

DAILY COMMENT

HOW A DECADE OF POPE FRANCIS HAS CHANGED THE CHURCH

The Pontiff has shown that Catholicism is a dynamic institution, whose leader can face unresolved questions openly.

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Francis has made it clear that a humble, personal search for the right way to live one's life is a good fit with twenty-first-century Catholicism all the way to the top. Photograph from Vatican Pool / Getty



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In March, 2014, Pope Francis went to confession in St. Peter's Basilica. A little more than a year after his election, he was leading a penitential service, which had been organized to encourage Catholics worldwide to fulfill their obligation to confess their sins (in the sacrament now called reconciliation) before Easter. Priests were stationed in confessional booths that had been arrayed around the basilica. The plan was for the Pope to man one himself, but he broke away from the person escorting him to his booth and strode to a different one, where he knelt, crossed himself, and spoke quietly to the priest, startling onlookers, who had expected the Pope to absolve others of their sins—not to confess his own.

In retrospect, the intent seems obvious—the Pope was leading by example, entering into the ritual rather than holding himself above it. The act itself was unexpected, though. There was no memory of a recent Pope going to confession in public: not John Paul II, who led a “Day of Pardon” at St. Peter's, in 2000; not Benedict XVI, who expressed concern over the slackening of the practice of frequent confession, following the Second Vatican Council. But now there was a Pope, on his knees, a sinner asking for mercy, just like the people he serves.

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On March 13th, Francis celebrates his tenth anniversary as Pope, and such acts have become a hallmark of his tenure. Just as John Paul II altered the profile of the papacy through his world travels, Francis has done so through his spontaneity and candor. To the distress of traditionalists, he has shown that the Church is an institution whose leader can face unresolved questions openly, rather than dismiss them as out of bounds. He has made it clear that a humble, personal search for the right way to live one's life is a good fit with twenty-first-century Catholicism all the way to the top.

Francis's pontificate was tagged as surprising from the start. In February, 2013, Benedict resigned, the first Pope to step aside in nearly six hundred years. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, of Buenos Aires, Argentina, was elected the next month: the first Jesuit Pope, the first Pope from the Americas, and the first to take the name Francis—in emulation of Francis of Assisi, the medieval Italian saint known for “holy poverty.” Once the new Pope assumed office, he lived in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the Apostolic Palace, often rode to papal events in a Fiat instead of a Mercedes-Benz, and brought an anything-goes playfulness to the regular audience outside St. Peter's. His rapport with the public suggested that he had been changed by his election—that a man known to many Argentinians as dour and circumspect had been infused with what he calls “the joy of the gospel.”

Since then, Francis has made the unexpected seem obvious again and again. Of course, the Pope should confess his sins before hearing the confessions of others; wade into a crowd outside St. Peter's and embrace a man whose illness had left his face marred; visit a camp for migrants and refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos (and bring some refugees back on the papal plane to settle in Italy); go to a mosque in the Central African Republic in the midst of a civil war fuelled by Christian-Muslim strife; and admit that he was wrong to have defended a Chilean bishop accused of covering up priestly sexual abuse. (Though the bishop, Juan Barros, has denied these allegations, the Pope

accepted his resignation and averred, “I was part of the problem.”)

Francis has also brought his knack for the unconventional to the everyday workings of the Vatican. He assembled a council of advisory cardinals, making it clear that he would consult with others; launched an investigation of the Vatican Bank, which was long suspected of corruption and money laundering; made efforts to streamline the Vatican administration, called the Roman Curia; and appointed a woman, Sister Nathalie Becquart, of France, to a key role in the Dicastery for Bishops, one of the most influential Curial offices. These were not giant steps, but they were steps beyond those that his two predecessors had taken during their combined thirty-four years in office.

At the same time, Francis has purposefully directed the papacy outward: devoting his second encyclical letter, “*Laudato si’*,” to the climate emergency; travelling to about a dozen predominantly Muslim countries; opening the Secret Archive of documents pertaining to the Vatican’s diplomatic machinations during the Second World War; and speaking to the press with an offhand ease that is rare for any public figure. In July, 2013, during his first press conference aboard the papal plane, he genially answered a reporter’s question about a supposed “gay lobby” at the Vatican with a now famous remark—“If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has a good will, then who am I to judge him?”—and set the tone for a pontificate whose aims he has spelled out in interviews and discussions as much as through encyclicals and other formal documents.

