Vatican

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Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio holds the hands of a woman and girl during Holy Thursday Mass in 2008 at a church in a poor section of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Bergoglio was later elected pope March 13, 2013, becoming the first pope to take the name of St. Francis of Assisi. (CNS/Reuters/Enrique Garcia Medina)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis, a transformative figure who revitalized the hopes of millions of Catholics after decades of scandal, stagnation and increasing social irrelevancy for the global church, died on April 21 after a prolonged battle with double pneumonia, for which he was hospitalized for five weeks before returning to the Vatican on March 23.

The Vatican said that his time of death was 7:35 a.m, Central European time, on Easter Monday.

Read more: DEATH OF TRAILBLAZING POPE LEAVES THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AT A CROSSROADS

Elected as pope on March 13, 2013, Francis took the helm of the global church after a period of unexpected and seismic change. Pope Benedict XVI, who had reigned for eight years, had not died but become the first pontiff in at least six centuries to resign the papacy.

The new pontiff, born in Argentina in 1936 as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, became the first in history from the Western Hemisphere.



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he arrives for his general audience in St. Peter's Square Oct. 5, 2022, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

He was also the first Jesuit pope and the first to take the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the Italian *poveretto* who in the 13th century founded a "back to the basics" movement within Christianity: eschewing the church's late medieval wealth and influence in favor of caring for those in need, taking care of the environment and pursuing dialogue with other religions.

The Argentine pope clearly drew inspiration from his chosen Italian namesake. Early actions from the new leader of the Catholic Church included returning to the hotel he had booked for the conclave of cardinals to pay his bill, spurning the Vatican's opulent Apostolic Palace for a room instead in the city-state's small guesthouse, and calling for a church that was "bruised" and in the streets.

Within months, it was clear this new pope also intended to be a church reformer. He called for a global gathering of Catholic bishops, known as a synod, to discuss contentious family life issues, including divorce and remarriage and ministry to LGBTQ people. Asked by journalists about rumors of a gay priest working at the Vatican, he responded: "Who am I to judge?" And he would later create the Vatican's first-ever high-level commissions to respond to clergy sexual abuse and to consider the possibility of women serving in ordained Catholic ministry.

Francis' first encyclical authored on his own, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," called on the world to take action to combat climate change. With it, he became a global leader on ecological issues and advanced the fledgling ecological initiatives begun under Benedict and pushed the church to more fully embrace its own teachings on care for creation.

Newark Cardinal Joseph Tobin, the third of only six Americans Francis elevated to the cardinalate, equated the pope's efforts at reforming the church to a captain at the rudder of a bulk ore carrier on one of the Great Lakes.

"They're massive ships, and they can't turn on a dime," Tobin told NCR in 2021.



Pope Francis listens to a question from a journalist on his flight heading back to Rome July 28, 2013. The pope answered questions from 21 journalists over a period of 80 minutes on his return from Brazil. (CNS/pool via Reuters)

Francis, said the cardinal, knew that "the important thing is to keep your hand on the rudder. Because if you don't keep the pressure on, it will never turn."

Jesuit Fr. John O'Malley, the late eminent church historian who wrote extensively on the changes in Catholicism since the reforms of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, credited Francis for reopening conversations that emerged at that event but were then squashed during the largely regressive papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Of the four popes since the council, O'Malley told NCR in 2021, Francis was "the one who had the best grasp of what the council was trying to do."

O'Malley pointed to the pope's six Synods of Bishops that addressed issues such as women's roles in the church and the possibility of married Catholic priests as crucial to Francis' legacy.

"He not only allowed a discussion, but actually promoted a discussion — insisted on a discussion," O'Malley said. "This was not done by his predecessors … or, certainly, not in the same way and to the same degree."

A disappointment for many Catholics was Francis' relatively slow movement on opening leadership roles for women in the church. Although he made strides later in his papacy — opening all Vatican positions, including top posts, to women and allowing lay men and women to vote at synod meetings — Francis leaves the Vatican a largely clerical, and male, environment.



