

Some Kind of Pope

by Anthony Favier

On the 5th anniversary of Pope Francis' election to the throne of St. Peter, Anthony Favier reflects on the career path and achievements of a pontiff torn between the desire for change and the need to embody a weakening Catholic institution.

Since his election on 13th March 2013, Pope Francis has made a lasting impression on his contemporaries. As the head of a hybrid institution, he plays two roles: that of religious leader (the Bishop of Rome) and politician (the sovereign leader of the Vatican State). Francis now stands as a leading media figure; yet embodies a paradox in our globally secularised and democratic societies.

The 266th successor of Saint Peter is certainly a fascinating figure. A quick information research shows that he is a leading editorial topic. Countless books have been written on him. The 5th anniversary of his election to the throne of Saint Peter will no doubt be an occasion for a new batch of publications. Right-wing or left-wing, liberal or conservative, progressive or traditional, there is no shortage of interpretative frameworks. The usual divisions in social and political analysis, however, may struggle to account for this man with a complex mind.

The pope is loyal to the Jesuit tradition and rejects ideology, which he considers to be something that isolates people and limits their experience of faith. It is difficult to identify Francis' "programme". At best, it is possible to distinguish a vision of the world and the Church. What are the traits that have characterised that vision five years into his pontificate? In particular, what is the pope's position on gender-related issues?

Although the pope enjoys unprecedented popularity, it could be said that his method has revived tensions within contemporary Catholicism. Will Francis succeed in being both the pope of change and the guardian of Catholic unity?

Latin American and Jesuit pope of a globalised Church

Following a resignation that was unprecedented in the recent history of the papacy, the cardinal electors chose a little-known Argentinean bishop to be the new pope in 2013. Journalists' difficulty in deciphering the name announced from the balcony in the famous formula "habemus papam" by the senior Cardinal Deacon was evidence of the fact that Cardinal Bergoglio was an unknown *papabile* at the time of his election.

Born in Argentina in 1936 into a family of Italian emigrants, Jorge Mario Bergoglio has often told the story of his vocation. After a confession that greatly inspired him while still a young student, he felt called to the priesthood in 1953 and entered the Society of Jesus as a novice in 1958.¹ Having completed the highly demanding Jesuit training, he was ordained as a priest in 1969 and took his fourth vow of obedience to the pope in 1973.

While still a young man, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was named provincial superior as Argentina was sinking into a dictatorship. That was a complex time for him. Father Bergoglio governed his province with an iron fist during the crisis of vocations. He restricted Jesuits' freedom of expression in order to protect the order from General Videla's regime. Although he was held responsible for abandoning two Jesuit priests, who had gone against his orders and been arrested by the regime, an Argentinean court later ruled that he had not reported them.² Nevertheless, it was partly because of this episode that he was sent to Germany from 1980 to 1986. When he returned, he did not hold any particular function before being appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires then Titular Bishop in 1998.

Bergoglio gained recognition during a synod of American bishops on the issue of poverty. He was rewarded by being promoted to the cardinalate by John Paul II in

¹The pope has told this story in various books such as *Je crois en l'homme*, Paris, J'ai lu, 2014, p. 45.

² Paulo A. Paranagua, "Le Jésuite Jorge Mario Bergoglio était le chef d'une Église argentine contestée", *Américana Latina (VO)*, blog in *Le Monde*, 13 March 2013, (website visited on 24 January 2018).

2001. When the latter died in 2005, Bergoglio was already considered a *papabile* but his past resurfaced when the press published information regarding the two Jesuit priests abandoned under the dictatorship. In 2007, during a Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM), he played a major role in drafting the final text and made an impression on his colleagues. After the resignation of Benedict XVI in 2013, the cardinals showed the confidence in him that they had failed to show seven years before.

The pontificate of Pope Francis is at odds with that of his predecessor in three main areas. First of all, he is the first Latin American pope of an institution that, despite the evangelisation of America from the 16th century onwards, had failed to promote a cleric from the New World to the top of its hierarchy. While the 1978 election of John Paul II from Poland marked a break with tradition, he was still a European, albeit from the East, much like Josef Ratzinger, his successor in 2005, who was Bavarian.

