

CATHOLICITY IN AN EVOLVING UNIVERSE

---

The Liminal Papacy  
of Pope Francis

---

*Moving toward Global Catholicity*

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## Introduction

---

# Pope Francis and Global Catholic History

### Historicization and Periodization: The Liminality of Francis's Pontificate

Writing and speaking about Pope Francis from a historical point of view during his pontificate is understandably difficult. It is challenging to discuss any pope and any pontificate, but it is even more so in a church now dominated more than it used to be by mass media, digital and social media, and a news cycle without gatekeepers and often without editorial control. The immediacy—temporal and otherwise—of the new information environment has to be reconciled with the long-term perspective of Catholic institutional culture and the long duration of the tectonic movements within Catholicism as a social and cultural entity.

Addressing Pope Francis's pontificate from a historical perspective is complicated. It is an unfinished pontificate at the time of completing this book (in fact, a pontificate in full swing). But there is also a more complex issue at the heart of Francis's papacy. For a long time Francis's pontificate has been viewed almost as if it were hanging in the vacuum between the sudden end of the previous pontificate and the beginning of his own pontificate. There has been an "unfinished transition" from one pontificate to another, because of Pope Benedict XVI's decision to resign, to become emeritus (a title that did not exist before and is theologically and canonically questionable) and to live in

the Vatican as emeritus in conditions that are not dramatically different from when he was pope.

But there is a deeper liminality at the heart of this pontificate. The first liminal aspect of Francis's papacy has to do with the way Jorge Mario Bergoglio became pope, inaugurating a pontificate while his predecessor's was not completely over in the eyes of the global church—Francis on the threshold between the old and the new.

The conclave that elected Francis in 2013 took place in an extraordinary situation: as Francis's predecessor not only prepared but also survived the conclave, one could say that in some sense the conclave of 2013 never really ended. The conclave is a juridical-ritual way for the institution and the community to process "the killing of the father": the deceased pope joins the line of predecessors, and the new pope is given institutional and charismatic powers. But as we know, the election of Francis took place in a very different situation. Hence the difficult reception of Francis's pontificate and the difficulty of writing history about it in a church where the transition between pontificates—when accomplished with the death of the pope—tends to settle old intellectual, personal, and "corporate" scores, and also to redefine individual and collective loyalties. The transition of Benedict XVI from pope to pope emeritus has left in the church and in theology "outstanding bills" that a normal transition between pontificates tend to resolve in a much shorter period of time.

Church historians cannot ignore this particularity in the ecclesial environment surrounding Francis's pontificate, because the place of a pontificate in history is not immune to the reception of the pontificate's development. Despite the canonical definition of Francis as pope since March 13, 2013, we cannot really say that in the perception of Catholics the pontificate of his predecessor, Benedict XVI, ended completely on the day designated by Benedict XVI, that is, February 28, 2013, at 8:00 p.m. local time in Rome.

In other words, there is a liminality to Francis's papacy that begins with his very election in the conclave and symbolizes the entire pontificate and its meaning for global Catholicism: a key junction in the history of the Catholic Church between an "already" and a "not yet" that can be understood only by analyzing this pontificate from a multilayered historical perspective.

At the same time, when writing about a pope, one must remember that Christianity is history *and* geography. This is particularly true for Francis's pontificate. The liminality of Francis is at the same time historical and geographical. His emphasis on the margin and the peripheries entails also a redefinition of boundaries and borders. Francis is a pope from the margins, visibly challenging the revival of the borders in our political discourse. In Francis's imagination the border is more a *limen* (threshold) than a *limes* (rigid frontier). The concept of liminality is key to understanding Francis's pontificate because of his reinterpretation of the borders in this age of new walls. It's a border that relates and connects the "other" more than it excludes. This is at the heart of Francis's project, in which liminality is a central aspect of the *pontifex*, etymologically the "bridge builder," both *geographically*—in his focus on a new map of the global world in the disruption of globalization, and *historically*—in his efforts to reconnect the church and tradition in a non-traditionalist way.

### History, Pontificates, and the Church

The historic nature of the transition between Benedict XVI and Francis was partly related to the influence of a post-historical and, to a large extent, anti-historical way of understanding the church. One of the critical elements in the reception of Francis's pontificate is thus a difficulty in understanding Catholicism and the papacy in its sociocultural and institutional dimensions in historical terms—in a long-term perspective that is both backward and forward. This, in turn, is part of a larger crisis connected to the role of history in the cultural canon of Western Christianity.