Pope Francis greets staff members of the Vatican newspaper's monthly insert dedicated to women during an audience March 4 at the Vatican. To the pope's left stands Andrea Monda, director of the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano. The newspaper's supplement, "Women, church, world," was launched in May in 2012. The pope praised and encouraged the staff members in their work, saying "it is not a kind of clerical feminism of the pope, no! It is opening the door to a reality, a reflection that goes deeper." (CNS/Vatican Media)

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a theologian at Manhattan College, said that while Francis had led "an extraordinarily amazing papacy," he did not fulfill hopes that he might empower women more. While Francis rejected calls to ordain women as priests, he also dashed the hopes of those expecting him to restore the female diaconate.

"As progressive of a papacy as it was and as much as it embraced the vision of the council, he did not do for women as much as we had hoped," she said.

With Francis' death, the Vatican and the world must now prepare for something not seen in two decades: the funeral of a reigning pontiff, expected to include high pomp, circumstance and the presence of a range of world leaders; and a conclave of cardinals to elect his successor.

Two-thirds of the 135 cardinals now readying to gather in that conclave were selected by Francis.

In the group are 10 Americans, including six appointed by Francis: Tobin, Chicago's Blase Cupich, Washington, D.C.'s Wilton Gregory, San Diego's Robert McElroy, Robert Prevost, who heads the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops, and Kevin Farrell, who as the Catholic Church's camerlengo is now also temporarily leading the Vatican until a new pope is chosen.



Pope Francis places a red biretta on then-new U.S. Cardinal Kevin Farrell during a consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this Nov. 19, 2016, file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

'Vatican II was coming back'

For American Catholics who had lived through the era of the Second Vatican Council (which largely promised reform, decentralization and more roles for the laity) and then the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI (which widely returned to a staid, Vatican-centric and thoroughly doctrinal view of Catholicism), Francis was almost immediately a shock.

Christopher Bellitto, an historian at Kean University in New Jersey who has written histories of the papacy and of several church councils, said it was a bit like going "back to the future."

"A lot of people whose lives had been lit by Vatican II felt that the council had been taken away from them," said Bellitto. "And that at the end of their lives, Vatican II was coming back."

Richard Gaillardetz, the late theologian at Boston College who wrote extensively on issues of authority in the church, said the council would be an "indispensable reference point" for thinking about Francis' papacy.



Pope Francis greets retired Pope Benedict XVI during an encounter for the elderly in St. Peter's Square Sept. 28, 2014, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"Both of Francis' predecessors just blatantly ignored key elements of the council," said Gaillardetz, who was also a former president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Gaillardetz, who spoke to NCR before his own death in 2023, referred to the work of German theologian Hermann Pottmeyer, who has suggested that the council built

the pillars of a building but not the dome or roof that might connect them.

"Francis, more than any pope, has helped to pull the various pillars together into a much more coherent reading of the council," said Gaillardetz.

One early indication that Francis' views aligned with those of the council was his October 2013 calling of two Synods of Bishops focused on the church's family life teachings. The synods were later held in 2014 and 2015.

Immediately signaling a far greater sense of openness to discussion than previous synods, which had largely been inconsequential, the Vatican tasked national bishops' conferences around the world with conducting a wide-ranging poll of Catholics asking for their opinions on church teachings on contraception, same-sex marriage and divorce.

A second major indication of Francis' views came with the November 2013 release of his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), which was peppered with themes taken from the council documents that later became hallmarks of the papacy.

Among some of the now iconic language:

- A call for the church not to be "shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges";
- Joking remarks that the church cannot be "a tollhouse," nor the confessional "a torture chamber";
- Emphasis on the Eucharist as "not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak";
- Calls for a "conversion of the papacy," and a "sound 'decentralization' " of church structures.

