Opinion
Guest Voices

Pope Francis greets immigrants at the port in Lampedusa, Italy.

Pope Francis greets immigrants at the port in Lampedusa, Italy, during his first papal trip outside Rome, on July 8, 2013. During that visit, Francis urged people not to be part of the "globalization of indifference" to the world's immigrants and refugees. Francis' call for mercy toward all summarizes his vision of the church, writes Diego Mauro. (CNS/CPP/L'Osservatore Romano)



by Diego Mauro

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As speculation has grown about the next pope, quietly or not so quietly, following Pope Francis' latest health scare, it's become clear that the doors he opened will be difficult to close and his pontificate will leave a deep mark in the history of the Catholic Church, comparable to the work of Leo XIII, John XXIII or John Paul II.

Even his supporters recognize his health may limit him, but will the changes he has already made take hold?

The key word that has summarized Francis' vision of the church is mercy, which expresses the church with open doors he has proposed, one close to the social and existential peripheries. Francis' argument that no one can shut the door on anyone else has been perhaps the most radical definition of his papacy and the one that has

generated the most resistance from conservatives. It has angered those who would prefer to turn the church into an exclusive club with many accreditations and moral conditions.

And though he has questioned the traditionalist sectors that nourish what he calls "i*ndietrismo*" (backwardness), he does not support all the changes promoted by the more progressive sectors, such as the German Synodal Path. For Francis, these sectors have forgotten that the church is diverse and that any change must be built by listening to all the different voices, from the most conservative to the most progressive. Balance is difficult and unstable, but Francis has managed to contain the moving forces in the universal church to go beyond tensions.

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His impact has been global and has extended beyond the church. During his hospital stay, Buddhist monks prayed for him, and nonbelievers sent him good wishes for his recovery. His austerity and direct form of communication, supported by the use of social networks, has allowed him to build a close bond within the Catholic sphere but also the world in general. His political and spiritual capital was sustained by the papal institution but goes beyond it.

Yes, he has been influential because he is the pope, but even more so because he is Francis, because of his particular charisma and personality. His social prestige and moral authority, acknowledged by global leaders of different ideologies, helped him build the support he needed as the global leader of Catholics in order to implement important reforms, the effects of which can already be seen in some aspects.

Francis' magisterium has brought innovation in terms of the church's social doctrine. In his main encyclicals, *Laudato si*' (2015) and *Fratelli tutti* (2020), as well as in his most recent apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum* (2023), he updated Catholic social teaching developed during the 19th century.

In those documents, Francis emphasized that new communitarian ways of producing, working and living must be encouraged. He not only defended social justice and asked capitalists for moderation, but he urged us all to find new ways of inhabiting the world.

He reminded us that private property is not an absolute value and asked us to look for new ideas in the social and popular economy to think about the future. He did not intend to provide technical solutions nor concrete measures of economic policy, but he does outline desired horizons. Francis also has proposed changes in the way we think about power and authority in the church.

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The purpose of the synod on synodality has helped Catholics think about necessary reforms and, more importantly, more collegial forms of decision-making within the institutional church. This is a continuation of the debate that was at the heart of the Second Vatican Council. The composition of the synod, which should not be confused with a congress since it is a non-resolving institution, shows the direction of the changes Francis wants.

For the first time, 54 women, including lay and religious, participated, out of 364 members, and had a vote. In the synod, in addition, all positions have been reflected: those closest to his papacy but also the most critical. The goal is not necessarily to synthesize them but to identify possible directions while preserving diversity.

He also has encouraged a new relationship between religious truth and history. In the 2024 document *Dignitas infinita*, promulgated by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, the church accepts that its understanding of human dignity has changed over time. In the document's presentation, the head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Victor Fernández, pointed out that when "we talk about human dignity" it is clear that "it is not something that the Church has always recognized with the same clarity: there was a growth in understanding. It develops, deepens comprehension."

In 1452, Pope Nicholas V endorsed slavery in a letter to the king of Portugal, but in 1537 Pope Paul III excommunicated those who defended slavery because he

considered that slaves were human beings. "Even at a time of slow change," Fernández said, "a pope said practically the opposite of what [his predecessor] said, just 80 years apart."

Francis' appointment of Fernández to the DDF was a key decision and a strong signal for the future. Fernández identifies with Francis' ideas, and, at 62, is relatively young. He will probably remain in office at least a few more years after Francis is gone. A new pope could remove him, but it won't be easy without generating more conflicts. As the recent publication of document *Dignitas infinita* shows, Fernández is determined to carry on firmly.

The majority of the members of the College of Cardinals in charge of the next conclave have been appointed by Francis, which increases the chances that his successor will be someone close to his ideas. Yet, there is no guarantee that will happen. The papacy is a kind of monarchy with limited prerogatives, and succession remains a mystery. But it can be safely said, at least for the time being, the field seems tilted in Francis' favor.