On one hand, the historical element is exploited by a socially weakened Catholicism for the enhancement of the ecclesiastical historical patrimony that tends toward "monumentalization" and "musealization"; Rome and the Vatican are often reduced by current Catholic culture—including "militant" Catholicism—to a romantic backdrop feeding the aesthetic superiority complex of Catholicism over other Christian traditions, over other religious traditions, and over a secularized modernity perceived to be both morally and aesthetically lost in postmodernity. On the other

hand, there is an alienation between history and theology that is found, for example, in seminary curricula. This alienation is particularly evident in some contexts, such as the North American one, in which theological studies—both for candidates to the priesthood and for lay theologians—continually reduce the emphasis on the study of the history of the church, retaining only the study of the life of saints and patristics.<sup>1</sup>

In both Catholic and secular academic circles, studies of church history and Christianity have to deal with the wave of social and cultural studies that minimizes the importance of historical studies for understanding the religious phenomenon. History is reduced to a narrative with a declared ideological purpose: to serve the identity of a specific group from which the narrative springs and to which it is addressed. It seems that it has become much more difficult to write about history—even the history of the church—in the way Rowan Williams described doing so a few years ago:

The very effort to make any kind of historical narrative can be seen as a sort of act of faith, faith that massive disruption does not in fact destroy the possibilities of understanding, and thus the possibility of a shared world across gulfs of difference . . . the idea of history itself as a moral or spiritual undertaking, which gives us grounds for assuming it is possible to share a world with strangers.<sup>2</sup>

These gulfs of difference are even more important in the church of today for understanding Francis's pontificate, in a time when history and church history are not really part of the debate, and in a global church where a new emphasis on the local dimension often means a church overwhelmed by obsessively idiosyncratic political and cultural narratives.

The reception of Francis's pontificate cannot be properly considered without exploring the global, universal, and local

---

<sup>1</sup> See Katarina Schuth, *Seminary Formation: Recent History, Current Circumstances, New Directions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 10.

dimensions of the recent history of the Catholic Church. For example, the ecclesiological dispute around the year 2000 between Cardinal Walter Kasper and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reflected the tense relationship between the church's local and universal dimensions.<sup>3</sup> Today, the work of Catholic theologians has become less and less important to many Catholic leaders (such as bishops, public intellectuals, and major donors), who have turned their attention away from the teachings of Francis's pontificate and toward initiatives that address the "culture wars" between so-called liberals and conservatives. Because of the left-right split that had widened during the pontificate of John Paul II, many Catholics, including intellectuals and even academics, now wrote theology off as a discipline corrupted by "liberal opinion." History and church history are eminent victims of this involution, which has thus had an impact not only on the way one writes about a pope, but also on the way this particular pope is seen by his contemporaries.

### Chronology and Periodization of Francis's Pontificate

From the point of view of the global Catholic Church there is no alternative to seeing Pope Francis through the lens of church history. When we talk about the issue of understanding Francis historically, we must consider the compatibility between the need to understand the church as a subject and the tendency to deconstruct the history of institutions (including church institutions and the papacy) into a series of stories and narratives centered on ever narrower fields defined by membership and by an identity that is exclusive and competitive with other identities. It seems clear that the future of historical and theological studies on the church will have to articulate in a new way the relationship between a classical approach to church history (which is less and less practiced in the academy, even in Catholic universities) and the methodological contribution of the postmodern focus on

---

<sup>3</sup> See Kilian McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002): 227–49.

deconstruction of the institutional dimension. Postmodernity is largely abandoning the history of the church in favor of other stories or narratives of a secularist, antireligious, or a-religious tendency.

In this sense trying to understand Francis's pontificate in history and in a chronological periodization can be seen as passe and irrelevant. But the attempt is necessary, provided that we go beyond the approach of a purely ecclesiastical history while also refraining from cornering ourselves in a sociocultural approach alone.

The theological culture of the institutional church is not immune to the rise of the "post-truth" culture in which we now live. One of the effects of that culture may be seen in the use in church polemics—including at high levels of the ecclesiastical echelon—of a very simplified hermeneutics of "continuity and reform" versus "discontinuity and rupture" in the interpretation of Vatican II. Given this era of epistemological ambiguity, historical study has become even more crucial for understanding the development of tradition. For example, the current wave of Catholic neo-traditionalism, especially in the United States, reflects a failure to keep a healthy sense of history alive in the church. Moreover, the tendency to privilege narratives instead of history is a symptom of the politicization and privatization of history.<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, periodization is a useful and necessary alternative to the dominance of ideological narratives.

I propose two kinds of periodization for understanding Francis's pontificate: (1) a periodization that attempts to look at a multi-framework historical picture (ecclesiastical, theological, and global) in order to locate Francis's pontificate in different kinds of histories, an approach that is particularly necessary in the context of a pontificate of the world church;<sup>5</sup> and (2) an internal periodization of Francis's pontificate that analyzes the shifts within the pontificate.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Massimo Faggioli, "Vatican II: The History and the Narratives," *Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (December 2012): 749–67.

<sup>5</sup> See Massimo Faggioli, *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 1–19.