First of all, the election of Pope Francis confirmed that Catholicism's centre of gravity had shifted towards the southern nations. While in the 1950s, the countries of Western Europe, led by France and Italy, formed the demographic heart of Roman Catholicism, this later has progressively moved to Latin America. Two countries alone, Brazil and Mexico, with 113 million and 96 million Catholics respectively, represent 19% of Catholics in the world. That is more than the entire African continent, which totals 16%.

International relations specialist Constance Colona-Césari also believes that Pope Francis' action should be considered through the North-South prism. She maintains that there is "a big difference in comparison with the pontificate of Benedict XVI, who showed no hope of acting in a temporal fashion (...) and was a sovereign pontiff who focused on the life of the Church (...): peace with traditionalists, mass in Latin, and coming to terms with the Second Vatican Council".³

Francis therefore endeavours to rely more on the institution's "soft power" in order to produce a critical analysis of financial globalization and its lack of ethics. No European capital has yet been rewarded with a visit from Pope Francis, who instead focuses his attention on the suburbs and the poor, and maintains a resolutely Latin American perspective. With Francis, "the Vatican today sees itself as a counter-power against globalisation, the injustices it generates, environmental crises, the destruction

³ Constance Colona-Césari, "Le Vatican, une diplomatie d'influence", *Les Enjeux internationaux* television programme, France Culture, 25 December 2017.

of the planet”⁴ and we could add to this list Europe’s struggle to manage the humanitarian migrant crisis.

History may allow the innovative nature of Francis’ papacy to be put into context. In fact, it is only since the end of the Papal States, when Italy unified, that the Holy See has had to make a virtue of necessity and take on the role of moral watchdog on contemporary issues. For papal historian Philippe Levillain, “the capture of Rome in 1870 reduced the Holy See to the Word. The institution gained in mystery what it lost of its bedrock of historical conviction.”⁵ The papacy morally asserted itself in its ultimately successful struggle against ideologies that were threatening its very existence during the Second World War and the Cold War. At the time of the Second Vatican Council, whose opening in 1962 was one of the first events to be given global coverage by satellite television, the pope, who had previously described himself as a prisoner of the Vatican, became an international leader for whom travel became a vital tool for communication.

From 1978, John Paul II skilfully played the role of globe-trotting pontiff. He became a defender of human rights, long since regarded warily by the Church, against communism or what he considered to be the misguided ways of liberal modernity. His pontificate was arguably one of the most important stages in the metamorphosis of the recent papacy. Pope Francis is the inheritor of this contemporary history and, in his predecessors’ wake, is making the most of the opportunities presented by an institution whose strength lies in the density of the diplomatic network and cultural relay of a pool of 1.3 billion baptised Catholics.

Overwhelmed by a Curia beset by rumours and public scandals, and worn out by old age and illness, Benedict XVI chose to renounce the office of Sovereign Pontiff in 2013. The man who had so excelled as cardinal in the role of Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during John Paul II’s papacy was somewhat overwhelmed by his role as pope, which requires a very special charisma. The events surrounding his Regensburg address, the reinstatement of several fundamentalist bishops, one of whom proved to be a negationist, and controversy over the use of condoms quickly cast a shadow over his pontificate. Western societies showed deep distrust of him. It is fair to say that the choices of the German prelate could have thrown the Church’s centre of gravity off-balance. Indeed, Benedict XVI had liberalised the use of the traditional Latin mass, taken as a sign of appeasement

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Philippe Levillain, *Le moment Benoît XVI*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, p. 19.

towards the “Lefebvrists”,⁶ and had shown a certain dogmatic intransigence, particularly with regard to bioethical issues.

