News



Pope Francis holds his pastoral staff as he celebrates Mass marking Sunday of the Word of God in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Jan. 22. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Stephanie Yeagle

View Author Profile

syeagle@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @ncrSLY

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Enormous change for the Catholic Church in the opening of the synod on synodality, and Pope Francis' appointments and removals of bishops and church officials participating in the culture wars were among the topics that NCR's opinion, commentary and editorial writers took on in 2023.

These 10 pieces were NCR's most read — not necessarily the most important — opinion articles and commentaries of the year. They are listed in order by the number of site visitors who read the story, with short summaries of their contents. We posted a separate article about our most read news stories on Dec. 26.

1. Pope Francis' new Vatican doctrinal chief signals enormous change for Catholic Church



Cardinal-designate Víctor Manuel Fernández, appointed prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith by Pope Francis July 1, is pictured with Pope Francis June 30 at the Vatican. Francis will elevate Fernández to the College of Cardinals during a special consistory at the Vatican Sept. 30. (CNS/Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández Twitter page)

Pope Francis' naming of Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández as the new prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith marks the most consequential curial appointment of this pontificate, wrote theologian Richard Gaillardetz in July.

"Many supporters of Francis have been disappointed over the years by his reluctance to appoint figures to curial leadership more in keeping with his vision for the church," Gaillardetz said. "Often, he seemed too willing to allow outspoken curial critics of his papal ministry (e.g., Cardinal Gerhard Müller and Cardinal Robert Sarah) to remain in office. But now, the pope has appointed an enthusiastic supporter of his reformist program to lead one of the most powerful curial offices."

Gaillardetz, an "exemplary colleague and teacher," according to friend and colleague Catherine Clifford, died Nov. 7 after a long struggle with cancer.



Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, and other U.S. bishops concelebrate Mass in the crypt of St. Peter's Basilica Jan. 20, 2020, during their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican. The Holy See Press Office announced Nov. 11 that Pope Francis has "relieved" Bishop Strickland from the pastoral governance of the Diocese of Tyler. (OSV News/CNS file photo, Paul Haring)

2. Joseph Strickland was my bishop. Here's why he had to go.

In a piece published at Black Catholic Messenger and NCR, Briana Jansky shared the experience of being a layperson under the pastoral care of Bishop Joseph Strickland in the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, until he was removed from office Nov. 11 by Pope Francis.

"When I attended my first Mass celebrated by Strickland, I noticed two distinct things about him," Jansky wrote. "One was that he undoubtedly loved Jesus and was hungry to share the truth of the real presence of the Eucharist. Second, he was openly critical of the pope and the magisterium."

3. After 10 years of being patient, Pope Francis is entitled to be less so

In recognition of Pope Francis' 10th anniversary in the pontificate, columnist Michael Sean Winters outlined evidence of an inflection point in Francis' pontificate, as conservative criticisms of the pope increasingly ring hollow and Francis seems to be increasing the pace of change.

"It seems that after 10 years of patience, the pope is entitled to be less so," Winters wrote. "Patience did not bring [Cardinal George] Pell to rally around the pope. It did not bring [Archbishop Georg] Gänswein over. The two prelates' complaints about Francis were representative of a well-funded, vocal, organized conservative group within the church."



Irme Stetter-Karp, president of the Central Committee of German Catholics and co-chair of the Synodal Path, and Bishop Georg Bätzing, president of the German bishops' conference, attend the fifth synodal assembly March 9 in Frankfurt. The pope commented on the Synodal Path in a private letter dated Nov. 10, later published in German news outlet Die Welt. (OSV News/Reuters/Heiko Becker)

4. Pope Francis writes a letter to four German women — and surprises almost everyone

"It's no secret that the German Catholic Church's reform project, known as the 'Synodal Path,' is a thorn in Pope Francis' side," wrote commentator Renardo Schlegelmilch. "He has criticized the process, which has brought forward ideas such as blessings for same-sex couples and the election of bishops, numerous times."

But his latest comments came as a surprise for just about everyone, except for four conservative German Catholic women who received a private letter by the pope, dated Nov. 10 and later published by the German news outlet Die Welt.

"The sentiment of the one-page note probably wouldn't surprise anybody familiar with the recent tensions between Germany and the Vatican," Schlegelmilch added. "Still, the reactions in Germany are mixed. They range from disappointment to sheer denial to even some conspiracy theories."