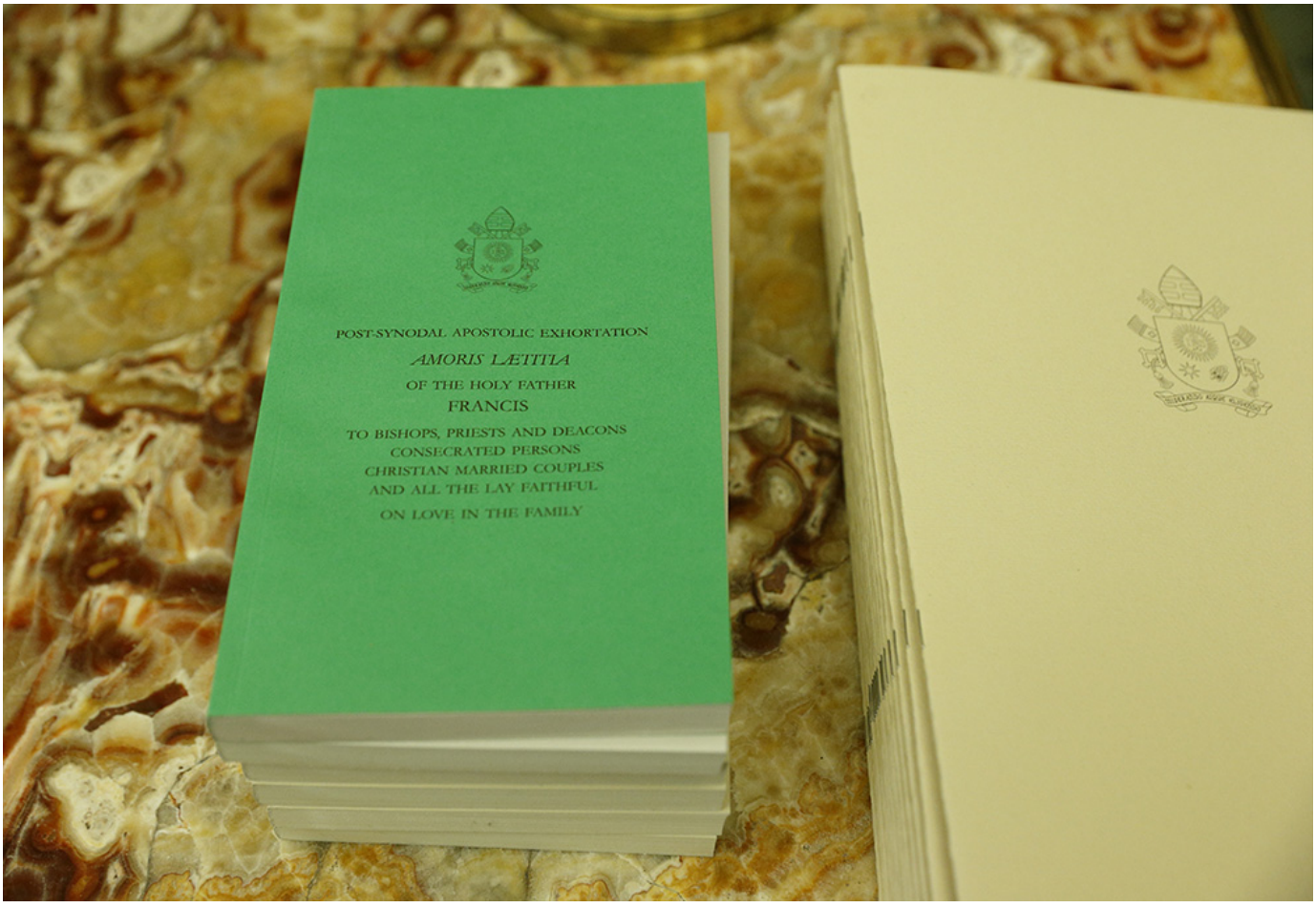
Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), written in response to the 2014 and 2015 synods, confirmed for many that the Catholic Church under his leadership had changed radically.

The pope asked the world's Catholic clergy to let their lives become "wonderfully complicated" by recognizing God's grace at work in the difficult and sometimes unconventional situations families and marriages face.

Francis also told Catholic bishops and priests they could no longer make blanket moral determinations about so-called "irregular" situations such as divorce and remarriage. In a significant shift of teaching, the pope even suggested in a footnote that some who had been remarried without receiving annulments might be able to receive Communion.

Massimo Faggioli, a theologian and church historian at Villanova University, said that in terms of Francis' accomplishments as pope, *Amoris Laetitia* was "the big one."

"He really did something big there and moved something forward," said Faggioli, an Italian who emerged as a sought-after commentator throughout Francis' papacy.



