Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis attends his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Dec. 14, 2022. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)



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When Pope Francis was elected 10 years ago, I was sitting in front of a BBC camera preparing to be interviewed and uttered a word I cannot print in my column. Luckily, my mic had not been turned on. All I knew about Jorge Bergoglio was that my friends in Latin America, liberation theologians and Jesuits, did not like him, calling him conservative and authoritarian.

I was not alone in my ignorance. George Weigel, the conservative Catholic commentator and biographer of Pope John Paul II, opined in a column shortly after Francis' election that the sole disappointment in John Paul and Pope Benedict XVI for many cardinals was that these popes had not reformed the Jesuits. According to Weigel, the cardinals had decided that the only way to reform the Jesuits was to elect a conservative one as pope.

Weigel claimed to know the mind of Bergoglio because he had spent time talking with him in Buenos Aires about the Jesuits and the church. My guess is that Weigel did most of the talking while Bergoglio sat poker faced, leading Weigel to think that the archbishop agreed with everything he said.

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Within a couple of weeks, we learned how wrong we both were. The cardinals had elected as pope a man who would change the style of being pope, attack clericalism,

empower the laity, open the church to conversation and debate and change the pastoral and public priorities of the church.

Although he did not change doctrine, he was revolutionary in every other way.

The stylistic change was immediately evident when, from the balcony of St. Peter's, Francis, in simple dress, greeted the people informally and asked them to pray over him before he blessed them.

His simple style was linked to a full-throated attack on clericalism. He told cardinals and bishops not to act like princes. Leadership means service, he told them. Shepherds should smell like their sheep. Clergy were to be "gentle, patient and merciful" with an "outward simplicity and austerity of life."

Although Francis became known for his compassion and kindness, this did not apply to the clergy, with whom he could be very tough. Here he sounded like the authoritarian director of novices and Jesuit provincial that he once was. This became especially true in the manner he removed bishops who had not dealt forthrightly with sexual abuse.

Linked to this attack on clericalism was his desire to empower the laity. Do we give the laity "the freedom to continue discerning, in a way befitting their growth as disciples, the mission which the Lord has entrusted to them?" he asked. "Do we support them and accompany them, overcoming the temptation to manipulate them or infantilize them?"



Pope Francis, left, watches the unveiling of the new sculpture "Angels Unawares" on the occasion of the Migrant and Refugee World Day, in St. Peter’s Square, at the Vatican, on Sept. 29, 2019. (Vincenzo Pinto/Pool Photo via AP)

Francis also opened up the church to conversation and debate in a way that had not been seen in the church since the Second Vatican Council. Fearing the church had become too chaotic, John Paul had used Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to clamp down on priests and theologians who wanted to continue discussing doctrinal issues in the wake of Vatican II.

Francis, on the other hand, held that "open and fraternal debate makes theological and pastoral thought grow. That doesn't frighten me. What's more, I look for it." This freed theologians to talk about how the church could present the gospel message in a way that is understandable in the 21st century.

Francis was also critical of the curia's control over what happened at the synod of bishops. He recalled being told what could and could not be discussed at a synod he was involved in leading. The synods had become not forums for advising the pope

but places for participants to show their loyalty to the pontiff and the Vatican.

At his first synod as pope, he told the participants, "Speak clearly. Let no one say, 'This can't be said.' … Everything we feel must be said, with parrhesia (boldness)." He used the Greek word "parrhesia" describing how St. Paul addressed St. Peter at what could be called the first synod in Jerusalem, when the disciples discussed the obligation of Gentile Christians to follow traditional Jewish practices.

In other words, Francis was telling the synod participants, "treat me the way St. Paul treated St. Peter."

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Ironically, conservatives used this new freedom to attack the pope for allowing free debate. Those who had labeled as dissenters anyone who questioned the actions or teachings of John Paul and Benedict now became vocal in their dissent. "Loyalists" became rebels, showing that their true loyalty was not to the papacy but to their own opinions.

Francis also changed the pastoral priorities of the church. He wanted a poor church for the poor, one that would serve, accompany and defend the poor. He described the church as a field hospital for the wounded, not country club for the rich and beautiful. His stress was on compassion, mercy and reconciliation.

He felt that the church's message was too complicated. "We lose people because they don't understand what we are saying, because we have forgotten the language of simplicity," he said.

And while others blamed the faithful or the culture for the exodus from the church, Francis feared that people saw the church as "too weak, … distant from their needs, … cold, … caught up with itself, … a prisoner of its own rigid formulas, … a relic of the past, unfit for new questions."

For Francis, the first words of evangelization are about God's love and compassion. We should preach the gospel, not the catechism or a rule book. As the Gospel of Matthew teaches us, living the faith (orthopraxis) is more important than how we

talk about faith (orthodoxy).



Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, left, meets with Pope Francis in Najaf, Iraq, on March 6, 2021. (Courtesy of Office of the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani)

Francis also changed the public priorities of the church. In an interview during his first year in office, he said he would not obsess over abortion, same-sex marriage and birth control since everyone knows what the church teaches on these topics.

Rather he attacked unregulated capitalism and globalization. He criticized war and called for peace. In words and actions he defended migrants, refugees and the marginalized. He continued and advanced the work of John Paul in interreligious dialogue, meeting and issuing joint statements with the top Shia leader in Iraq and the top Sunni leader in Egypt.

Finally, he wholeheartedly embraced the environmental movement and called on the church and the world to deal with global warming.

Although I love and support Francis, he is not perfect. His language about women drives First World feminists nuts. One might call him a Third World feminist because he is concerned about human trafficking and poverty, not language. He will promote women to positions of power in the church bureaucracy, but will not ordain them priests.

Nor has he completed the work of curial reform. Rather than firing people who are incompetent or disloyal, he calls them to conversion. The church is terrible at human resource management. It tends to be either authoritarian or too gentle, paternalistic or bureaucratic.

Nor has he been willing to spend the money on the lay expertise necessary to reform Vatican finances. Cleaning up the Vatican bank cost over a million dollars in accounting fees. Cleaning up the rest of the Vatican finances will have similar costs. Forensic accountants are not cheap.

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Although Francis is 86, his papacy is not over. The Synod on Synodality is on track to meet in October this year and again next year. For Francis, I believe, the synodal process is more important than any decisions that come out of the synod. His hope is that the process will transform the church into a synodal church. This will be disappointing for progressive Catholics who want results: married priests, women priests and changes in church teaching on sex and gender.

Francis is not a miracle worker. Because he has not won over large numbers of bishops and clergy to his vision for the church, his impact has been limited. People love Francis, but they often do not see him in those leading their parishes or dioceses.

As Francis continues to the end of his papacy, he is likely to be attacked from the right and the left. Conservatives are already plotting to make sure there is a return to something like the papacies of Benedict and John Paul. There are even rumors that "opposition research" is being done to dig up dirt on cardinals who might

continue down Francis' path.

And yet the odds are still in favor of continuity between this pope and the next; Francis has already appointed two-thirds of the cardinal electors and still has time to appoint more.

No matter who is elected, the impact of Francis on the papacy will be long lasting. Like Vatican II, he has opened windows that are difficult to close.