Francis was given a warmer welcome to the papacy by Catholics and the general public alike because he had the ability to renew the papal style. An excellent pastor, at ease speaking and improvising particularly during his weekly audiences, the new pope quickly established a presence that made him popular. This gave a moral foundation to his message, taking it beyond Catholicism itself.

A number of *exempla* rapidly forged his image as an accessible, affable and good-humoured priest: being blessed by the crowd at the time of his election, refusing to live in the papal apartment in the heart of the Vatican in favour of modest lodgings in Saint Martha’s House, allowing young people to take selfies with him on their tablets, breaking with established protocol to telephone people who send him letters and even removing the bulletproof glass on his popemobile.

In addition to these gestures which have helped to restore the Catholic institution's image, Francis has readily appropriated a number of sayings. These ecclesiastical maxims or aphorisms have also guaranteed him critical success. Comparing the Church to a “country hospital” was one of the first metaphors to draw people’s attention. For Francis, priests should be like good shepherds, living with “the smell of the sheep” (in a speech given to new bishops, 19 September 2013). In December 2014, he condemned the “15 ailments” of the Curia and made comments about the sexuality of Catholics who do not “breed like rabbits”. These spontaneous expressions turn his overseas trips and his speeches into events followed by the faithful and the media alike. The latter has found in him a figure whose bold words and gestures guarantee high audience ratings.

The third shift that took place with Pope Francis’ election lies in the more familiar and horizontal style of governance he has resolutely chosen to implement. Some analysts attribute this to the fact that he is a Jesuit. A religious pope is not a novelty in itself, although in the contemporary era it had not occurred since the 19th century. What is entirely new, however, is the fact that he is a priest from the Society of Jesus, an order founded by Ignatius of Loyola during the Catholic Reformation.

⁶ The Catholic fundamentalists who supported bishop Marcel Lefebvre in his 1986 clash with the Vatican.

Before the election of Francis, never before had the cardinals given so much power to a Jesuit in the Church. As a result of their choice, priority has shifted to “spiritual discernment”: paying special attention to situations in order to decipher God’s will and the closeness of the Gospels. As Francis reiterated: “*a Jesuit must be a person whose thought is incomplete, in the sense of open-ended thinking.*”⁷. In contrast with the confident, top-down style used by Benedict XVI, a theologian and philosopher, when exercising his ministry, Francis prefers horizontality, consultation and the possibility of being challenged by situations.

This factor also makes it easier to understand the fact that any attempts to identify Pope Francis' programme are futile because his style of governance leaves considerable room for consultation and the deflection of personal judgement.

From social Catholicism to sexual Catholicism?

People’s disenchantment with the Catholic institution in the West is still connected with the Second Vatican Council and the dashed hopes of progressive Catholic baby-boomers. After the Council, the overruling of the reformative branch of Catholicism was not unreasonably associated with *Humanae vitae*. In 1968, Paul VI’s encyclical forbade married couples to use artificial contraceptives. The *aggiornamento* allowed in the liturgy and on certain political issues did not extend as far as morality. In the Church’s social doctrine, the moment marked a shift in priority from questions of social justice to issues of morality and bioethics.

The texts of the magisterium of the Catholic Church have since confirmed that the only lawful place for sexuality is marriage, with the ultimate purpose being procreation. There can be no morally acceptable situations in which it is possible to derogate from this. The 1992 Catechism characterises homosexual acts as “intrinsicly disordered”. No pope has ever given any form of political legitimacy to the movement of homosexual emancipation.

With regard to the organisation of ministries, clerical duties are still not accessible to women, despite a strong intellectual drive in that direction, particularly among female theologians in North America. The polite refusals issued in the 1970s

⁷ Antonio Spadaro, "Interview du pape François aux revues culturelles jésuites", *Études*, 419, October 2013, p. 8.

turned into a clear “non possumus” under the pontificate of John Paul II during the 1990s: women cannot access the priesthood because it would constitute a derogation of the revelation.⁸

Finally, in the field of bioethics, Catholic couples are not authorised to use medical techniques that can fight against infertility, even in situations where it would be sufficient to use the gametes of both spouses without involving a third party.⁹

These varied issues have in common the fact that they relate to Catholicism’s gender organisation. The changes requested by the faithful or by theologians on these questions concern the way the Catholic Church conceives and expresses the difference between the sexes. These themes share the fact that they question the ideology and gender organisation of Catholicism itself.

