

REVIEW OF Paul Vallely,
*Pope Francis: Untying the Knots--
The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*
New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2015

This is a revised and expanded version of the 2013 biography of Pope Francis by the distinguished British journalist Paul Vallely. It is probably the most balanced and certainly the richest in insider detail of the biographies available in English. The first eight chapters cover Jorge Bergoglio's life before his election as pope. The presentation here is much revised from the earlier biography, but it still says little about his growing up. It makes good use of materials from others' biographies and an amazing array of his own contacts and sources including, of course, Francis himself with his confession of being a sinner and having made many bad decisions because of his authoritarian way of operating. Unlike Austen Ivereigh whose biography is more like hagiography and tends to avoid dealing with faults and limitations, Vallely, who clearly admires Francis, is not afraid to offer throughout some judicious evaluation and criticism.

Chapters nine through seventeen—entirely new—are really a book in themselves—a fascinating treatment of the pope's first two years. It shows a sophisticated understanding of this very complex man, his inner freedom, his successful ventures in reform, the resistance he met from the Vatican bureaucracy and several cardinals, and in a few instances the limits of his own vision and will.

This is the comprehensive Francis biography to read.

--George Traub, SJ