Culture

Pope Francis is interviewed at the Vatican for "Stories of a Generation," a Netflix series based

Pope Francis is interviewed at the Vatican for "Stories of a Generation," a Netflix series based on the pope's book, "Sharing the Wisdom of Time." (CNS/Vatican Media/Simone Risoluti)



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The 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' election is an opportunity to consider his filmography. These films and series create a cinematic canon, if you will, of Francis' papacy. They extend his teaching and influence across ages, cultures and history and transcend physical borders that people build to reach and transform lives and hearts with the Gospel message.

"Pope Francis: A Man of His Word" (2018), by the Palme d'Or award-winning German director Wim Wenders, is the first of three recent documentaries that feature the pope's travels and his messages of care for those on the periphery, social justice, God's mercy and the environment.

Wenders often lets the pope speak directly to the camera, which he does in a reflective tone, giving the audience the opportunity to look into the pope's eyes as if having a conversation with him. Personally, I found the 96- minute film beautifully

produced but rather bland. It is available on Netflix.

Pope Francis greets Evgeny Afineevsky, a documentary filmmaker, at his general audience at

Pope Francis greets Evgeny Afineevsky, a documentary filmmaker, at his general audience at the Vatican in this Aug. 28, 2019, photo. (CNS/Vatican Media via Evgeny Afineevsky)

"Francesco" (2020) is by the Oscar-nominated Russian Israeli U.S.-based director Evgeny Afineevsky. Released during the pandemic, the film combines a biographical narrative of Francis with the pope's journeys, talks and encounters with individuals and families where he addresses issues of refugees, war, migrants, family, climate change, social injustice, war, racism, those who identify as LGBTQ and the clergy sex abuse crisis. When Francis speaks to the camera, he is warm and engaging.

The film was criticized, however, for mixing and matching non-broadcast archival and broadcast segments of an interview with a Mexican journalist about his stance on same-sex marriage and unions, as NCR reported at the time. "Francesco" covers a broader range of themes and delves into more topics than any other documentary to date. At two hours, it does run long. (In full disclosure, I am credited as an associate producer on the film.)

"Francesco" was featured as one of the Docs to Watch at the 2021 SCAD Savannah Film Festival. Streaming on Discovery+ and accessible at francescofilm.com.

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"In Viaggio: The Travels of Pope Francis" (2022), by Italian-American director Gianfranco Rosi, premiered out of competition at the 2022 Venice Film Festival. It is an 85-minute travelogue of 35 journeys made by Francis that does not have a voice-over narration but allows the pope or others to address the audience directly on the pope's key themes of peace, migration, the environment and social justice. These comments move the film along in a contemplative pace. The style is more observational than the others. Some critics view the film as balanced in its perspective.

"In Viaggio" is in theaters now.

Anthony Hopkins portrays retired Pope Benedict XVI and Jonathan Pryce portrays Pope Franci

Anthony Hopkins portrays retired Pope Benedict XVI and Jonathan Pryce portrays Pope Francis in a scene from the movie "The Two Popes." (CNS/Courtesy of Netflix/Peter Mountain)

"The Two Popes" (2019) features a series of imagined encounters between the late Pope Benedict XVI and soon to be Benedict's successor, Cardinal Jorge Bergolio. Unlike the above three films, this one did not have — nor did the filmmakers seek — the cooperation of the Vatican. Here, Benedict is played by Anthony Hopkins and Francis by Jonathan Pryce. I appreciated the film's focus on the personalities and interactions between the two men who helmed and would helm the Catholic Church.

In general, audiences and critics liked "The Two Popes," though some negative comments noted that the film simplified complex moral and ecclesial issues, preferred Francis over Benedict and made light of serious matters. The biggest complaint I heard was that people expected a documentary and were disappointed that they instead got a combination drama-comedy-biography — even though it was never promoted as a documentary. The film was widely nominated and won several awards. It is now streaming on Netflix.

"Stories of a Generation — with Pope Francis" (2021), a four-part series from Netflix, is inspiring, informative, deeply human and filled with heart. It takes four themes — love, dream, struggle and work — which several people age 70 and over speak to about what each means to them. In addition to some of Francis' best sayings about growing older and caring for the aging are insights from Martin Scorsese (interviewed by his daughter Francesca), Jane Goodall and everyday people from many countries and cultures. I loved it.

If I were going to use any of these films about Francis with groups, I would use "In Viaggio" for general audiences because it is recent and short, and "Francesco" for groups that have the time to watch it and really want to delve into the issues Francis cares about.

In keeping with the spirit of new A.I. language modules, I asked ChatGPT "Does the Vatican have an archive of all the films made about the popes?"

ChatGPT answered that it does not but that "there are several organizations and archives around the world that do collect and preserve films related to the papacy,

including the Library of Congress in the United States, the British Film Institute, and the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. Some of these archives may have copies of films related to the popes that are not available in the Vatican's collection."

The Vatican's Film Archive does not contradict this information!