Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis listens as Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals, offers best wishes for Christmas on behalf of the cardinals and top officials of the Roman Curia during a gathering Dec. 22, 2022, in the Vatican's Hall of Blessings. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Just months after his election in 2013, Pope Francis announced he would break with 400 years of tradition and would no longer spend summer holidays at Castel Gandolfo, a papal villa outside of Rome, instead preferring to remain at the Vatican and work through the summer months.

In a January 2023 interview with the Associated Press, Francis cited his decision not to move to the summer palace, saying, "Castel Gandolfo was a bit of a court. The court spirit. In June, the court was moving there as from London you go to Scotland, the court. It's that kind of court idea. It's the last absolute court in Europe."

His vision for the papacy, he said, is to "remove all appearance of court and to give it what is really a pastoral service."

As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was already known to have moved out of the archbishop's palace, doing his own cooking and using public transportation.

When he first appeared on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica the night of his election, wearing only a simple white cassock and refusing to don the traditional velvet mozzetta, red shoes and gold pectoral cross for the new pope, Archbishop

Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, Australia, recalled being puzzled.

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As a one who worked in the papal court, in the Secretariat of State under Pope John Paul II, he thought it looked odd. Then Francis asked those in the square to pray for him before giving them his blessing.

"It was clear this was not business as usual," Coleridge told NCR, ahead of Francis' 10-year anniversary. "And it was anything but show biz. One of the things about Francis is the way he has freed himself from the very powerful protocols of the papal court."

The changes over the last decade, Coleridge notes, are more than cosmetic. It's a "dismantling of the papal monarchy" where Catholicism's global leader is shifting the church from what Coleridge describes as a "hierarchical church to a synodal church" and "from a powerful church to a church that is poor and powerless."

"The paradigm shift that we've seen unfolding in these 10 years has been astonishing," he added, "and it's something I never thought I'd see."

New processes for preaching the Gospel

On Oct. 11, 2022, Francis celebrated a Mass marking the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, where he said the 1962-65 council was a moment of "rekindling" the church's outward-facing mission.



People holding lighted candles leave St. Peter's Basilica after Pope Francis celebrated Mass Oct. 11, 2022, to mark the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. (CNS/Vatican Media)

According to Anna Rowlands, a professor of Catholic social thought and practice at Durham University in England, the 10 years of the Francis papacy can be viewed not only as "taking us back to certain key teachings of Vatican II" but as the "embedding of the teaching in the church's practices."

As Vatican II taught, the church cannot be viewed as a monarchical or vertical institution, according to Rowlands. Instead, the council elevated the importance of the entire church.

"And if we really see the church as the people of God, then what we need to be discerning is what the Spirit is doing amongst the people of God and letting that process speak," she told NCR.

Italian theologian Andrea Grillo, who teaches at Rome's Pontifical Atheneum of St. Anselm, concurred.

"Having restored the dynamic side to the Catholic tradition and having overcome a 19th-century model of Catholic vision is the greatest merit of this decade of pontificate," he told NCR, noting that in the last 10 years, Francis has "unlocked" what was blocking the church's reform in a number of key areas, such as liturgy, family life and questions of authority.

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For Rowlands, one of the main projects of the Francis papacy to date is taking the core theological teachings of the council and "turning those teachings into accessible, meaningful processes so that by recovering the teachings and the process, they become the practices of the institution."

"And that's the bit that I think Francis and many others feel has never really happened in terms of the reception of the council," she added.

Archbishop Roberto González of San Juan, Puerto Rico agreed, saying, "Francis is the most important pope to implement the Second Vatican Council."

While González said John Paul II began the initiation of the council, and Pope Benedict XVI's theological writings elevated its importance, Francis has exemplified the implementation of the council with his language, gestures and processes.



Archbishop Roberto González Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico, center right, leads the Palm Sunday procession to the cathedral to celebrate Mass April 14, 2019. (CNS/Octavio Duran)

And for many observers, the two greatest pillars of Francis' reform process are his focus on synodality, which he is using as a vehicle to implement the council's reforms, and his new Vatican constitution, which dramatically expanded the number of top leadership roles lay men and women can hold and reorganized Vatican departments under the central priority of evangelization.

Under the title of *Praedicate Evangelium* ("Preach the Gospel"), the new apostolic constitution was released in March 2022 and took effect in June, overhauling the Vatican's central bureaucracy for the first time in more than 30 years.

Cardinal Arthur Roche, prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, recalled hearing from fellow cardinals who participated in the meetings of cardinals ahead of the 2013 conclave that elected Francis: "The voice that was heard above all the other voices was Cardinal Bergoglio saying we have to stop being introspective and rediscover that the nature of the church is

missionary."

"He [Francis] said that a church that stops moving loses its nature," Roche said in an interview with NCR.

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Not only does the new constitution reform the Roman Curia, it also demands a reform of diocesan curias around the world, Roche said, adding that at the heart of all of the church's structures should be the question: "How do we become more missionary?"

Coleridge also pointed to the constitutional reforms, which, after nine years in the making, emphasize decentralization — stating explicitly that curial offices are at the service of both the pope and the bishops of the world, not above them — and elevate the importance of co-responsibility, including with the laity.

"It may not be a magic bullet, but this is the best attempt you could hope for to shift culture," Coleridge acknowledged. "If it is carried through, it is the best attempt you could hope for to shift not only the culture of the Vatican, but the church around the world."

Synodality takes center stage

At the end of Vatican II, in 1965, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops, where bishops from around the world would gather in Rome every few years to discuss certain major themes in the life of the church.

Francis, however, has shifted it from being an event to a process and a major way of inviting participation from all of the church's members.