Copies of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), are pictured Jan. 16, 2017, on a table at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

But while *Amoris* raised hopes for church reforms, both an October 2019 synod focused specifically on the church's ministry in the nine-nation Amazon region and the October 2023 and 2024 synods on synodality appeared to temper them

somewhat.

Although the 185 voting members at the Amazon synod had specifically requested that the pope allow for the priestly ordination of married men in their territories to address a severe lack of ministers there, Francis' response to them, made in February 2020, did not even mention the request.

Instead, in the apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* ("Beloved Amazon"), Francis focused primarily on calling the church in the region to continue its struggle against destructive development taking part in one of the world's most biodiverse areas. A similar pattern occurred in 2024, when the pope curtailed the synod's openness toward women deacons, saying the time was not "mature."

Tobin, who was not one of the members of the Amazon synod, said he thought the pope had simply discerned that it was not right to accept the bishops' request.

The cardinal said he had recently written to the pope about a delicate matter he was facing in the Archdiocese of Newark and got a short, handwritten reply.

"Tobin, you and I are simply altar servers of the Holy Spirit," the cardinal said the pope wrote. The pontiff continued: "What does it mean? We listen, we pray, we remain close to the people of God, we discern and we take decisions without fear."

"Somewhere in those five actions … the decision wasn't mature," Tobin suggested of the Amazon synod request.



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, during a meeting with U.S. bishops at the Vatican in this Nov. 28, 2019, file photo. (CNS/Vatican Media)

O'Malley suggested that Francis had learned from some of the negative response to *Amoris* from conservative elements in the church that "he can't shake up things too quickly and too radically."

"This is the Catholic Church," said the historian. "It moves slowly. It has to move slowly. And seeds are sown. And what's a shock to one generation, two generations later becomes: 'What was the delay all about?' "

Gaillardetz said that while Francis might not have achieved all the reforms theologians would have hoped for, "history could well see him as inaugurating far more significant institutional reforms than I think he is being given credit for."

The theologian said Francis had helped the church shift from a hierarchical model "that presupposed a fairly rigid, lay-clergy distinction" toward "a listening church,

where the first responsibility of clergy … is to listen, to be attentive to the Spirit."

"I think that's a big and dramatic change over his predecessors," said Gaillardetz. "Just a thorough reimagining of what it means to think of the magisterium."

As the cardinals come to Rome to gather in conclave to elect Francis' successor, Bellitto suggested that their considerations may be a bit like those of the cardinals who gathered in 1963 to elect a successor for John XXIII, who had opened the Second Vatican Council.

"Just as in the conclave of 1963 there was one question, 'Will Vatican II continue?' I think that in the conclave that follows Francis, the one question will be, 'Do we continue with his agenda or not?' " said the historian.

"I think the answer is going to be, 'Yes, we continue with this agenda, but we modulate it,' " he said.

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Clergy abuse: Early stumbles, later reforms

An area where Francis had a decided impact on Catholic Church policy was in the handling of clergy abuse cases, especially in the later years of his pontificate.

In 2019 and 2020, Francis approved the first overarching child protection policy for Vatican City State, mandated for the first time that all global Catholic clergy and religious must report suspicions of abuse or cover-up, and directed bishops to investigate allegations even if they at first appear unfounded.

The centerpiece of the reforms was the 2019 apostolic letter *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* ("You are the light of the world"), which established a new global system for the evaluation of reports of abuse or cover-up by bishops that involves the empowering of archbishops to conduct investigations of prelates in their local regions. The law was made permanent in 2023.

Dominican Fr. Thomas Doyle, a noted canon and civil lawyer widely known for his advocacy and work on behalf of abuse survivors, told NCR his overall appraisal of Francis' record on abuse would be "very positive."

"He's taken some steps that we have been screaming about for years," said Doyle, referring to decades of lobbying by himself and advocacy groups like the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "He's instituted some legislation that is potentially very effective."

In December 2019 Francis also abolished the church's practice of imposing strict confidentiality rules on the Vatican's legal proceedings in clergy abuse cases. The reform, which did away with what is known as the "pontifical secret" for abuse cases, was long sought by Doyle and other advocates.

The Dominican said that move was "powerful and effective" and was already having an impact in U.S. lawsuits involving church authorities, as plaintiffs can now more easily argue for release of incriminating documents that were once considered confidential.

