
POPE FRANCIS (1936—): THE LAYMAN'S POPE

Description

People's Revolution here comes from the top, through religion. Pope Francis is a rare revolutionary and an everyman at the same time.

“Pope Francis stood out as someone who has changed the tone and perception and focus of one of the world's largest institutions in an extraordinary way,” Time managing editor Nancy Gibbs said, after Time magazine named Pope Francis as the Person of the Year 2013, and she described him as “the first Jesuit pontiff who won hearts and headlines with his humility and common touch”.

The Vatican's Gorbachev: As de facto ruler of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev tried to reform the stagnating Party and the state economy by introducing Glasnost (“openness”), Perestroika (“restructuring”) and Gorbachev was largely hailed in the world for his ‘new thinking’. Here Pope Francis is sure to remind us of Mikhail Gorbachev, the same noble intention to open up a very old, very secret, very bureaucratic, very vertical organization, and make it more transparent and reform it. Much the same way Mikhail Gorbachev cleansed the Soviet Party structure with Glasnost and perestroika, Pope Francis has launched nothing short of a revolution in the Catholic Church. When Gorbachev touched *his* organization it disintegrated like a termite-ridden antique chest and everyone, everywhere thought it was wonderful, except the people that lived in it. Everyone, everywhere loves Gorbachev except the many Russians, who hate and despise him. Pope Francis will be fortunate indeed to escape the same fate as Gorby's.

By revitalizing and breathing new life into over 1.5 billion strong institution, like the Catholic Church, the new Pope is actually revitalizing and breathing new life into the whole mankind of the ‘global village’.

Openness, simplicity, change: If there was a single, central dynamic driving the coalition of cardinals that elected Francis in last year's conclave, it was the desire to put an end to the command-and-control style that characterized Rome's management under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Earlier, dissent was quashed and suspect theologians were silenced. Bishops constantly looked over their shoulders, worried about perceived lapses in orthodoxy while Vatican departments tried to micromanage local issues that Rome knew little or nothing about. Dialogue was out, conformity was in, and bishops who toiled outside Rome were fed up.

Not anymore. Pope Francis has welcomed criticism and opposing opinions; as he put it in an interview with an Italian newspaper, “fraternal and open confrontations help develop theological and pastoral thinking. I do not fear this; on the contrary I seek it.” To that end, Francis has summoned his cardinals and bishops to Rome for regular meetings, including an intense 10-day stretch at the end of February 2014 to talk about Vatican finances, reforming the Curia and launching a two-year dialogue on tough pastoral issues such as Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics.

But while many were looking for the recent meetings to produce policy statements or other portents, the real goal was to get senior church leaders talking openly and honestly — even in front of the pope. Francis, the cardinal said, is trying to get cardinals and bishops to realize that “they

can listen to everyone and speak freely and without fear, that each one can say what they think. They can be correct in what they say, and if not, it's fine that they think differently."

Pope Francis also grasps the nature of the great cultural crisis of post-modernity. In all respect, he seems to have captured the imagination of the world. Drawing audiences of millions, he speaks of freedom from repressive regimes and love for humankind. As a evolutionary shepherd for a secular age, he is a pastor who is deeply concerned for the flock, draws spiritual strength from the flock, challenges the flock to make good decisions.

Simple living, highly educated Jesuit priest-turned-archbishop-turned-pope rocks the Vatican with a modest lifestyle and frank tone that is seen as a radical departure from the practices of previous pontiffs. The pope, who named himself after the radical mystic St. Francis of Assisi in order to remember the poor, called for a church of healing. He refused to stand on the customary platform above other archbishops and dressed himself in simpler vestments than his predecessors. He's made a practice of shunning the rich trappings of the position, from paying his own hotel bill to opting out of the palatial apartment popes have lived in for a century in favor of simpler digs. Just after being named the new pontiff, he asked the faithful to pray for him, rather than the other way around.

Many of these acts send a signal about who Jorge Mario Bergoglio (his earlier name) is and what reforms he thinks the Catholic Church's leadership needs to make. He's making a point of continuing the humble lifestyle he lived in Argentina (where he was known to take the subway and fly coach) and showing how the Church's bureaucracy has become too wrapped in clerical privileges.

The welcome results are that cardinals are shedding titles and crimson-laced vestments. Work patterns in Vatican institutions, from the change-resistant Curia to the troubled Vatican Bank, have radically altered – shaking corrupt sedentary systems and people out of their lethargy – regardless of religion. The new pope seeks to enhance the role of the layman – not just in ceremonial ways, but in the nuts and bolts of reforming and governing the Church.

