

Pope Francis feted in Italian ancestral village

By Antonella Ciancio | Reuters - 59 mins ago

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BRICCO MARMORITO, [Italy](#) (Reuters) - [Jorge Mario Bergoglio](#) has made history as the first pontiff from Latin America, but his distant cousins in a hilltop hamlet in northern Italy claim Argentina's [Pope Francis](#) as one of their own.

Bergoglio's great grandfather, also named Francesco or Francis, bought a farmhouse in 1864 in Bricco Marmorito which sits in the shadow of the snow-capped Alps in a wine-producing region in northwest Italy.

Relatives living in the quiet hamlet were as excited as anyone when Bergoglio's name was announced as the new pope from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica 700 km south in Rome on Wednesday night.

"When we heard the news we were really surprised because we never thought he could become pope," [Anna Bergoglio](#), a distant cousin of Pope Francis, said in the garden of her house in the province of Asti, best known for its sparkling wines.

Her grown-up daughter Roberta was one of the few in the family - and beyond - who seemed to have an inkling that he might become leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics.

"Last Friday we were looking at a photograph of him and my daughter said 'Mum, do you think he could be Pope Bergoglio?' And I said 'I hope so'," Anna recalled.

Francis and the cardinals who elected him toasted his appointment on Wednesday with a glass of Asti spumante fizzy wine, a nod to his Italian roots and less expensive than champagne for a man who likes to eschew life's luxuries.

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Bergoglio's father emigrated from Italy in the 1920s, one of millions of Italians who moved to Argentina in search of a better life.

The new pope speaks fluent Italian, albeit with a slight Spanish intonation, and his links to Italy are thought to have smoothed his election in the secret conclave.

He is the third successive pope to come from outside Italy after centuries of Italian domination of the papacy.

His cousins said the pope's father worked for the railway, while his grandfather had a food store in the nearby town of Asti.

"He came from poverty, he's a good man," Anna Bergoglio said.

The Bergoglios are now hoping for a family reunion.

"The Vatican called me because they want to organize the chance for us relatives to go and visit him there," said [Delmo Bergoglio](#), a 75-year-old.

Delmo Bergoglio says he is the last farmer left in a village where many of the vineyards producing brignolo and barolo wines have now been abandoned and earning a living is tough.

Pope Francis quietly returned to see his family's birthplace a decade ago.

"I heard he took a handful of earth with him to Argentina," said Delmo Bergoglio, wearing a thick sweater against the early spring chill.

The red-brick house where the pope's ancestors lived rests at the very top of the hill.

"This is the house where the parents and grandparents of the new pope were born," said its owner Giuseppe Quattrocchio, who bought the property 20 years ago.

He said other relatives of the pope, who live nearby, once came to see the house to take pictures which they sent to Bergoglio.

Down the road in the neighboring village of Portacomaro, a collection of modest concrete houses with a modern church, locals are enjoying the attention brought by the papal links.

"The pope is here with us," read colored letters on a white banner hanging from the primary school balcony.

(Reporting by Antonella Ciancio; Editing by Keith Weir and Peter Graff)

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