Most of Francis' 2019 and 2020 reforms came as the result of an unprecedented summit on clergy abuse for the presidents of the world's conferences of Catholic bishops, which the pope held at the Vatican in February 2019 in the wake of allegations against former cardinal Theodore McCarrick.

The pontiff's initial efforts to address the clergy abuse crisis were not wholly successful. Although he created a first-of-its-kind papal commission to advise him on the issue in March 2014, the group struggled for years to get Vatican officials to put its policy recommendations in place.



Clerical abuse survivor Marie Collins is seen at the World Meeting of Families Aug. 24, 2018, in Dublin, Ireland. (CNS/Reuters/Clodagh Kilcoyne)

Three of the group's original 17 appointees eventually resigned, including respected Irish abuse survivor Marie Collins in March 2017. In a statement to NCR at the time, Collins said she decided to leave after losing hope that Vatican officials would cooperate with the commission's work.

Francis reconfigured the group in February 2018, reappointing eight of the remaining original members and adding nine others. Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley has served as the head of both iterations of the commission.

The group experienced another shock in March 2023, when longtime member and papal adviser Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner also resigned and launched a series of searing criticisms against the organization's leadership and its alleged lack of transparency.

Although Collins now credits Francis for his later series of reforms and said she thinks the pontiff was "very sincere in his intentions" in confronting clergy abuse,

she told NCR he sometimes "balked at grasping the nettle and making the fundamental changes that were necessary."

"I think over time, he didn't live up to the expectations," said Collins. "His being in the position he was in has not changed things that should have been changed."

One issue the Irish survivor pointed to was the fact that while *Vos Estis* allows for Catholic officials to report allegations of abuse to civil authorities, it does not mandate they do so in every circumstance.

Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna, the Vatican's leading abuse investigator and a close adviser to Francis, said at the time of the creation of the new law that such reporting was not made obligatory because of the ways different cultures handle sexual abuse issues.

Some credit Francis' later efforts on abuse issues to his experience during his visit to Chile in January 2018, where the usual crowds greeting the pope were underwhelming and he was met at several events by protesters angry over his 2015 appointment of a bishop accused of covering up abuse.

The pontiff also attracted unusually acrimonious media coverage after he told reporters during the visit that the charges against that bishop, Juan Barros Madrid, were "calumny." Barros had been accused of witnessing crimes perpetrated by the notorious abuser Fr. Fernando Karadima in the 1980s and '90s.

Days after returning to Rome, Francis sent Scicluna to Chile to interview Karadima survivors and take their testimony about Barros.

In April 2018, the pontiff admitted in a letter to the Chilean bishops that he had made "serious mistakes" in his handling of abuse cases in their country and said he felt "pain and shame" over his actions.

In late April of that year, Francis met at the Vatican with three of Karadima's victims: Juan Carlos Cruz, James Hamilton and Jose Andres Murillo. Two weeks later, he called all of Chile's bishops to Rome, and nearly all 34 of them offered their resignations to him. Francis accepted Barros' resignation that June, and half a dozen more throughout the rest of 2018. The pope removed Karadima from the priesthood in September 2018.



Juan Carlos Cruz at a 2019 panel discussion on clergy sex abuse at the University of Notre Dame (CNS/University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)

Abuse survivor Cruz said that he and Francis had spent some three hours together during their first meeting and he "never, never saw someone be so contrite" about making a mistake. The Chilean would later travel to Rome to meet with the pope on several other occasions.

Cruz told NCR that Francis had "strengthened a faith that I never wanted to lose and that I was in such jeopardy of losing."

"I don't have the words to say how much he's changed my life," the survivor said of the pope.

Tobin portrayed Francis' experience in Chile as a catalyst for his later actions on clergy abuse. "He was humble enough to admit … when he's wrong," said the cardinal, "and then take action."

"Not simply the church, but most institutions have or will eventually come to a deeper understanding of … the pervasive nature of sexual abuse of minors and change their minds," said Tobin. "And [we] were seeing a pope do that in real time."

Krysten Winter-Green, another member of Francis' original abuse commission, said she thought the pope had handled clergy sexual abuse "as best he could" given the opposition of some Vatican officials against his efforts.