## A Multi-Framework Periodization

There are seven frameworks we must consider for this approach: (1) the history of the Roman papacy; (2) the history of the Roman Catholic Church; (3) the history of the reception and application of Vatican II; (4) the history of theology and of the theological tradition; (5) the history of the ecclesiastical institutions; (6) the shift from a European-centered to a global church history; and (7) the global political and social history.

### *The History of the Roman Papacy*

Francis is the first Latin American pope and the first Jesuit pope. He is also the first pope in the last century (except for the very short pontificate of John Paul I) who does not come from a career in the diplomatic service or from a professional academic background. Francis is an outsider, both to the academic and curial circles of papal Rome and to the circles of Italian Catholicism; this means that he has a particularly obvious detachment from both Italian politics and Italian church politics. Francis is also the first pope to reassess the relationship between the papacy and synodality, both in the Synod of Bishops and in the life of the church more generally. He is the first pope who is not afraid to side with the poor in a programmatic way from within the Roman Catholic Church and to advocate a “poor church” and a “church for the poor,” thus challenging a series of assumptions about the relationship among Catholicism, the papacy, and the sociopolitical status quo. His contributions to the history of the papal ministry are particularly evident in his desacralization of the person of the pope; his emphasis on a new, less argumentative relationship with modernity;<sup>6</sup> and his foregrounding of the experience of the poor in the church. As the first pope from Latin America, Francis continues to interpret his pontificate in unprecedented ways,<sup>7</sup> it becomes increasingly clear that this

---

<sup>6</sup> See Daniele Menozzi, *I papi e il moderno. Una lettura del cattolicesimo contemporaneo (1903–2016)* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2016), 148–59.

<sup>7</sup> See Alberto Melloni, *Il Giubileo. Una storia* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2015), 109–11.



papacy will be considered a pivotal moment in the history of global Catholicism.

### *The History of the Roman Catholic Church*

Another helpful framework for understanding Francis's pontificate is the history of the Roman Catholic Church and in particular the relations between the pope and the councils convened since the sixteenth-century Council of Trent.<sup>8</sup> Francis is a pope who embodies the theology and the church of Vatican II Catholicism, but he is also a postconciliar pope with an unproblematic relationship with both the council and the postconciliar period. Furthermore, beyond the shallow controversies about the alleged liberalism or conservatism of Vatican II and the popes of the post-Vatican II period, Francis's pontificate is part of the bigger question of whether Vatican II was merely the end of the Tridentine period, opening toward a time of transition yet to be seen, or if it was the beginning of a new era in Roman Catholicism. Within this larger debate the more particular question is whether Francis is part of the ending of the Tridentine model, or of the beginning of a new period.<sup>9</sup> The infrequency of direct, textual mentions of Vatican II by a post-Vatican II pope like Francis is not indicative of his dismissal of the council. On the contrary, more than fifty years after Vatican II the church has reached a point in the reception of the council at which the conciliar trajectories no longer need to be labeled.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> See John W. O'Malley, *Vatican I: The Council and the Making of the Ultramontane Church* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), esp. 55–95 (on the Ultramontane movement in the first half of the nineteenth century).

<sup>9</sup> See Paolo Prodi, *Il paradigma tridentino. Un'epoca della storia della Chiesa* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010); idem, "Europe in the Age of Reformations: The Modern State and Confessionalization," *Catholic Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 1–19.

<sup>10</sup> See Massimo Faggioli, *A Council for the Global Church: Receiving Vatican II in History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 329–35.

### *The History of the Reception and Application of Vatican II*

In contrast to his predecessors' approaches to the relationship between the council and the postconciliar era, Francis embodies the shift toward a theology shaped by pastorality. As Christoph Theobald observes, "Vatican II can be defined as a 'pastoral council.' The reception of the council today means shifting towards a new stage of reception, that is, putting into practice the praxis of the council and discovering the 'conciliar pastorality' that marks that ecclesial praxis."<sup>11</sup> And, unlike Benedict XVI, Francis sees a consistency between Vatican II and the post-Vatican II period—his defense of the council does not require him to distance himself from the tumultuous postconciliar period. Francis also does not contrapose pre-Vatican II theological *ressourcement*, John XXIII's conciliar *aggiornamento*, and post-Vatican II (especially Paul VI's) renewal.<sup>12</sup> Above all, he understands the application of the council largely in terms of its reception by the local churches, which are to have a more pronounced role.

### *The History of Theology and of the Theological Tradition*

Francis's complex assessment of modernity includes a rebalancing of the neo-Thomist and neo-Augustinian approaches to reality, following Joseph A. Komonchak's interpretation of the deep theological dynamism of Vatican II.<sup>13</sup> There is a philosophical divide not only between neo-Augustinians (philosophically close to Platonism) and neo-Thomists (philosophically close to

---

<sup>11</sup> Christoph Theobald, *Accéder à la source*, vol. 1 in *La réception du concile Vatican II* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 886.

