Opinion
Editorial



Pope Francis opens the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica to inaugurate the Jubilee Year of Mercy at the Vatican in this Dec. 8, 2015, file photo. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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March 13, 2023

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Before the world's cardinals entered into conclave in March 2013 to elect a successor to Pope Benedict XVI, they had a series of meetings together at the Vatican to discuss what the 1.3-billion-member Catholic Church might need most from its next leader.



The late Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino would later say that the most impactful moment in the meeting came when one Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio said a few brief words, calling for a church "which evangelizes and goes out of herself."

Bergoglio, then 76 years old and preparing to retire as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, used a particularly evocative image.

Ortega recalled the full phrasing as: "In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks. Obviously, the text refers to his knocking from the outside in order to enter, but I think about the times in which Jesus knocks from within so that we will let him come out."



Pope Francis opens the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica to inaugurate the Jubilee Year of Mercy Dec. 8, 2015, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In more than a few ways, everything that would follow in the next 10 years can be traced to that one image. Jesus, locked inside, wanting to get out. And now a new pope, trying to open the door.

Looking back from 2023, it is hard even to conjure up the shape of the church at the eve of that conclave in 2013.

It was a church of secret investigations of theologians. Of unjustified crackdowns on the work of U.S. women religious. Of the atrophy of the vision of the Second Vatican Council, and the comeback of the pre-conciliar Latin Mass. Of bishop after bishop being found to have covered up sexual abuse or misconduct, and being allowed to stay in office.

It was a church before the call to create a "culture of encounter." Before the vision of a community that is "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets." Before the declaration of "no concession" to those who would walk back Vatican II reforms. Before prioritizing the "ecological commitments which stem from our convictions." Before mandatory reporting of suspicion of abuse or cover-up, worldwide.

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Even in that briefest of summaries, the arc of Pope Francis' achievements over the past 10 years becomes clear. The former Cardinal Bergoglio has changed the church in substantial ways. His papacy, as former President Barack Obama once said, has been transformative.

In our series marking "10 Years with Pope Francis," we have had several prominent figures trace some of the most important aspects of this papacy.

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Particularly moving is the account of Juan Carlos Cruz Chellew, a Chilean abuse survivor whose meeting with Francis in 2018 likely shifted the direction of the pope's efforts with regards to clergy sexual abuse.

Also instructive is theologian Richard Gaillardetz's wide overview of this pope's efforts at reforming the church. Like Bergoglio before the conclave, he, too, uses a metaphor of a door to frame Francis' achievements. Francis, Gaillardetz says, has "seeded our ecclesial imaginations" with "stirring theological rhetoric," but has been reluctant to step through the door of wider church reform.

A knock at the door. Turning the handle. Passing through yourself, or letting someone else by. The imagery is suggestive. But what to make now of a papacy entering its 11th year? Is the door thrown open? Who is passing through?

Related: Pope Francis has opened the door for real church reform, but hasn't stepped through

Looking ahead, it is clear that much of whatever time remains of this papacy is now wound up in the ongoing process for the Synod of Bishops. Francis is clearly focused on the importance of the process itself — the three-year effort to consult Catholics at every level about what the church needs most now, and to throw open the global dialogue. As he told the 2014 synod on family life: "Let no one say: 'This you cannot say.' " That sentiment alone is an incredible development forward from the church of 2013.



Pope Francis meets with cardinals from around the world Aug. 30, 2022, at the Vatican. The meeting was to reflect on the apostolic constitution Praedicate Evangelium ("Preach the Gospel") on the reform of the Roman Curia. (CNS/Vatican Media)

But here is where we come to the "however." If after three years of preparation and two back-to-back Synods of Bishops in Rome in 2023 and 2024, there is little sense of movement on more substantial changes, one needs no sense of imagination to think of the disappointment of U.S. and other church-reform-minded Catholics.

It is beyond time in particular for women to be more concretely included in church governance. (Francis' 2022 reform of the Vatican bureaucracy makes this a clear possibility, but the pope is yet to put it into practice). It is also beyond time to concretize structures for better inclusion and leadership of lay Catholics at just about every level of church life. Despite Francis' good words, the culture of clericalism remains rampant throughout the institution.

Jesus knocked. Francis opened the door. It's time to step through.

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

A version of this story appeared in the **March 17-30, 2023** print issue under the headline: It's time to step through the door Francis has opened.