Winter-Green, a New Zealander who lives in the U.S. and provides consulting services to dioceses and religious congregations, cited the "entitlement posture of clerics" and "a patriarchal prism that throttles transparency" as roadblocks she saw Francis encounter in his efforts.

"He impressed me as a holy man of great courage in the face of his detractors," she said, citing the French adage "*Il est agité par les vagues, et ne sombre pas*" ("He is rocked by waves, but does not sink").

'Mind-blowing' McCarrick laicization, report

Beyond the events in Chile, Francis' actions on clerical abuse also came after the shocking June 2018 announcement by four American dioceses that an allegation of abuse made against retired Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick had been found "credible and substantiated."

The news was beyond explosive. McCarrick, a counselor to popes and presidents for decades, had served as an auxiliary bishop in New York and the head of the Diocese of Metuchen and the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, before retiring from Washington in 2006.

Although Francis acted relatively quickly — ordering McCarrick to suspend ministry in June, accepting his resignation from the College of Cardinals in July and then removing him from the priesthood in February 2019 — the revelations about the now-former cleric induced endless rounds of speculation about how such a man could have risen so high.

Enter Archbishop Carlo Viganò, the Vatican's ambassador to the U.S. from 2011-16. Issuing an 11-page letter in August 2018 filled with unproven claims against dozens of Catholic officials, Viganò claimed a systemic cover-up of McCarrick's crimes.

Even more, in an unprecedented action for a former papal diplomat, Viganò blamed Francis for not moving against McCarrick earlier and called on the pontiff to resign.

For his part, Francis told journalists that he thought Viganò's letter, which included a host of unsubstantiated accusations and even anti-gay smears, spoke for itself. The pope advised the members of the press to "read the statement attentively and make your own judgment."

About six weeks later, in October 2018, Francis ordered the Vatican to conduct a "thorough study of the entire documentation" in its archives about McCarrick's career to determine how he had risen through the hierarchical ranks.



Pope Francis leads his general audience in the library of the Apostolic Palace Nov. 11, 2020, at the Vatican. A day after the Vatican released its extensive report on former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the pope renewed the Catholic Church's pledge to uproot the scourge of sexual abuse. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The resulting 450-page text, released in November 2020, placed an abundance of responsibility for McCarrick's career on Pope John Paul II, who appointed the prelate to Washington in 2000 and made him a cardinal in 2001.

The report revealed that John Paul had made those appointments despite being warned in 1999 by then-New York Cardinal John O'Connor that McCarrick had been the subject of anonymous allegations and was known to invite seminarians to sleep in the same bed as him.

The document also revealed that while Viganò was serving as ambassador in Washington, the diplomat did not follow instructions to investigate allegations against McCarrick.

Doyle praised Francis for undertaking such a thorough report on McCarrick's career, and not showing the former cardinal any leniency in terms of pursuing his removal from the clergy.

"When [Francis] laicized Ted McCarrick, that was mind-blowing, for a number of reasons," said the Dominican priest. "Cardinals were almost untouchable."

"That was a wake-up call for a lot of people," said Doyle.

Tobin, who leads the archdiocese McCarrick headed from 1986-2000, suggested the final report on the disgraced prelate's career could be used in the future to evince the dangers in priests and bishops acting as if they are a class apart from laypeople.

"One of the many things the abuse crisis taught us is what happens when you just have a bunch of Roman collars talking to one another," said the cardinal. "The McCarrick report is a good example of that."

As for Viganò, in July 2024, the Vatican took the extraordinary step of excommunicating the former nuncio and finding him guilty of schism. The move came after the former nuncio spent years questioning the legitimacy of Francis and the authority of the Second Vatican Council and using his personal website and social media to promote his radicalized views.

For women: Firsts, and disappointments

Another area where Francis made strides later in his papacy was in appointing more women to roles in Catholic Church leadership, although the late pope still leaves the Vatican a largely clerical, and male, environment.

In January 2020, the pontiff for the first time named a woman to serve as one of the Vatican's deputy foreign secretaries, entrusting Italian Francesca Di Giovanni to be responsible for the Vatican's relationships with multilateral agencies such as the European Union and the Organization of American States. She later retired, after a career of Vatican service, in 2023.