Benedict XVI’s pontificate showed great loyalty to these different positions. In a speech given to members of the European People’s Party in 2006, the German pope reiterated that the principle focus of the Church's interventions in political life “*is the protection and promotion of the dignity of the person and she is thereby consciously drawing particular attention to principles which are not negotiable.*” These non-negotiable points, in other words which cannot be the object of transactions between the faithful and politicians, are “*the protection of life in all its stages (...), the recognition and promotion of the natural structure of the family*” and “*the protection of the right of parents to educate their children.*”¹⁰

It is also to Benedict XVI that we owe the spread of the disparaging phrase ‘gender theory’ to describe university gender studies. These are portrayed as a plot by international institutions to destroy the traditional concept of family and legitimise homosexuality or trans identity.¹¹

⁸ See: Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Inter Insigniores”, statement on the question of admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, 1976 ; John Paul II, “Ordinatio sacerdotalis”, lettre apostolique sur l’ordination sacerdotale, 1994 ; John Paul II, “Mulieris dignitatem”, Apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women, 1988.

⁹ John Paul II, “Donum vitae”, encyclical on respect for human life in its origin and the dignity of procreation, 1987.

¹⁰ Benoît XVI, “Address to the members of the European People's Party on the occasion of the Study Days on Europe”, 30 March 2006, text available online on the Vatican's website (page consulted on 5 January 2018)

¹¹ Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La Croisade “anti-genre” : du Vatican aux manifs pour tous*, Paris, Textuel, 2017.

In line with John Paul II, Benedict XVI had no interest in helping to develop an awareness of discernment and bioethical work but rather to defend objective and universal references on human life and sexuality that are inscribed in law and must be adopted unaltered by Catholics.

Francis' approach: synodal rather than magisterial

After taking office as sovereign pontiff, Pope Francis thus inherited a rather complex situation. He has had to manage the relationship between Catholicism and modernity on issues of gender and bioethics, particularly in Western nations, without renouncing the basic tenets of the Catholic faith or embarking on a struggle against modernity with no certain outcome. The pope has done so while maintaining the unity of a Church that is itself divided on these issues.

In strategic terms, Francis has been quick to avoid becoming locked in the litigious field of sexual morality in order to regain more room for manoeuvre. In the interviews he gave to a number of Jesuit magazines in the summer of 2013, Francis spoke out against the pastoral stalemate caused by the controversial confrontation over moral issues:

We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. [...] The Church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. [...] We have to find a new balance, otherwise even the moral edifice of the Church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.¹²

By moving back to the field of pastoral care, in the name of a fair hierarchy of what is important in believers' proclamation of faith, Pope Francis takes up the debate where his two predecessors left off.

In addition, in order to move forward on these issues, Francis has sought to encourage a “synodal” approach based on collective reflection in the Church, in contrast with Benedict XVI who focused primarily on the “magisterial” (teaching) side

¹² François, *L'Église que j'espère*, *op. cit.*, p. 72-73.

of his ministry. Once elected pope, the Argentinean announced two Synods of Bishops¹³ to be held on the subject of the family, which took place in 2014 and 2015.

Internal resistance

When questioned on the subject of “gender theory” during one of his trips abroad in October 2016, Pope Francis reiterated the core of Roman condemnation by strongly criticising some textbooks used in French schools. Meanwhile, he reorganised the Pontifical Council for the Family – the Vatican's armed wing against this “theory.”