But the image of Francis as the people’s Pope has stirred resentment among Catholic traditionalists, who cherished John Paul for his popularity, which he gained while holding to an unswerving line on Church doctrine. Francis’s willingness to join arms fraternally with other religious leaders, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and Ahmed el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, and his diplomatic opening to China, a stark contrast with John Paul II’s anti-

Communism at the end of the Cold War, also stoked displeasure. Perhaps more than anything else, though, the traditionalists are rankled by Francis's habit, in interviews (urging support and care for "hurting couples") and in face-to-face encounters (with a gay couple, with trans people), of distinguishing between Church teaching and pastoral practice, an approach which suggests that the Church must reexamine its approach to sexual matters—not only homosexuality but marriage and sex outside of marriage. Traditionalists have pressed the anti-Francis case aggressively—whether cranky podcasters, guests on the EWTN cable network, or powerful cardinals in Rome.

Francis's openness to revisiting, and even revising, Church teachings—and to the disagreements that prospect calls forth—may be the most consequential development of his pontificate, the one that truly sets him apart from his predecessors. John Paul and Benedict, and many of the several hundred bishops whom they appointed, sought to tamp down Catholics' sincere struggles with Church teachings; they disciplined Catholic theologians who kept on speaking and writing about certain issues—Father Jacques Dupuis and Father Peter Phan, on the Church's relationship to non-Christian religions; Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson, on the gendered impressions of God the Father; Sister Margaret Farley, on sexual ethics—by initiating inquiries about the individuals' work aimed at restricting their ability to write and teach. Meanwhile, the bishops, who are meant to be teachers of the faith, engaged with questions on complex subjects simply by repeating the Vatican formulae (on in-vitro fertilization, for example, "which the Church has clearly and unequivocally judged to be immoral"). By 2008, when Benedict visited the United States, in a trip thick with pageantry, the lockdown on challenges to papal authority seemed to have prevailed to such a degree that Catholics working in fields that involve free and open inquiry—academia, science and medicine, politics, and the media—would have to live their religious lives in defiance of a Vatican that assuredly would not change.

Pope Francis hasn't dismantled the traditionalists' project, just backed away from it. He recognizes that formal papal decrees have limited influence and that the individual's act of conscientious soul-searching on urgent moral questions is the stuff of religious life, as it is of life broadly. And, for the most part, he has refused to be provoked by those who insist otherwise. In 2016, after four traditionalist cardinals issued a document proposing that Francis's approach to divorce and remarriage risked heresy, he just coolly let the controversy play out. He has done much the same with regard to Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, a former Vatican diplomat who, since 2018, has decried Francis's pontificate in a series of inflammatory statements that, among other things, have accused him—and not so much his predecessors—of turning a blind eye to clerical sex abuse and also insinuated that he is in the grip of the Antichrist. In the United States, Viganò's last diplomatic posting, more than two dozen bishops have made statements supporting him or posted approving comments on parish Web sites and social-media pages. But Francis has not disciplined Viganò and his supporters; months after the allegations were first made public he denied them, though not before urging journalists to examine the case for themselves. (More recently, Viganò has also put out written missives endorsing conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine.)

Without question, the Pope's record is mixed in a number of areas. Shortly after Francis was elected, former President Jimmy Carter sent him a letter chiding him about the Church's limits on women in leadership roles, and Francis promised Carter that he would make progress, but he has done relatively little. His soaring language in "Laudato si' " about the need "to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" hasn't been matched by measures actually compelling parishes to reduce their carbon footprint. He defrocked Theodore McCarrick, a cardinal facing several accusations of sexual abuse of minors and adults (accusations that McCarrick has denied) and, in 2019, he established norms requiring the Church to hear out people who accuse

clerics of sexual abuse, insuring that they are “welcomed, listened to and supported,” rather than immediately rise to the clerics’ defense. But, since then, some accused bishops, as well as a papal adviser—Cardinal Marc Ouellet, of Quebec—have defended themselves swiftly and stridently while dismissing the accusations and expressing little concern for the people accusing them. The Pope spoke out strongly against nuclear weapons during a visit to Hiroshima, in 2019, but he initially refused to criticize Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, even as Vladimir Putin made remarks about his readiness to use such weapons in that war.

Francis is eighty-six, and he has said that he has no plan to resign, unless he is no longer able to perform his duties. It’s possible that he’ll live to be a hundred and die in office. Even if he does, however, a traditionalist successor—a John Paul III—might aim to close down the more open Church that he has brought about. Traditionalist Catholics are already working for that outcome. In 2020, after George Weigel, the author of a biography of John Paul II, published “The Next Pope,” a short book categorically stating all the qualities that Francis’s successor “must” have and all the things he “must” do, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the archbishop of New York, arranged for it to be sent to the two hundred and twenty-plus members of the College of Cardinals, which includes all of the men who might be in a position to elect the next Pope. But, of course, no one, not even the Pope, can know what the Pope “must” do in the coming years. After more than a third of a century under two stern and superintending Popes, the Church, under Francis, has seen a thaw, one that many hoped for but few expected. Across ten years, Francis has frankly recognized that the Church is an unpredictable institution—a dynamic one. ♦