POPE FRANCIS AT 10 YEARS

A reformer's learning curve and plans

Pope Francis during interview with The Associated Press at The Vatican on Jan. 24. So much for a short pontificate. He celebrates 10 years since his election Monday. DOMENICO STINELLIS — AP

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VATICAN CITY >> So much for a short pontificate.

Pope Francis celebrates the 10th anniversary of his election Monday, far outpacing the “two or three” years he once envisioned for his papacy and showing no signs of slowing down.

On the contrary, with an agenda full of problems and plans and no longer encumbered by the shadow of Pope Benedict XVI, Francis, 86, has backed off from talking about retiring and recently described the papacy as a job for life.

History’s first Latin American pope already has made his mark and could have even more impact in the years to come. Yet a decade ago, the Argentine Jesuit was so convinced he wouldn’t be elected as pope that he nearly missed the final vote as he chatted with a fellow cardinal outside the Sistine Chapel.

“The master of ceremonies came out and said ‘Are you going in or not?’ ” Francis recalled in a recent interview with The Associated Press. “I realized afterward that it was my unconscious resistance to going in.”

He was elected the 266th pope on the next ballot.

Sex abuse

Francis had a big learning curve on clergy sex abuse, initially downplaying the problem in ways that made survivors question whether he “got it.” He had his wake-up call five years into his pontificate after a problematic visit to Chile.

During the trip, he discovered a serious disconnect between what Chilean bishops had told him about a notorious case and the reality: Hundreds or thousands of Chilean faithful had been raped and molested by Catholic priests over decades.

“That was my conversion,” he told the AP. “That’s when the bomb went off, when I saw the corruption of many bishops in this.”

Francis has passed a series of measures since then aimed at holding the church hierarchy accountable, but the results have been mixed. Benedict removed some 800 priests, but Francis seems far less eager to defrock abusers, reflecting resistance within the hierarchy to efforts to permanently remove predators from the priesthood.

The next frontier in the crisis already has reared its head: the sexual, spiritual and psychological abuse of adults by clergy. Francis is aware of the problem — a new case concerns one of his fellow Jesuits — but there seems to be no will to take firm action

Significance of synods

When the history of the Francis pontificate is written, entire chapters might well be devoted to his emphasis on “synodality,” a term that has little meaning outside Catholic circles but could go down as one of Francis’ most important church contributions.

A synod is a gathering of bishops, and Francis’ philosophy that bishops must listen to one another and the laity has come to define his vision for the Catholic Church: He wants it to be a place where the faithful are welcomed, accompanied and heard.

The synods held during his first 10 years produced some of the most significant, and controversial, moments of his papacy.

After listening to the plight of divorced Catholics during a 2014-2015 synod on the family, for instance, Francis opened the door to letting divorced and civilly remarried couples receive Communion. Calls to allow married priests marked his 2019 synod on the Amazon, although Francis ultimately rejected the idea.

His October synod has involved an unprecedented canvassing of the Catholic faithful about their hopes for the church and problems they have encountered, eliciting demands from women for greater leadership roles, including ordination.

Latin mass

Catholic traditionalists were wary when Francis emerged as pope for the first time on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica without the red cape that his predecessors had worn for formal events. Yet they never expected him to reverse one of Benedict's signature decisions by reimposing restrictions on the old Latin Mass, including where and who can celebrate it,.

Though the decision directly affected only a fraction of Catholic Mass-goers, his crackdown on the Tridentine Rite became the call to arms for the anti-Francis conservative opposition.

Francis justified his move by saying Benedict's decision to liberalize the celebration of the old Mass had become a source of division in parishes. But traditionalists took the renewed restrictions as an attack on orthodoxy, one that they saw as contradicting Francis' "all are welcome" mantra.

"Instead of integrating them into parish life, the restriction on the use of parish churches will marginalize and push to the

peripheries faithful Catholics who wish only to worship," lamented Joseph Shaw of the Latin Mass Society's U.K. branch.

Though the short-term prospects for Francis relenting are not great, the traditionalists do have time on their side, knowing that in a 2,000-year-old institution, another pope might come along who is more friendly to the old rite.

Role of women

Francis' quips about the "female genius" have long made women cringe. Female theologians are the "strawberries on the cake," he once said. Nuns shouldn't be "old maids," he said. Europe shouldn't be a barren, infertile "grandmother," he told European Union lawmakers — a remark that got him an angry phone call from then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

But, it's also true that Francis has done more to promote women in the church than any pope before him, including naming several women to high-profile positions in the Vatican.

That's not saying much given only 1 in 4 Holy See employees is female; no woman heads a dicastery, or department; and Francis has upheld church doctrine forbidding women from the priesthood.

But the trend is there and "there is no possibility of going back," said María Lía Zervino, one of the first three women named to the Vatican office that helps the pope select bishops around the world.

LGBTQ faithful

Francis' insistence that long-marginalized LGBTQ Catholics can find a welcome home in the church can be summed up by two pronouncements that have book-ended his papacy to date: "Who am I to judge?" and "Being homosexual is not a crime."

In between making those historic statements, Francis made outreach to LGBTQ people a hallmark of his papacy more than any pope before him.

He ministers to members of a transgender community in Rome. He has counseled gay couples seeking to raise their children Catholic.

During a 2015 visit to the U.S., he publicized a private meeting with a gay former student and the man's partner to counter the conservative narrative that he had received an anti-same-sex marriage activist.

"The pope is reminding the church that the way people treat one another in the social world is of much greater moral importance that what people may possibly do in the privacy of a bedroom," said Francis DeBernardo of New Ways Ministry, which advocates for greater acceptance of LGBTQ Catholics.