<sup>12</sup> See Serena Noceti, "What Structures Are Needed for a Reform of the Church?" in *Concilium 2018/4: The Church of the Future*, ed. Thierry-Marie Courau, Stefanie Knauss, and Enrico Galavotti (London: SCM Press, 2019), 85–99, esp. 96.

<sup>13</sup> See Joseph A. Komonchak, "Augustine, Aquinas, or the Gospel *sine glossa*?" in *Unfinished Journey: The Church Forty Years after Vatican II, Essays for John Wilkins*, ed. Austen Ivereigh (New York: Continuum, 2005), 102–18.

Aristotelians), but also between the role of theology as patristic-monastic and Augustinian versus neo-Thomistic. There is also an ecclesiological divide. As Ormond Rush notes, “The Augustinian school is wanting to set church and world in a situation of rivals; it sees the world in a negative light; evil and sin so abound in the world that the church should be always suspicious and distrustful of it. Any openness to the world would be ‘naive optimism.’”<sup>14</sup> Francis does not see the church as far removed from a sinful world—“the Church as an island of grace in a world given over to sin,” in the words of Avery Dulles<sup>15</sup>—but perceives deeply the “signs of the times” (Marie-Dominique Chenu),<sup>16</sup> the historicity of the church (Yves Congar),<sup>17</sup> and its identity as a “world church” (Karl Rahner’s *Weltkirche*).<sup>18</sup>

### *The History of the Ecclesiastical Institutions*

Francis’s efforts to reform the Curia are significantly different from those of his predecessors. He is neither trying to achieve reform through apostolic constitutions like those of Paul VI (in 1967) and John Paul II (in 1988), for example, nor is he emulating Benedict XVI’s attempt to strengthen Rome’s authority in the global Catholic Church. In contrast, Francis tends to seek guidance on reform from those outside the Curia, as when he established a Council of Cardinals in 2013 that included only

---

<sup>14</sup> See Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical Principles* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Avery Dulles, “The Reception of Vatican II at the Extraordinary Synod of 1985,” in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 353.

<sup>16</sup> See Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Vatican II Notebook*, ed. Alberto Melloni, trans. Paul Philibert (Adelaide: ATF, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> See Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), original in French, *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l’Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1950, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> See Karl Rahner, “Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council,” in Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 77–90, original in German, “Theologische Grundinterpretation des II. Vatikanischen Konzils,” *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 101 (1979): 290–99.

one member of the Curia and a number of people known to be critical of the way the Vatican operated. This kind of outreach is a typical aspect of Francis's pontificate, along with impulses toward a decentralization of Catholicism—a move by Francis that should for now be termed initial, open-ended, and possibly subject to reversal in the near future by another pope. Clearly Francis acknowledges the need for a new kind of role for Rome in the twentieth century (part of the solution of the “Roman question” after the end of the Papal States) together with a new awareness of both the local and global Catholic Church. Recognition of the polar tensions of *globalization* and *localization* have long been visible in the intellectual history of Jorge Mario Bergoglio.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Shift from a European-Centered to a Global Church History*

The most notable change in this framework is the way Francis talks about the relationship among Europe and the Catholic Church and Christianity. He doesn't see the essential connection between the destiny of Christianity in Europe and the future of the Catholic Church upheld by John Paul II and especially by Benedict XVI. Instead, Francis believes that the Greek-Latin paradigm should play a proper but not exclusive role in a church that seeks a truly universal catholicity. This is not only because the appropriation of that Greek-Latin paradigm by the Catholic churches of Western Europe and North America is questionable, especially if understood as an appropriation exclusive of other cultural and linguistic canons within global Catholicism, but also because inclusivity should be welcomed rather than feared. As he notes in the programmatic document of his pontificate, the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, “We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous,” and then warns that “the message that we proclaim always has a certain cultural dress, but

---

<sup>19</sup> See Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), original in Italian, *Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Una biografia intellettuale* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2017), 19–55.

we in the church can sometimes fall into a needless hallowing of our own culture, and thus show more fanaticism than true evangelizing zeal” (no. 117). Francis thus elaborates the issue of Eurocentrism in a way that differs significantly from Benedict XVI’s Regensburg lecture of September 12, 2006, in which Benedict lifts up the “inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical entity,” even going so far as to seemingly back the claim that “the critically purified Greek heritage forms an integral part of Christian faith.”<sup>20</sup> There is in Francis a very clear connection between the pastoral constitution of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, and his own document, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Francis’s pragmatism also affects his views on the trajectory of the European project: his critique of the technocratic paradigm (especially in the encyclical *Laudato Si’*) reveals him to be a critical and disenchanted supporter of the European Union (in light of the shift of the spirit of the European Union away from its origins, which were inspired in part by Catholic social teaching, and toward the technocracy of the neoliberal age). The same can be said about Francis’s relations with the political and cultural center of the twentieth century, the United States, which Francis does not credit with the providential role some Americans and American Catholics presume to hold.