Pope Francis tries on a hat presented by Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane during a meeting with Australian bishops at the Vatican June 24, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Synodality, which means "walking together," said Coleridge, has gone from being "some of the bishops, some of the time, to all of the bishops and, in fact, all of the church, all of the time."

"Synodality is maybe the most important thing he has done," said Franciscan Sister of Penance and Christian Charity Katharina Kluitmann of Germany.

Kluitmann, who in 2018 became president of the German Conference of Superiors General, said that synodality responds to two great issues facing the church today: the clergy sexual abuse crisis and how the church communicates its message to the world around it, especially when it has lost its moral credibility.

"Sexual abuse is always an abuse of power," she told NCR. "And communication is the best means against combating that power, but often we don't know how to do it well."

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With synodality, she said, the church is changing the way it communicates about critical issues — so far, Francis has hosted synods on marriage and family life, young people, and the Amazon region and the environment — "but it's more than just content, it changes the style of the way the church operates," with the current ongoing synod process hosting listening sessions with Catholics all over the world to discuss a number of topics once considered taboo in church life.

Senegalese Sr. Anne-Béatrice Faye of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of Castres echoed Kluitmann's observation, noting that synodality allows for a proximity to the people and emphasizes the church's missionary nature.

"The perspective of Pope Francis' pontificate starts from below, from attention to the peripheries," Faye told NCR. "He invites us de facto to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, so that the love of Jesus can reach the whole world."



Pope Francis greets people as he visits the Mother Teresa House in the Tejgaon neighborhood in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Dec. 2, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"Fortunately, the church is discovering the benefits of listening to each other," she added, "in the recognition of our common Christian condition."

While society is increasingly polarized, with different groups closed off from one another, synodality invites listening so that the church does not "lose contact with reality, with people," Roche said.

Ultimately, he said, it is a call for the church to be "an instrument of metanoia, not of paranoia."

"Metanoia opens up, it goes toward God, it goes to others," said the cardinal. "Paranoia is obsessive and closes down and we're locked within ourselves."

The free and future-minded pope

When the bishops from Latin America gathered in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007 — where then-Cardinal Bergoglio served as the lead drafter of its final document —

they wrote that "we are living through a change of epoch, the deepest level of which is cultural."



Residents hold statues of Our Lady of Aparecida as Pope Francis visits the Varginha slum in Rio de Janeiro July 25, 2013, during his weeklong visit to Brazil for World Youth Day. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Individual subjectivity reigns supreme, they lamented, and the market economy and technology, instead of one's relationship with God, had come to define human relationships.

Puerto Rico's González, who attended Aparecida, said this reality is "very much present in the mind and in the mission of Pope Francis."

Argentine theologian Emilce Cuda, who serves as co-secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, said, "In a world trapped with no way out ... a religious leader from the end of the world has managed to bring together a whole

people and motivate them to walk out and cross existential borders."

Francis, said Cuda, is taking the "church beyond its walls."

And for theologian Rowlands, the key to understand what Francis has been doing over the last 10 years and where he might be going — from the synods, to understanding his travels or how he navigates tensions over hot-button culture war issues — is that he is trying to initiate new processes with an emphasis on encounter.



Anna Rowlands speaks at a news conference at the Vatican Oct. 27, 2022, to present the document for the continental phase of the Synod of Bishops on synodality. The document will guide discussions at the regional or continental level in preparation for the synod. (CNS/Junno Arocho Esteves)

"He believes we have become detached, disengaged, yet simultaneously an angry generation," she told NCR. "And he thinks that the only antidote to that virus is encounter and that has to be unmediated, it has to be immediate, face-to-face, small-scale and building to a scale beyond that over time."

For some, this has caused tremendous backlash. The late Australian Cardinal George Pell termed the Francis papacy a "catastrophe" and the synod process a "toxic nightmare."

Francis, however, seems unfazed, responding that "criticism is a human right."

"He's unafraid of conflict," said Rowlands. "While he knows that not all conflicts are good, some will yield fruit and the church must discern the conflicts in a spiritually healthy way."

This has allowed Francis to not be consumed by the Catholic culture wars that have so long galvanized so much debate in the church, she said.

Related: For 10 years, Pope Francis outlasts the conservative resistance

"He's less interested in the question of 'who we are' " — which she said is an "anxious generational question" — and much more interested in asking, "Where is God in the world?"

As for the anxiousness and criticisms, Roche said it's important to remember that Francis is "a reforming pope" and that throughout history, "reforming popes are always in the firing line."

"To change is really a challenge," he acknowledged. "Most people like security."

But Roche is not willing to let those who are resisting the change off the hook.

"If you're not listening to Peter, well then something is very wrong with your Catholicism because he is the universal pastor," Roche said. "He has been chosen by the Holy Spirit. He has the confidence of the church. That's the call of every cardinal. If that's not happening, we're not taking our oath seriously."



Pope Francis prepares to place the red biretta on new English Cardinal Arthur Roche, prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, during a consistory for the creation of 20 new cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Aug. 27, 2022. (CNS/Paul Haring)

At 10 years, Coleridge believes that critical to Francis' authenticity and his success is that "he's unafraid and free."

"There are so many in the church that are very constricted by fear," he lamented.

Where it will all go from here is undetermined and will be left up to the Holy Spirit, he said. But through the pope's personal witness and new processes, Coleridge believes Francis is charting a new course for the Catholic Church.

"Francis is not afraid of the future. It's that sense of moving beyond fear and the sense that we don't really have too many other options," Coleridge continued. "Either we become the kind of church that the Spirit is calling us to be, or we will become this angry, irrelevant, shrinking institution."

"Each generation has to possess and retrieve the apostolic tradition in new and creative ways," he said. "It's not just a package we hand on, it's a process where each generation has to make the tradition its own that shows the brilliance of the Gospel and the truth of Jesus."

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.
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