

Interview with Claretian Fr. Gustavo Larrazábal, personal friend of Pope Francis I



Fr. Gustavo Larrazabal, an Argentine Claretian missionary, has been the publisher of the books of Cardinal Bergoglio, now Pope Francisco, during all his years as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. "Editorial Claretiana" Buenos Aires, belongs to Claret Publishing Group. The writings of this unknown Pope are now being made available to the rest of the world. We offer this endearing interview to the readers of our blog. In this interview, as well as in his books, we can have a glance at our new Pope Francisco.

Fr. Gustavo, how did you meet Cardinal Bergoglio?

I met him in back in 1997, when he was appointed Archbishop Coadjutor with right of succession in Buenos Aires. At that time, when the previous Archbishop was sick, we went to visit the new Archbishop Bergoglio and brought him a book as gift. I remember that it was a simple interview, and he was behind a simple desk in his office. I remember also that the book that we give him was a commented edition of the book "The Code of Canon Law". The Cardinal, some time later, in a meeting with other Catholic publishers, made me look red face when he said: "The first time that Gordo (the chubby one—Gustavo is a big man and we all call him 'Gordo' as a nickname), visited me,

he gave me the “Code of Canon Law,” thinking perhaps that I am an ignorant and that I needed to study Canon Law better...”. I remember fondly that first meeting.

That was an interesting story...

The second time I met Bergoglio was in a more difficult situation, and that was the time when I began to forge a close relationship with him. He was of great help to me in a moment that we had difficulties as a publisher, because from Rome, the Holy See, contacted us with a few negative comments about a book we had published. The cardinal called me to help me and asked for some clarifications about the book. He was the ecclesiastical authority of the place where I was the publisher and he intervened in a way that is extraordinary, carefully, helping, solving.... The cardinal called me and asked me: "Gordo, what is this book about?" I told him: "But if you know, bishop... I sent it as a gift to all the bishops..." (laughs). The truth is that he helped me a lot. From Rome they were putting a lot of pressure, and Bergoglio, in a very paternal and fraternal way, helped us out of trouble and to realize that the book had some edges that needed to be polished....

From that time on we started a close relationship, and a close friendship that lasts until today. The day I turned 50 years old, about a year ago, I celebrated a Mass with my friends, the editorial staff and family. They had hidden it to me, but the cardinal came to concelebrate the Mass. I didn't want to preside with the cardinal there. But he stood as one more of the Claretian brothers accompanying me and told me I had to preside, because it was my birthday. And so I did. I really enjoyed that day. Present also were my mother and my aunt godmother of baptism. The cardinal was very friendly and affectionate with them also and they were enchanted. He had dinner with us and we had a good time. It was a gesture of closeness with me and a moment of full emotion.

And your relationship with him as a publisher?

We offered him to publish his writings. This strengthened, obviously, this good relationship. He wanted that we be the editors and publishers of his books while he was the Archbishop in Buenos Aires. So now, we have all the books that he wrote during his time as pastor in this Archdiocese; books that now are sought after all over the world. Editorial Claretiana has the rights to all his writings, until the day he became Pope. Thus was established a close relationship of author and publisher, although institutional relationship as well, between the Archbishopric of Buenos Aires and Editorial Claretiana. We also publish many other books, like on catechesis and other titles, and for this we sought his approval.

You have known him well and have dealt much with him... how would you describe his personality?

I found in him a father and a friend whenever I had to go to him; a person who always heard me,

together we could find solutions; a person always optimistic, but not naively optimistic. He is, without doubt, a man of great faith and much prayer. His advice was always qualified, as of a spiritual guide: advising, guiding...; a person always seeking solutions, not wanting to abide in the problem. I think this is very important because, after talking with him, myself and others, came out better; I don't know how to explain it, but after talking with him, you would have another perspective to address the problem, a word that he said... or, simply, that he had heard or advised you.

These days people are saying that he is very affable, very cordial. All that is true! That smile that he has is also very natural, but I would still point out to something deeper than this: the ability to understand each person, no matter who they are. He attended lots of people, and people who have been in touch with him telling the same thing. This is also what we are reading these days in the newspapers.

On the other hand, it is the easiness to meet him. You do not need to ask for an appointment. When I wanted to see him, I simply called him by phone saying: "Jorge, I want to talk to you, when can you see me?" And he would ask: "Is it urgent, Gordo?" If I said 'Yes' he would say something like this: "Well, now I will make a little room... come now, or come tomorrow morning", all without too much protocol. Many times to access these personalities you have to go through a secretary, ask for an audience, etc. With him it was not necessary and he always facilitated the process.

Going back to the books. Let's talk about the first two that are being translated in many languages. In his homily at beginning of his pontificate, he used the title of one of the books almost as if it were a programmatic slogan, and then he sent it by twitter: "Service is the real power."



That title was given by our editorial team, obviously taken from one of his writings. We wanted us to prepare a book from his many speeches, homilies, etc. and he edited it. He liked the title and the cover that we prepared with his picture washing the feet of a group of people. The cardinal always gave the final go-ahead to the books, but always gave us freedom to choose the cover. He likes the cover because he said that his face was not seen, only the gesture. We were very happy, the same as in the cover of the other book "Open Mind, Believing Heart." That he always let us choose the cover was a sign of his trust. I know that some covers we had on his books did not convince him at all, but he said: "The decision is yours."

What about the second book: "Open Mind, Believing Heart"?

The book grew out of a special circumstance. It turned out that the cardinal told me that he had asked the secretary of the rector of the Catholic University, to put some order on his writings because he was already 75 years old, had presented his resignation and wanted to leave it all in good order. When this person finished this task, it facilitated the work. Regarding those writings the cardinal said that once the draft was ready we were going to meet and see what we could publish. The material was brought to the editors and we worked, scanning some pages and typing some others that were handwritten. At the end we saw that we had material for a good book of spirituality, and the cardinal approved it. Once this compilation work was completed, we prepared a draft cover that has a beautiful picture of the cardinal. It is with that smile, that we all know now, that is so typical. I sent it to him and told him that he was not going to like it, because his face was very visible. But as he knows me and knows that I am a person difficult to convince; he did not say anything and accepted it gladly. The title of the book is mine. He always likes to repeat that phrase, or something similar. I took it from one of his lectures, adjusting just a little and asked him: "What about 'Open mind, believing heart?'" He approved without hesitation at the first sight and that is the history of the title of that book. He told us that it was going to be his last work as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. And now... we have him as Pope. I think that it will be a blessing for the Church, as it has been a blessing in Buenos Aires.

Fr. Alberto Rossa, cmf