### *Global Political and Social History*

This pontificate is the first to witness a clear crisis of globalization: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 have given the pontificate a role that is different, for example, from John Paul II’s fight against communism or Benedict XVI’s responsibilities in a post-9/11 world.<sup>21</sup> Then there is the issue of the relationship between the post-Vatican II church and the globalization of Catholicism with respect to global history. The explosion of the sexual-abuse crisis in the church as a world

---

<sup>20</sup> For a comparison between Benedict XVI and his predecessor regarding the relationship between faith and cultures (plural), see John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, September 14, 1998, esp. nos. 3 and 70–72.

<sup>21</sup> For a historical-political analysis of the crisis of globalization, see Vittorio Emanuele Parsi, *Titanic. Il naufragio dell’ordine liberale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018).

problem is also an integral part of the narrative on the globalization of Catholicism and an integral part of the history of Francis's pontificate.

The application of a global historical framework to his pontificate is necessary not just from an internal Catholic perspective on globalization, considering the impact on the church of enormous scientific, cultural, and ethical changes (for example, the emergence of bio-politics) in the differentiation between the Western world and the so-called global south. It is also needed from a church-world perspective; what was typical of the link between conciliar theology and the historical-political moments of the past (the end of colonial empires and decolonization, the de-Europeanization of Catholicism, the Cold War) must now be reconsidered in a deeply changed situation.<sup>22</sup> The shift from a Western world inspired by the election of Barack Obama in 2008 to the polarized era following the election of Donald Trump in 2016 is a key factor for the historical periodization of Francis's pontificate and must also be considered in a global theological-political periodization of his pontificate and its reception.

### **An Internal Periodization**

This multi-framework attempt to understand Francis's role in history must be supplemented by another periodization, internal to the pontificate, that explores different phases and moments in Francis's tenure since his election.

#### ***Francis and Benedict's Extended Papacy***

One key element to consider is the relationship between Francis's pontificate and that of Benedict XVI. First of all, there was the particular experience in the first two conclaves of the twenty-first century. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was the runner-up

---

<sup>22</sup> See Stephen R. Schloesser, "'Dancing on the Edge of the Volcano': Biopolitics and What Happened after Vatican II," in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley, 3–26 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 2005<sup>23</sup> before being elected pope, rather swiftly as is typical of contemporary papal history, in the following conclave of 2013. There seems to be between Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Joseph Ratzinger a rather interesting relationship that began in 2005; it is a relationship that has developed over time, and it has been largely shielded from the public eye except for some carefully staged photo opportunities.

Indeed, both (a) the March 2018 incident in which Benedict XVI declined the invitation to write an introduction for a series of Vatican-published volumes on Francis's theology,<sup>24</sup> and (b) the April 2019 publication of Benedict XVI's article on the sexual abuse crisis,<sup>25</sup> revealed something of the complexity of the periodization of a pontificate in the age of the new institution of the "pope emeritus." The issue of the relationship between the pope and the pope emeritus has often been framed in terms of the personal loyalty of the living emeritus to the new pope—something that has never been in doubt since the latter's election in March 2013. However, the bigger and more complicated issue is the symbolical legitimacy of the new pope vis-à-vis the pope emeritus in a church where the papal ministry has become less institutional and more charismatic.

Benedict XVI's office and ministry as bishop of Rome and pope ceased on February 28, 2013, at 8 p.m. Rome time. There are some who are not fully aware of this, surprisingly also among those who want to support Pope Francis by trying to extract from the predecessor unnecessary public statements about the supposedly perfect continuity with his successor. This attempt to defend Pope Francis on the basis of the statements of Benedict XVI has created a dangerous precedent and does not come without caveats and costs, including the endless interpretations of Francis's pontificate as being in "continuity or discontinuity" with his predecessor.

---

<sup>23</sup> See Lucio Brunelli, "Così eleggemmo papa Ratzinger," *Limes* 4 (2005): 291–300.

<sup>24</sup> See Andrea Tornielli, "Viganò's Resignation: Background and Unanswered Questions," *Vatican Insider*, March 22, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See Massimo Faggioli, "Benedict's Untimely Meditation: How the Pope Emeritus's Disappointing Essay on Sex Abuse Is Being Weaponized," *Commonweal* (April 12, 2019).