As I give the finishing touches to this book, Pope Francis was only ten months into the job, and he had already more than distinguished himself, as the pontiff is most likely to go revolutionizing the whole world by broadening – and even revolutionizing – the definition of love, humility, tolerance, religion, wealth, health, medicine, science, politics, leadership and market.

The pope shakes up the whole world: No more business as usual

On many counts, it is no exaggeration to say that the world got a revolutionary pope, the first revolutionary being Jesus Christ Himself, Whose true philosophy Pope Francis is passionately trying to practice. Among many revolutionary acts by Jesus Christ, I may quote just one example. Money changers had turned the Jerusalem Temple into a scene of greed and sinfulness. Entering the Temple, Jesus saw the money changers, along with merchants who, as middlemen, were buying and selling animals for sacrifice, for huge profit. Jesus was so filled with anger at the desecration of the holy place that he took some cords and wove them into a small whip. He ran about, knocking over the tables of the money marketeers, spilling coins on the ground. He drove the exchangers out of the area, along with the men selling pigeons and cattle. He also prevented people from using the court as a shortcut.

As he cleansed the Temple of greed and profit, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 56:7: "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers." (Matthew 21:13. The common people were impressed by Jesus' teaching, but the chief priests and scribes feared him because of his popularity. They began to plot a way to destroy Jesus which ended up in his crucifixion).

Pope Francis has launched a revolution in the Vatican as he seeks to clean up the Catholic Church, a giant and long established global institution that directly contains almost one fourth of the world's population (1.5 billion Catholics) and that indirectly influence the whole world. The report that Pope Francis has been chosen as TIME magazine's Person of the Year 2013 is not much of a news to me. He is far greater than that and, for that matter, I will not be surprised if he is chosen for a few Nobel Prizes in future. The reality is that the TIME magazines and Nobel Prizes Committees are all long established institutions that go the-business-as-usual way. And Pope Francis is a new live humane leader, who having changed the perception and tone of a far greater and mightier institution like Vatican in extraordinary way, is far beyond the scope of these institutions to grasp, let alone, in bestowing on him a few prizes or any 'person' of years.

Maybe, in this 'cleaning' process, the pontiff is making friends as well as enemies. The hitherto powers-that-be fear that Pope Francis has every intention of cleaning up. The question remains whether Francis will succeed in reforming the Vatican or will meet the fate of Jesus Christ in His eventual crucifixion.

Today, when our world is ruled by the market forces which have created all the catastrophic problems and crises that the world faces, it is not surprising to see what Jesus identified in those years are still happening around us today. American Catholics, on the front lines of social justice struggles, expressed delight at Pope Francis' frequent references to caring for the poor, his trenchant remarks about "savage capitalism," and his calls for government intervention to pursue the common good in the face of hostile market forces. Pope Francis said: "Christ is 'a true revolutionary and we are revolutionaries of this revolution.....In this day and age unless Christians are revolutionaries they are not Christians'".

Pope Francis, who has made alleviating poverty a central pillar of his papacy, criticized the "idolatry of money" in the global economy and denounced the unfettered free market as the "new tyranny." He asked, "how can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses 2 points?"

"Quite frankly, it brings tears to my eyes," said Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of the Catholic social justice lobby NETWORK. "It's been so long since one of our leaders brought the struggle of humanity front and center. It's a relief — and a joy — to see the Gospel being preached with such clarity", Campbell added.

Here what attract me most is the new pope's insistence that reality is more important to him than ideas. This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of a historical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom. The implication is that Catholicism will move towards flexibility where "rules" get in the way of evangelisation and the Church's mission to the poor.

This mission, the pope Francis makes clear, cannot be dissociated from a rejection of heartless free-market capitalism – that familiar target of papal pronouncements, condemned here with extreme clarity. It depends, of course, what we classify as heartless capitalism: the employment of sweatshop labour in developing countries by multinational corporations is unquestionably a scandal, but when Francis hints that the abolition of jobs by technological development is an

avoidable evil. In a May 16 audience at which he received the credentials of four ambassadors to the Holy See, Pope Francis said:

“The worldwide financial and economic crisis seems to highlight their distortions and above all the gravely deficient human perspective, which reduces man to one of his needs alone, namely, consumption. Worse yet, human beings themselves are nowadays considered as consumer goods which can be used and thrown away. We have started a throwaway culture. This tendency is seen on the level of individuals and whole societies, and it is being promoted! In circumstances like these, solidarity, which is the treasure of the poor, is often considered counterproductive, opposed to the logic of finance and the economy. While the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling. This imbalance results from ideologies which uphold the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation, and thus deny the right of control to States, which are themselves charged with providing for the common good. A new, invisible and at times virtual tyranny is established, one which unilaterally and irremediably imposes its own laws and rules.”