In August 2020, the pope named six women to the high-level group that oversees the Vatican's finances. The appointments to the Council for the Economy, akin to something like a financial board that controls the finances of both the Vatican city-state and the Holy See, were probably the most senior yet given to women in the global church.

In January 2025, Francis made history when he named Consolata Missionary Sr. Simona Brambilla as the first woman to ever lead a Vatican department.

Brambilla, who serves as prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Vatican office that works with religious orders and their members, joined a growing number of women that Francis has elevated to high-ranking posts in the Vatican, including: Xavierian Sr. Nathalie Becquart, who in 2021, was appointed by Francis as the first woman to serve as an undersecretary for the Vatican's office of the Synod of Bishops and former Italian judge Catia Summaria as the first woman to serve as the prosecutor for the Vatican's appeals court. Even from hospital, Francis announced on Feb. 17 that he was appointing Franciscan Sr. of the Eucharist Raffaella Petrini as the president of Vatican City State, another historic first, making a woman the governor of the world's smallest country.

Among historic women's appointments earlier in the papacy were the 2016 naming of Barbara Jatta to lead the Vatican Museums, the 2016 naming of Paloma Garcia Ovejero as vice director of the Vatican press office, and the 2017 naming of Linda Ghisoni and Gabriella Gambino to serve as undersecretaries of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

While theologians praised Francis for elevating women more than his predecessors, they also noted that his efforts were limited and did not involve placing any women

in charge of major Vatican offices.

In March 2022, Francis did however dramatically expand the number of top Vatican roles available to both lay men and women. In a new constitution to reorganize the Vatican's bureaucracy — given the title *Praedicate Evangelium* ("Preach the Gospel") — the pope specified that "any member of the faithful can preside" over a Vatican office, ending centuries of limiting top leadership posts to bishops and cardinals.

In a similar vein, Francis also dramatically expanded participation in the Synod of Bishops in April 2023, granting both lay men and women the right to be appointed as full voting members of that body for the first time.

Imperatori-Lee, the theologian at Manhattan College, said the pope often placed women in roles that fit "with a kind of stereotypical understanding of women's strengths," she said.

"There are still no women in decision-making roles at the CDF," said Imperatori-Lee, referring to a former acronym for the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is ultimately responsible for policing Catholic theologians around the world.

"There could be," she said. "There are women theologians."

Beyond appointing women to Vatican roles, Francis did ignite hopes earlier in his papacy that women might one day serve as ordained ministers in the church.

On the request of the Rome-based umbrella group representing sisters and nuns across the world, the pontiff in 2016 created a commission to study the history of women serving as deacons in the early church.

But that group was wound down in May 2019, with Francis saying that its members had been unable to come to consensus about the role women deacons had played in the first centuries of Christianity.

In April 2020, the pope created a second commission with an entirely different group of members. As of February 2025, that commission's work was still ongoing.

Phyllis Zagano, a theologian at Hofstra University in New York who was one of two Americans to serve on the first deacons commission, said she thought Francis wanted to be careful not to slot women into existing church structures and instead

pursued "a new kind of ecclesiology."

"I think he sees church differently," Zagano told NCR. "And because he sees church differently, he's trying to reform it differently."

Zagano, who is also a longtime NCR and Religion News Service columnist, said her understanding was that while her commission studied the historical facts regarding women who served as deacons centuries ago, the second group was tasked with looking at the pastoral implications of those facts for the church today.

"If he has ended the historical discussion about women in the diaconate, then he's done a lot," said the theologian. "Because the end of the historical discussion has to be that history alone is not dispositive, in one direction or the other."

Although Francis did not ultimately ordain women as deacons, he did make another small but significant change: updating the church's canon law to make explicit that laywomen can act as readers and altar servers in liturgical celebrations.

The shift, made in a January 2021 apostolic letter, essentially removed a previous option for individual bishops to restrict those ministries only to men. At the time, Zagano praised the move as representing "the first official recognition" that women could serve in a role near the altar during liturgies.

It was in response to a question about Francis' record on including women in church leadership that Tobin made the analogy that the church is like a large ore carrier, hard to try and turn too quickly.

While Tobin said he had never spoken directly with Francis about the pope's record on women, the cardinal suggested: "I would guess there's probably some degree of disappointment for him, that he hasn't been able to do more."