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5. Pope Francis' responses to the 'dubia' cardinals were brilliantly done

No one knows for sure why Pope Francis chose to publish his responses to the dubia presented by five intransigent cardinals on the eve of the opening of the October synod on synodality. But Francis' responses were "brilliantly done," observed Winters.

"The decision by the dubious cardinals to publish their queries also mentioned that the pope responded and they found his responses unsatisfactory, so perhaps he just wanted to clear the air," Winters wrote.



Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, superior general of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 23. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

6. Bishops walking out, 'tiresome' listening: Inside tensions at the synod

It was less than two weeks into the synod on synodality when multiple reports emerged about participating delegates storming out of the room. Tensions, it seems, are part of the synod process, wrote NCR Vatican correspondent Christopher White in his View from the Vatican column.

"One day after hearing accounts of sharp disagreements, I asked one synod member to corroborate some of the things I had heard," White wrote, confirming with one member that it was all true.

"We're not even at first base here," the member told White. "We can't even get to discussing many of these issues, because so many people in the room haven't been trained in the practice of synodality. That's what this month is providing."



Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, speaks at a National Gathering for U.S. pilgrims, at Quintas das Conchas e dos Lilases Park Aug. 2 in Lisbon, Portugal, during World Youth Day. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

7. Why does Bishop Barron keep attacking Pope Francis' allies?

In August, Bishop Robert Barron criticized papal biographer Austen Ivereigh of making conversion a "dirty word," shunning evangelization properly understood and that the disagreement was essentially terminological.

It is hard not to conclude that Barron's real target is not Ivereigh, but Pope Francis, wrote Winters. "Barron is not wrong that our Catholic faith bestows a rich intellectual tradition on all who find a home within her," Winters said. " There is something Kantian about his fixation on ideas, and on his ideas to the exclusion of other ideas and approaches. There is one way, and it is always his way, even when an alternate way is proposed by the pope!"



The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence show their support during the gay pride parade in West Hollywood, California, June 12, 2016. (AP/Richard Vogel,File)

8. Actual sisters react to LA Dodgers and Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

Amid the controversy over the Los Angeles Dodgers honoring the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a charity group that parodies religious women by dressing in drag and habits, real Catholic sisters have been relatively silent, observed NCR senior correspondent Heidi Schlumpf in June.

Schlumpf interviewed four sisters who had different reactions to the controversy, but agreed on one thing: Hate is not the answer.



(Unsplash/Thays Orrico)

9. The Eucharist is about more than the real presence

"The Eucharist should be the center of Catholic life, but falling church attendance on Sundays shows that the center is crumbling," pointed out Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese in this January column. "This, along with declining belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, has caused great concern among Catholic bishops, who have launched a Eucharistic revival effort."

"If you want to adore Christ in the Eucharist, go to Benediction, not to Mass," Reese wrote. "Confusing these two church practices is a big mistake. The Eucharist, based on the Jewish Passover, was instituted by Christ; Benediction was instituted by the church at a time when few people went to Communion."



Advocates for transgender youth rally outside the New Hampshire Statehouse March 7 in Concord. House and Senate committees are holding public hearings on four bills opponents say would harm the health and safety of transgender youth. U.S. bishops issued a document March 20 rejecting gender-affirming medical treatments for transgender individuals. (AP photo/Holly Ramer)

10. US bishops' document against transgender health care is a disaster

On March 20, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine published a document titled "Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body," which calls for the refusal to provide gender-affirming care to those experiencing gender dysphoria.

"In the process, those responsible for this document not only deny the reality of transgender, nonbinary and intersex persons, but they also compound the harm experienced by already very vulnerable people," responded Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan. "That a statement like this was coming was not a surprise, but its final scope and content was unknown even to those who had been aware of the document at various stages of its drafting. Predictably, the result is nothing short of a disaster: theologically, scientifically and pastorally."

Bonus story: What the Catholic Church can learn from Taylor Swift



Taylor Swift performs in Los Angeles during the "Red Tour" in 2013. (Wikimedia Commons/Denielle)

The world practically stopped when pop star icon Taylor Swift was spotted at a Kansas City Chiefs game and was later rumored to be dating Chiefs' player Travis Kelce. But can Swift teach the Catholic Church something?

Culture writer Amirah Orozco argued that through "deeply confessional, vulnerable and unique lyrics, Swift zeroes in on the particulars of her own experience to relate more universally."

"I do not mean to suggest that she is as universal as Jesus Christ is, but with a 52-date tour of stadiums with hundreds of thousands of people, she has managed to create music that is much more universal than most other things or people in the world," Orozco wrote.