The Vatican, an age-old institution used to having almost everything done by the book, is bracing for the unscripted papacy. John Carr, who worked at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for 25 years coordinating social justice issues and is now leading the new Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University in Washington, and as the “Washington Front” columnist for America, writes in his article ‘100 Days of Francis’ in America Magazine:

“Everybody’s pope, Francis is changing the Vatican, not the other way around. So far, Francis is changing how the responsibilities of the pope are carried out, more than those responsibilities are changing him. He resists isolation and insists on reaching out to a new council of eight cardinals, to those who share the guest house and its common meals, to phone old friends and to reach out to the people he serves, especially the poor and vulnerable. Pope Francis is adapting the customs of the papacy to his pastoral manner, rather than the other way around....Pope Francis is making a big difference in how the papacy and church are perceived. He is helping people, Catholics and others, see our church and papal leadership in very different and more positive ways. In fact, I’ve heard people say they are returning to church because they feel welcomed and encouraged by Pope Francis.”

Stephen Schneck of The Catholic University of America in Washington said that he sees pope Francis combating some of the most deeply held beliefs among certain Catholic conservatives.”In America, a very scary error confuses Adam Smith’s invisible hands with God’s plan,” Schneck said. “Pope Francis powerfully rejects that error. An autonomous market can never be moral in itself. Free market forces are faceless, are without conscience, are unrestrained by anything other than their own competitive materialist dynamics, and thus are incapable of bearing moral responsibility. Without regulation or guidance, market forces can easily work against the common good.”

As for his view on homosexuality, the new pope welcome them in his Church, and they have started to feel the welcome sentiments. However it is altogether another matter about the cryptic statement of Pope Francis about a “gay lobby” in the upper echelons of the Vatican although he didn’t explain what a “gay lobby” actually is, how it’s gay lobbying and what it’s gay lobbying for – or what the Vatican intends to do about what Francis calls the “difficult” work of reforming the genuinely corrupt aspects of the worldwide organization he recently became the leader of. But his actions have revealed a Hillary-like determination to do it his way, protocol be damned. Making the clear distinction between sin and corruption, and in his initial effort of ‘cleansing the temple’, Pope removed cardinals in a major shakeup of Vatican bank. In a statement Pope Francis said, “Sinners are accepted [into religious life], but not people who are corrupt.”

Dig at Careerism, Professionalism and Narcissism: Using especially strong language on one of his favorite themes, Pope Francis decried a plague of careerism among priests and urged them to

renounce their personal ambitions for service to the church – warning that failure to do so would make them look “ridiculous”. In a speech to students from the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, Pope Francis said on June 6: “Careerism is a leprosy..... In our ecclesiastical region there are priests who don’t baptize the children of single mothers because they weren’t conceived in the sanctity of marriage. These are today’s hypocrites — those who clericalize the church and those who separate the people of God from salvation”.

In repeated broadsides at the culture of clericalism, Francis tells his fellow hierarchs that they are not to think of themselves as “a royal court,” as he put it to his first batch of appointed cardinals. That was just one in a series of blasts he issued in the days leading up to his first-year anniversary on March 13, reflecting an insistent theme of his young pontificate: Bishops are to lead by serving, not dominating. Hierarchical “careerism” is “a form of cancer,” Francis has said, comparing bishops who strut about in church finery to “peacocks.” Instead, he wants pastors who act as shepherds and who “smell of the sheep.” He does not want “airport bishops” who buzz around the world padding their resumes and preaching a doctrinaire gospel while living the good life. “Little monsters,” he calls such clerics.

While more than a few of the Vatican’s old guard find Francis’ predication “annoying,” as one put it privately, they nonetheless acknowledge that he includes himself in his critique. “I am a sinner,” as Francis put in a lengthy interview last summer. “This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.” And in his landmark exhortation published last November, he harped on the need for the conversion of the church: “Since I am called to put into practice what I ask of others, I too must think about a conversion of the papacy.”

As potent and attractive as those words are, church insiders say Francis first needs time — years, not months — to appoint bishops who buy into his vision. That’s not to discount the fact that many bishops have been moved by his exhortations, and others are adjusting their behavior accordingly.

