewer to the factual events of 2013. On February 11 Benedict announced his decision to resign. Pope Francis was elected by the conclave that was convened one month later. As the newly elected Pope vested in the ante-chamber of the Sistine Chapel (the ‘room of tears’), he is reputed to have refused the more elaborate garb of his predecessor, saying, “Il carnevale è finito” (the fancy dress is over). The film ends on a positive, but another factually improbable scene, of the two Popes watching Germany versus Argentina in the 2014 World Cup. Germany won.

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## Uncanny resemblance

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The big-budget production values of Netflix are evident in this movie. They even built a replica of the Sistine Chapel at the Cinecittà film studios in Rome. Jonathan Pryce bears an



**Anthony Hopkins as Pope Benedict XVI; influenced by Richard Burton, the actor decided to study at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, graduating in 1957**

uncanny resemblance to Pope Francis. While the screenplay is focused on the Bergoglio story, it is Anthony Hopkins who steals the show as the elderly, but determined, Pope Benedict.

Fernando Meirelles directed *The Two Popes* with characteristic Latin American flair. His Oscar winning *City of God* (2002) had his camera panning the narrow streets of Rio de Janeiro. Here he captures the colour of the Vatican’s corridors. The producers get many of the incidental details right, such as the Vatican’s (SCV) vehicle registration plates and the Italian Air Force helicopter used as the papal transport.

It’s in the bigger picture that *The Two Popes* is least accurate. According to his 2016 interview with Peter Seewald, Pope Benedict made the decision to resign on his own and without consultation with any of his cardinals. On the few occasions they have met, I imagine that the two Popes speak in Italian, not English. The movie exaggerates their contrasting theologies for the sake of dramatic effect.

However *The Two Popes* paints a positive view of the Church. While leadership in the secular world is fraught with hostility, these two men are gracious and respectful. They show the importance of listening to each other, as well as to God. ♦