Regarding the issue of ministries, the pope was quick to state his mistrust of “chauvinism in a skirt,” returning to the well-known issue of the excessive demands for equality that run contrary to women's true nature. Instead he spoke in favour of deepening our understanding of what is uniquely feminine by calling for a “deeper theology of women” in his 2013 address, without tackling the question of real equality.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Francis took the unprecedented step of appointing two women as under-secretaries in the Curia. Finally, in 2016 the pope established a study committee made up of 13 members, including 6 women, on the role of women deacons in history. There was also an unprecedented development when Roman nuns, in early 2018, began to challenge the way they have been treated by men in the Church.¹⁵

Is this ambivalence a Jesuit style of governance? It may respond to a form of realpolitik in the face of forces at work within the Catholic Church. It is also a reflection of Pope Francis' method: his desire to deepen the complexity of issues, allowing time for discernment in order to overcome divisions.

What, specifically, did the two synods change? The post-synodal exhortation¹⁶ *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) did not deviate from tradition. The indissolubility of Christian

¹³ Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has allowed the organisation of "synods" of bishops from around the world on issues proposed by the pope, who oversees the agenda, the discussions and the conclusions reached in the assemblies.

¹⁴ Francis, *L'Église que j'espère*, op. cit., p. 77.

¹⁵ "Le journal du Vatican dénonce l'exploitation des religieuses dans l'Église", La Croix, 2 March 2018.

¹⁶ A summary communication written by the pope following a synod in order to grant it the legitimacy of a pontifical teaching.

marriage and the non-validity of the second civil marriage, as well as the unlawfulness of homosexual unions, were reiterated.¹⁷

However, some of his positions have undeniably opened new horizons. First of all, for divorcees who have remarried, there is now a possibility for dioceses to develop specific pathways. These allow Catholics to perform penance and once again access the sacrament of marriage. Parishes or dioceses are authorised to set up specific LGBT groups including for baptised gay couples. They are required to promote a pastoral approach based on inclusion before forming any negative judgement.

In many ways, sociology has shown that there is no religious tradition without an institution capable of keeping it alive and developing it through complex and varied processes.¹⁸ Having studied changes in the Catholic tradition in a recent article, the historian Guillaume Cuchet reminds us that any institution must, in the long term, manage potential shifts and loyalty to tradition.

Starting from the idea that moments of normative resynchronisation, such as occurred during the Second Vatican Council, are actually rare in Catholicism, he analyses two necessary stages. First of all, the gap between practice and norm *“increases to the extent that a new situation develops in which a first line of deviants or innovators begins to question the reasoning behind the norm itself or the way in which it is presented.”* The second stage is when *“the Church then reshapes the theory (its doctrine) of its new (practical) hypothesis by reducing the gap that had manifested itself during the previous phase, either totally or partially.”*¹⁹

Following this reasoning, one might theorise that Pope Francis has initiated such a change by legitimising, within the Church, a period of questioning of the norms. The synodal method he has adopted has resulted in a high number of formulations that, while they may be heterodox, are being expressed interrogatively. The most significant innovation surely came in autumn 2014 in two paragraphs – which were ultimately left out of the text – of a draft version of the Synod conclusions. They recognised, on the one hand, the “gifts and qualities” that homosexuals offer the community and, on the other hand, took into account “cases in which mutual support

¹⁷ Francis, "Amoris laetitia", a post-synodal apostolic exhortation on family love, 2016.

¹⁸ Danielle Hervieu-Léger, *La Religion pour mémoire*, Paris, le Cerf, 1993.

¹⁹ Guillaume Cuchet, "'Thèse' doctrinale et 'hypothèse' pastorale. Essai sur la dialectique historique du catholicisme à l'époque contemporaine", *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 2015/4 (Vol. 103), p. 546.

and even sacrifice is a valuable asset to a couple's life."²⁰ Such statements would have been impossible under previous pontificates. Are they the prelude to tomorrow's doctrine?