Pointing out Spiritual Narcissism as a certain malaise in the Church that makes it sick, the pope refers to some practical applications of the following thesis:

- When theologians and academicians redefine faith and morals according to their own desires (chiefly, in our day, through the cancer of Modernism), they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When priests alter the liturgy to suit their tastes or fail to teach the fullness of Catholic doctrine, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.

Currently, through his latest book, *The Fix: How Addiction Is Taking Over Your World*, we have a clear idea of what sort of Pope has taken over the Catholic Church. His Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelic Gaudium* – the Joy of the Gospel – challenges Catholics to reject a life of comfort and move into direct contact with the poor as a matter of great urgency. It tells them that the Church has become lazy, even without realising it. It says that traditional styles of worship are not necessarily suitable for newly evangelised non-Western people, or the modern world in general; and, in a passage that will truly trouble some conservatives, it raises the possibility that non-Christian religions are performing God’s work, enriching souls albeit imperfectly. At the heart of the document, lies a revelation of papal mission. Francis is saying:

I made it very clear when I was in Buenos Aires what sort of bishop I was, and now I’m telling you that I am still that sort of bishop: Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a

community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. (Mk 6:37).

Far less certain is how long it will take Francis to implement the transformation he has started, and whether it will endure. "I'm firmly convinced we are at the dawn of a new era in the church," said Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, who heads the "kitchen Cabinet" of eight cardinals that Francis handpicked to advise him.

Francis could end up being nothing more than an inspiring role model, an object of great affection and even devotion but one whose impact disappears when he leaves the scene. One point in Francis' favor is that nothing succeeds like success. Now that the hierarchy has seen how popular Francis has been, even those who disagree with him don't want to go back to the bad old days of constantly playing defence on a range of issues. In his latest urging towards the people of all religions, Pope Francis has made clear his belief that there is no need to call others to convert to the one true faith as it can be found in the Holy Catholic Church alone. He maintains that religious diversity, with all of its contradictory and irreconcilable doctrines, is a gift to be celebrated. The pope has only nice views about atheists and said that atheists also should be seen as good people if they do good.

The new pope's influence has been dubbed the "Francis effect". As one commentator puts it: "But it helps people understand that God is a presence in the world in which we live." Some prominent quotes of Pope Francis are reproduced below:

- "Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape. . . . Today's economic mechanisms promote inordinate consumption, yet it is evident that unbridled consumerism combined with inequality proves doubly damaging to the social fabric. Inequality eventually engenders violence. This recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve. . . . Inequality is the root of social ills".
- "The two great aims of industrialism — replacement of people by technology and concentration of wealth into the hands of a small plutocracy — seem close to fulfillment. . . . Corporate industrialism itself has exposed the falsehood that it . . . ever has given precedence to the common good. No amount of fiddling with capitalism to regulate and humanize it . . . can for long disguise this failure. The evidences of it are everywhere: eroded, wasted, or degraded soils . . . whole landscapes defaced, gouged, flooded, or blown up; pollution of the whole atmosphere and of the water cycle . . . thoughtless squandering of fossil fuels and fossil waters, of mineable minerals and ores; natural health and beauty replaced by a heartless and sickening ugliness. Perhaps its greatest success is an astounding increase in the destructiveness, and therefore the profitability, of war".
- "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."

The Green Pope: Now, according to a Vatican statement, Pope Francis is working on an encyclical about ecology. Concern for ecology is at the core of Pope Francis' messages that humans are important and we should not undermine their well being by misuse of God's natural gifts to us and that our natural resources should be responsibly managed and used to sustain healthy human lives. The pope has already and repeatedly made between 'concern for the exploited earth and concern for marginalised and exploited people'.

The poor are dear to Pope Francis' heart. Misuse of the environment is also closely related to the issue of poverty. In his annual address to the Vatican's Diplomatic Corps on Greed, war, exploitation and global warming, the pontiff called the exploitation of environmental resources "a threat to peace".

Pope Francis' two predecessors made environmental stewardship part of their message to the world's 1.5 billion Catholics. Pope Francis on March 19 issued a strong appeal for the protection of environment and the defence of the weakest members of society, urging the world to shun, "the omens of destruction and death.....It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about," he said in the homily of his inaugural Mass.

Pope Francis, the former Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Argentina, took his name in honour of St. Francis of Assisi, a symbol of poverty, charity and love of Nature.

Category

- Articles

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admin