

What would Chavez think of Pope Francis?

By Cynthia Via

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Many will remember Hugo Chavez for his antics, his strong words, folksy humor and his anti-imperialistic rants.

But few can recall him as a religious man of spiritual words, who was able to gather support from Evangelical Christians.

And with recent news, what would he have made of Pope Francis I, who appears to be a man of the poor?

“The Kingdom of Christ is the kingdom of love, of peace; the kingdom of justice, of solidarity, brotherhood, the kingdom of socialism. This is the kingdom of the future of Venezuela,” said Chavez after his landslide reelection on Dec. 3.

Even in death Chavez was mourned by the Evangelical pastor, Alexis Romero Valera, in a eulogy commemorating his life and meaning, as seen on this recent Youtube. video.

[\[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPbnBUOngs8\]](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPbnBUOngs8)

It's no surprise that governments may use religion to manipulate the public or gather support; but it matters to what extent, and who is benefitting. At the time some Evangelicals sided with Chavez's social message and anti U.S. government fervor. Later his actions and words seem to suggest a preference for Evangelicals.

In the Gospel According to Hugo, David Smilde [\[http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RINVol9No3/GospelAccording%20to%20Hugo.htm\]](http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RINVol9No3/GospelAccording%20to%20Hugo.htm) writes that Chavez's religious feelings were similar to the average Venezuelan, who carry a lively belief, but do not necessarily practice in a formal setting.

Venezuelans take words and images from Christian, Afro Venezuelan, and indigenous traditions to meet real personal issues.

But it is from memos given to Wikileaks that some revelations surfaced. [\[http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=04CARACAS2252\]](http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=04CARACAS2252). These were gathered cables from the U.S, Embassy in Caracas.

If they are true they reveal that in 2004 the Venezuelan government catered to Evangelical Christians, to build the support base of President Hugo Chavez in order to

win his August 2004 recall referendum.

In that same year neo-pentecostal groups received \$400,000 from the government to organize two huge rallies for Chavez “Clamor for Venezuela” and “Million Prayers for Peace.”

Organizers at the rallies, who claimed to speak for the entire evangelical movement, threw their support for the socialist government. In a 40-minute speech, Chavez called Christ the “the original commandants” and himself, a “soldier of Christ,” according to Smilde.

After winning the presidency, the Bolivarian Socialist became closer to the Evangelicals, writes Smilde.

Part of the reason he abandoned Catholics was due in part for their criticism of expanding religious freedom, educational control and refusing to eradicate abortion.

Tensions grew worse after the Catholic Church State subsidy was cut by 80 percent in 1999.

Chavez was a practicing Catholic who promoted liberation theology.

This holds that priests should help the poor by working for political and social change, something that Pope Francis I might adhere to.

Chavez intensely disliked what he saw as a conservative Catholic hierarchy in Rome or in Caracas.

He viewed Venezuela’s Catholic Church as an influential power base that opposed his socialist revolution, and he ridiculed leading Catholic officials, calling them “liars,” “ignorant perverts,” and “Neanderthals.”

Nevertheless, the Wiki cable notes that only nine percent or fewer than two million people make up Venezuela's Evangelical population and “like many of his efforts to incorporate segments of Venezuelan society into Chavismo, Chavez's attempt to win over Evangelicals is poorly planned and executed, based more on payoffs than conviction.”

The Evangelical movement was troubled by "post-modernism," giving it a characteristic of slack personal morals with an importance on money and power, said Samuel Olson, President of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (ECV), in the wiki cable.

Olson claimed that many Evangelicals were given resources and money.

He said he spoke with an ECV pastor, who was offered housing and pension benefits, in exchange for supporting Chavez. The State television station broadcasts two free programs of popular evangelical ministers State, which also carry government ads.

One, Bishop Perez described his support for Chavez "as one of a common social agenda". As a child, Perez lived on the streets of Caracas, and viewed Chavez as "an answer to his prayer "

He mentioned, "the Catholic Church used its influence with previous governments to persecute Evangelicals."