Whatever the institutionalization of the papacy tried to control in the charismatization of the papal role since the First Vatican Council of 1869–1870 (the declarations on papal primacy and papal infallibility), the papacy embodies now a power more charismatic than it used to be, and more charismatic than institutional. All the institutional powers of the papacy have been transferred to Francis, but not all of its charismatic powers. To paraphrase what has been written about the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama, “until there was a black presidency it was impossible to conceive of the limitations of one,”<sup>26</sup> we can say that until there was a pope emeritus, it was impossible to conceive of the limitations that the pope emeritus could create for the actual pope. In this sense the effort to build a periodization of Francis’s pontificate cannot ignore the periodization of what can be called the extended pontificate of Benedict XVI, a post-resignation papacy made possible by the hyper-mediatization of Roman Catholicism.

### *Francis’s Plan and Vision*

To understand the role of the pope in an age in which church politics are influenced by modern mass media, one has to question the relationship between the agenda of the conclave (and the pre-conclave official and unofficial meetings) and the agenda of the pope the conclave elects.<sup>27</sup>

On the one hand, Francis seemingly received a mandate from the conclave (to which Francis referred in some interviews after his election) to stabilize the central government of the Catholic

---

<sup>26</sup> Jelani Cobb, “The Matter of Black Lives,” *The New Yorker* (March 14, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> If the age of mass media has changed the papacy, it is time to consider how social media have changed the making of the pope and church politics in general. The role of social media during the two bishops’ synods of 2014 and 2015 and in the preparation of the bishops’ synod on the youth of 2018 have been instructive. See Mario Marazziti, *I papi di carta: nascita e svolta dell’informazione religiosa da Pio XII a Giovanni XXIII* (Genoa: Marietti, 1990); Federico Ruozi, *Il concilio in diretta. Il Vaticano II e la televisione tra informazione e partecipazione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).



Church after the crisis under Benedict XVI and to reform the Roman Curia. Francis interpreted that mandate in a rather expanded and surprising way. Francis's decision to call a two-step bishops' synod on family and marriage, announced seven months after his election, is an interesting parallel with John XXIII's surprising decision to call the Second Vatican Council just three months after his election. But Francis's interpretation of his pontificate—as one that goes way beyond the agenda of a law-and-order pope who is focused on the management of the bureaucracy—was evident in the first few weeks, with his emphasis on God's mercy and a non-ideological, more welcoming Catholicism. If the conclave elected Jorge Mario Bergoglio on the basis of a specific plan, it now seems clear that Francis had other plans.

The presence of the pope emeritus in the Vatican has created some constraints for Francis's pontificate, however, in terms of reconciling his own plans with those of his predecessor. Unlike the situation in which Paul VI dutifully took up the task of resuming the Second Vatican Council, which had been suspended by the death of John XXIII in June 1963, there was extraordinary pressure from the beginning of Francis's pontificate for him to signal an institutional, formal continuity with his living predecessor and his unfinished business. Francis did specifically address the goals and hopes of Benedict XVI in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* of June 2013 (especially in its introductory paragraphs) and then expressed his own concerns much more fully in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of November 2013.

To be sure, *Evangelii Gaudium* is an apostolic exhortation that follows the bishops' synod of 2012 on evangelization, but it is really the theological vision of Francis for his pontificate and is more directly linked to Bergoglio's leadership in the Latin American church (the fifth conference of Latin American bishops in Aparecida, May 2007) than to the 2012 synod. It is a settled conclusion that *Evangelii Gaudium* represents Francis's long-term vision for the church, stemming from an original interpretation of Vatican II that is distinct from that of John Paul II or Benedict XVI. But *Evangelii Gaudium* can also be seen as a development of the ecclesiological vision of *Gaudium et Spes* from the model of a sphere to a polyhedron expressive of Francis's complex understanding

of the church in globalization.<sup>28</sup> In this sense *Evangelii Gaudium* represents the formal announcement of the theology of the pontificate, and it thus has a periodizing value.

### *The Synodal Event of 2014–2015 and Amoris Laetitia*

But *Evangelii Gaudium* is not the center of Francis's pontificate from the point of view of either its chronology or significance. On October 8, 2013, Pope Francis announced that in October 2014 there would be an extraordinary general assembly of the synod of bishops on topics related to the family and evangelization. Subsequent communications made clear that the extraordinary general assembly would be followed by an ordinary general assembly of the synod of bishops in October 2015 on the same topics. The celebration of the two synods was followed on April 8, 2016, by the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which is a result of Francis's reflection on the discussions and outcomes of both synods.

My contention is that the twin synods of October 2014 (extraordinary synod) and October 2015 (ordinary synod) on the same topic (a first in the postconciliar history of the Catholic Church) occupy a central place in Francis's pontificate. The synodal experience of 2014 and 2015, and by extension from the announcement in the fall of 2013 to the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* in April 2016, represents the significant pivot point of the pontificate. Francis's leadership style and mission in the church had already become clear in the early months of his pontificate. But it was between the end of 2013 (after the announcement of the two synods) and April 2016 (with the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*) that Francis made his main argument to the church and to the world. In a sense, what Vatican II was for John XXIII, the synodal event was for Francis, both from a *theological* standpoint (how to understand the pontificate's relationship to the gospel and the tradition) and a *historical* standpoint (what took place).