The potentially transgressive nature of what Francis is accomplishing can be clearly seen from the response he draws among the status quo camp. The revolt against the pope started as soon as he took office. The American cardinal Raymond Burke, appointed by Benedict XVI in 2008, is the undisputed public leader of this opposition movement. He expressed his disapproval of the reforms at the first synod held in 2014, claiming publicly that the pope had done "a lot of damage."²¹

In November 2016, a specialist blogger at the Vatican revealed a letter written by four cardinals, one of whom was Raymond Burke. In the missive, the prelates cast doubt over whether the *Amoris Laetitia* was in line with traditional doctrine.²² In 2017, cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, who had served as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was not reappointed. The cardinal, however, had not reached the age limit and could have continued his role. Some in the Italian media interpreted this as a layoff. Since then, the cardinal has given a number of interviews to newspapers in which he expresses his fear that a "schism" could develop, leading to doctrinal laxity.²³ Playing the public opinion card against the cardinal elite, Francis may have weakened his pontificate by alienating the Church executives.

Since the Second Vatican Council, however, the body of cardinals has played a key part in changing Catholicism.²⁴ No reform can go ahead without the support of the Vatican's government -the Curia - which can be likened to a court society.²⁵ Nevertheless, Francis is working hard to reform his government. The credibility of the

²⁰ Sandro Magister, "Pendant le synode et après, une porte à tambour pour les homosexuels", blog of the Italian daily newspaper *la Repubblica*, (website consulted on 28 January 2018).

²¹ Nicolas Senèze, "Le pape 'a fait beaucoup de mal' au Synode, estime le cardinal Burke" ("The Pope 'did a lot of damage' at the Synod, claims Cardinal Burke"), *La Croix*, 18 October 2014.

²² Sandro Magister, "Faire la clarté", blog in the Italian daily newspaper *la Repubblica*, 14 November 2016, (website consulted on 5 January 2018).

²³ Marie Malzac, "Le cardinal Müller affirme craindre un schisme", *La Croix*, 28 November 2017.

²⁴ Hans Küng, a German theologian who made a brilliant contribution to the Council but gradually became a dissident during the 1970s and 1980s, analysed the failure of the reformist pole following John XXIII's refusal to change the Vatican's functioning: "John XXIII guarded the Curia - whose protagonists were determined to obey the reformist pope only to the extent strictly necessary and, moreover, to exercise a policy of obstruction and damage limitation in order to conserve the old power structures in place," in *Mon combat pour la liberté : mémoires*, Paris, le Cerf, 2006, p. 217.

²⁵ See for example: Laura Pettinaroli and François Jankowiaks (ed.), *Les Cardinaux entre cour et curie : une élite romaine, 1775-2015*, Rome, École française de Rome, 2017, 482 pp.

“C9” council of nine cardinals, established for that purpose in 2013, has been weakened by a new corruption scandal involving one of its key members: cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga.²⁶ Improvements in the management of the Vatican's finances – long accused of being opaque and poorly managed – to meet international ethical standards also stalled, while cardinal George Pell had to return to Australia to organise his defence in a sexual assault trial. For many observers, this fifth year as pope will be crucial for Francis. It will prove his ability to reform the Church's government.

After five years of pontificate, Francis is at a turning point. There is no denying his numerous successes. The pope, through the interest and esteem he arouses in others, has revitalised the Vatican's soft power. His good nature and affability guarantee him a popularity that underpins his boldness. On questions of gender, his organisation of two synods, and the resulting texts, have shifted doctrine at a pace that is more geological than numerical. The opposition of certain prelates shows that his action is far from innocuous. Pope Francis, through his desire to increase the complexity of problems and overcome the divisions in which some wish to confine him, has courageously paved the way for a new, original style of governance in the Catholic Church. However, his pontificate remains in a state of tension because, without the cardinal communication channel, it will be difficult for him to perform his ministry of change and unity.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 3 April 2018. Translated from the French by Susannah Dale with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

Published in *Books & Ideas*, 18 June 2018.

²⁶ This Honduran cardinal was accused of receiving significant sums of money for honorary work at the University of Tegucigalpa and allegedly invested and lost more than 1 million dollars in London companies, see: “Il cardinale da 35 mina euro al mese”, *L'Espresso*, 21 December 2017.