Tobin also noted that Francis had frequently critiqued an attitude of clericalism in the church. "If people, whatever their sex, want to become clerics, he's really not interested in that," said the prelate.

A 'tremendously important' papacy

In choosing the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio clearly also took inspiration from the saint for the themes of his papacy.

Two of his three encyclicals — 2015's "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," and 2020's "*Fratelli Tutti*, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," which advocated a rethinking of the global economy after the coronavirus pandemic — took their titles from writings of St. Francis.

With *Laudato Si*', Francis compiled the compendium of Catholic thought on socio-ecological matters and provided the planet a moral and ethical lens on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The 2015 document elevated the ideas that "everything is connected" and "both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" are integral to questions of justice. In declaring the necessity to pivot from coal, oil and gas "without delay," Francis provided a touchstone for Catholic institutions to reconsider their relationship with fossil fuels, the main driver of climate change.

Francis placed on the liturgical calendar a World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation (Sept. 1) and invited Catholics to mark the ensuing monthlong Season of Creation alongside fellow Christians. He added "care for creation" to the works of mercy. He directed the concept of "ecological sin" be added to the Catechism.

Under his watch, the Vatican joined the Paris Agreement and committed the Vatican City State to become carbon-neutral by 2050. The Laudato Si' Action Platform invited all Catholic institutions worldwide to commit to similar goals. He met with world leaders and oil executives, urging all to move swiftly in slashing heat-trapping emissions.

In some ways, his influence was stronger outside the church than within it. Scientists praised his grasp of climate change. U.N. diplomats cited him in speeches and negotiations on the Paris climate accord. *Laudato Si*' proved a rallying point for a united faith front on climate change and environmental calamities, and even sparked a sister document from Muslim scholars.

On ecology and climate change, "There is no doubt that the pope's voice is one of the strongest in the world, if not the strongest," Christiana Figueres, architect of the Paris Agreement, told NCR in 2023.

Like his namesake, Pope Francis pursued Muslim-Christian dialogue with a fervor, visiting eleven Muslim-majority nations over 47 visits abroad and forging first-of-their-kind personal relationships with top clerics in both the Shiite and Sunni branches of Islam.

Three days after his election, the new pontiff told journalists he had chosen his name at the inspiration of Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes. Bergoglio had sat next to Hummes during the conclave, and as the final ballot was being counted and vote tally becoming clear, the Brazilian told the Argentinian: "Don't forget the poor."

"And those words came to me: the poor, the poor," the pope explained. "Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi."

"How I would like a church that is poor and for the poor," said the pontiff.

The choice of name was only a series of moves Francis took in the early days of his papacy that immediately showed him as being quite different from his predecessors.

When the new pope came out on the night of his election to greet the crowds in a misty St. Peter's Square, he joked that the cardinals had gone "to the end of the earth" to find the new Bishop of Rome. Before offering the traditional *urbi et orbi* ("to the city and the world") blessing to the crowd, he asked "for a favor."

"Before the bishop blesses his people, he asks that you pray to the Lord to bless me, the prayer of the people for the blessing of their bishop," the new pontiff said, bowing his head in silence for about 15 seconds.

Thirteen days later, the Vatican announced another dramatic change: Francis would be the first pope in 110 years not to move into the papal apartments in the Apostolic Palace, deciding instead to remain in the Vatican's Santa Marta guesthouse.

At the time, then-Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi called the choice an "experiment" to allow the new pope to have something of a community with the guesthouse's permanent residents, some of the priests and bishops serving as Vatican staff.

Francis would remain there throughout his papacy, and stories of visitors bumping into the pontiff in the hotel's small cafeteria, sometimes at the microwave, would abound.

Gaillardetz, the late theologian, said Francis had helped "de-sacralize" the papacy. He said actions such as not moving into the papal apartments, speaking more frequently with the press and the occasional cellphone call to a person who sent the pope a letter were "tremendously important."

"We're going to be doing a lot of work in the next 10 to 15 years ... just processing how he's contributed to the development of the papacy as an institution in the church," said Gaillardetz.

NCR Vatican correspondent Christopher White and NCR environment correspondent Brian Roewe contributed to this story.

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This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.