---

<sup>28</sup> See Christoph Theobald, "L'exhortation apostolique *Evangelii Gaudium*. Esquisse d'une interprétation originale du Concile Vatican II," *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 46 (2015): 321–40, esp. 337–39.

This choice of the bishops' synods of 2014 and 2015 as the center of Francis's pontificate is not motivated by the attention they gave to particular issues—especially in relation to divorced and remarried Catholics—but rather because in that synodal event we can see many elements typical of Francis's pontificate, in some sense even a summation of his theological vision:

- *A church that goes forth to reach those in “irregular situations”*: What Francis started to say from the beginning of his pontificate about the need to break away from a moralistic understanding of Christianity found full expression in the synodal discussions around the complexity of moral judgments on issues of love, family, and marriage.
- *A church that is not afraid to address issues that for some had been settled forever just a few years before*: Francis's efforts at resuming the discourse on Vatican II and the development of the tradition did not remain abstract but faced head on the challenge of reassessing the adequacy of the church's language on new issues; this was especially courageous given that he was operating in a moment in church history marked by the resurgence of neo-traditionalist and neo-fundamentalist tendencies.
- *A church that is aware and honest about the tensions between the law and the gospel*: In the corpus of Vatican II there seems to be no discernable tension among *ius*, *iustitia*, and *misericordia*. This can be interpreted as part of the council's attempt to give credit to earthly realities, as well as to the church's witness for the progress of justice in this world. In *Gaudium et Spes* the idea of justice is articulated in terms of social, economic, and international justice, looking at the possible applicability of Catholic social doctrine to the political realm. It is part of the positive view of Vatican II on the world—positive in the sense of a still-limited awareness of the complex relationship and tensions among the law, the gospel, and the world. In contrast, Francis's take on the relationship between law and gospel is more pragmatic and less optimistic.
- *A church that recognizes the need for a renewed collegial and synodal dimension*: Francis's decision to call the two synods and the way he led the synodal event are part of

his assessment of the successes and the failures of the post-Vatican II institutional church to keep the promise made by the council in terms of a more participatory ecclesial community. His speech of October 17, 2015, for the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, is the most important speech of a pope to date on the issue, the papal *magna carta* of synodality.

- *A church that faces the complexity of its global dimension, where the issue of unity in diversity takes different shape than it has in the recent past:* Tensions around different theological and cultural comprehensions of new issues (such as homosexuality, divorce, polygamy, and premarital cohabitation) surfaced during the two synods of 2014 and 2015 as never before in an official gathering of bishops in the Vatican. Pope Francis made it possible for these differences to emerge, to be on full display, and to be part of the process of synthesis at the synod, both in his papal reception of the synod (as seen in *Amoris Laetitia*) and in the ecclesial reception of the synod.

Francis's view of the relationship between the magisterium and the people of the church shaped the whole synodal experience: from the questionnaires before the opening of the synod, to the relations between the synod and the media, to the understanding of the role of *Amoris Laetitia* as a papal document offered to a synodal reception by the church.

From a strictly historical point of view this post-synodal exhortation played a unique role in the reception of Francis's pontificate. The aftermath of the synod and the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* in April 2016 revealed several key elements of his pontificate.

One of these elements is the deepening, narrowing, and extremization of the opposition to Francis from 2016 in particular areas and circles of the church. On September 13, 2016, Francis wrote a letter to the bishops of Argentina (region of Buenos Aires) praising their pastoral solution for divorced and remarried Catholics (one of the issues he had addressed in *Amoris Laetitia*). Yet a letter critical of *Amoris Laetitia* was submitted that year by four cardinals (Carlo Caffarra, archbishop emeritus of Bologna; Raymond Burke, patron of the Sovereign Military Order of

Malta; Walter Brandmüller, president emeritus of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences; and Joachim Meisner, archbishop emeritus of Cologne) to the Holy Father and Cardinal Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>29</sup> Less than one year later another letter critical of *Amoris Laetitia*, the “Correctio filialis,” was sent to the pope and made public on September 24, 2017.<sup>30</sup>

These oppositions to *Amoris Laetitia* have come from a small number of Catholic aristocrats and intellectuals representing circles already known for their rejection of the teachings of Vatican II and their ideological proximity to traditionalist circles (such as the schismatic group of the Society of St. Pius X and other traditionalist, quasi-schismatic movements within Roman Catholicism). This confirms the periodizing role of the bishops’ synods of 2014 and 2015 and of *Amoris Laetitia* as the chronological center of a pontificate consciously facing a new kind of opposition to the papal magisterium in the Catholic Church: those who literally consider themselves more Catholic than the pope.

The second key element of Francis’s pontificate, which emerged in the reception of the two synods and *Amoris Laetitia*, is the different reception of papal teachings in different areas of global Catholicism. For example, the debate in the United States on particular issues addressed by the synods (“irregular situations” such as divorced and remarried Catholics and homosexuality) and by chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia* has no parallel in other areas of the world. From the very beginning of Francis’s pontificate, the militant, neoconservative, and neo-traditionalist factions of American Catholicism felt the need to ensure a hermeneutic of absolute literal continuity with John Paul II and Benedict XVI. In the United States and in other provinces of Anglo-Catholicism in the world there has emerged a new wave

---

<sup>29</sup> See Joshua McElwee, “Four Cardinals Openly Challenge Francis over ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 14, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> See Joshua McElwee, “Scholars Say Correction of Francis for ‘Heresy’ Marked by Hypocrisy, Lack of Signatories,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 25, 2017.

of Catholic traditionalism (liturgical and otherwise) that Francis's papacy has not created but has helped reveal.

The synods and *Amoris Laetitia* made clear the differentiated receptions of the pontificate in different areas of the world. The churches whose attention is more focused on *Laudato Si'* than on *Amoris Laetitia* are churches belonging to a different cultural tradition as well as to different latitudes and longitudes on the world map. The relevance of pastoral provisions for divorced and remarried Catholics are not the same in the Christian West (where Christianity used to be the default) as they are in the churches of Asia, where Christians have always been a tiny minority and where climate change and the depletion of natural resources represent more imminent existential threats.

The synodal events and *Amoris Laetitia* represent the periodizing center of Francis's pontificate because they were the culmination of one of its key characteristics as a papacy for a new Catholic Church that needs to reassess how the global dimension affects its understanding of the theological and magisterial tradition (*historical* alignment) and how it influences its diversities on the world map (*geographical* alignment).

### *Permanent Shifts of Francis's Pontificate*

The tensions that have become typical of Francis's pontificate are much more related to his reactions to the doctrinal and political (*latu sensu*) balance of Roman Catholicism and to his defiance of the John Paul II–Benedict XVI paradigm than they are to *Amoris Laetitia* alone.

In terms of its place in history, Pope Francis's pontificate is likely to take on a role similar to John XXIII's in contemporary church history, for three reasons.

The first is the link between the emphasis on the poor church and on the personal embodiment of this ecclesiology. The focus on the "poor church, church for the poor" expressed by Pope Francis a few hours after his election comes from Vatican II and from its visionary pope, John XXIII, who in his life always cherished (without ever romanticizing it) the humble social conditions of his family as an integral part of his spiritual life and as a gift. The extraordinary character of John XXIII (Angelo Roncalli) is shown

by the fact that he opened the process for the redefinition of the papacy not through a plan or a project, but thanks to the “confluence in him of papal office, personal sanctity, and prophesy—a confluence that is exceptional in church history.”<sup>31</sup>

The second reason is that both Roncalli and Bergoglio brought with them to the Vatican an idea of a church that would be more global and more historical than it was before their election, and they connected this to the signature moments in their pontificates: Vatican II and the synodal experience, respectively. Similar to John XXIII’s conciliar aspirations, Francis had confidence in a collegial and synodal church that could bring in a new consciousness of the role of the church in the global world. Collegiality and synodality are not so much effective church-management strategies as they are ways to make the gospel message heard in today’s world.

The third reason is Francis’s confidence in the ability of the gospel to run the church, sometimes in defiance of the church’s normative dimension. Canon law, the catechism, and the Catholic tradition are read in light of an understanding of the whole Catholic theological and magisterial tradition that came from Vatican II. In Francis, *ressourcement* is not just a renewed attention to the sources of ancient and medieval Christianity but also to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This has critical consequences for his use and understanding of the normative dimension of the church. This move must be viewed together with Francis’s meta-doctrinal shift, the primacy of pastorality, which was also the most important theological shift of Vatican II: “The pastorality that marks Vatican II can be defined as the art of giving men and women access to the one source of the Gospel message.”<sup>32</sup>

For these three reasons, and many others, Francis’s pontificate can be seen as transitional only in the sense that it is about the shift from a balance that was assumed to be definitive to a different—maybe not necessarily new—kind of balance in Catholicism.

---

<sup>31</sup> Giuseppe Alberigo, *Papa Giovanni XXIII 1881–1963* (Bologna: EDB, 2000), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Theobald, *Accéder à la source*, 697. See also Christoph Theobald, “*Dans les traces . . .*” *de la constitution ‘Dei Verbum’ du Concile Vatican II. Bible, théologie, et pratiques de lecture* (Paris: Cerf, 2009).