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**Pope Francis: Ten Years of Parish Renewal**

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On March 17, 2013, a Jesuit cardinal from Argentina, Jorge Bergoglio, made a striking entrance on the world stage. Having chosen the name Francis after the great medieval saint from Assisi, he appeared on the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica dressed simply in the white papal cassock, without the traditional ermine cape. He then broke precedent by asking the vast throng of people to do him a favor: “I ask you to pray to the Lord to bless me.” The pope then bowed his head as the huge crowd grew reverently silent, an iconic moment that continues to inspire millions of people around the world who love and respect Pope Francis.

During his ten years as Bishop of Rome, he has maintained a favorable rating of over 80% among American Catholics, according to Pew Research polls. At the same time, he has received more public criticism than any other pope in history. For example, on the tenth anniversary of the Francis papacy German Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, former head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith accused the pope of sowing doctrinal confusion and putting too much emphasis on social issues like climate change. U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke repeated his claim that the Church under Francis is like a ship without a rudder. The late Australian Cardinal George Pell, who served on the Council of Cardinals for five years, wrote an anonymous memo in 2022, declaring the Francis papacy a “disaster and catastrophe” and calling on the next pope to restore doctrinal clarity in faith and morals.

In the United States, opposition to Pope Francis has been especially strong. Writing in *First* *Things*, papal biographer George Weigel claimed the decade long papacy of Francis has left the Vatican in a state of “fear and trepidation.” He accused Francis of failing to defend persecuted Catholics around the world, of giving China too much power to appoint bishops, and of limiting access to the Tridentine Latin Mass. Furthermore, Weigel accused Francis of disrespecting the legacy of Pope John Paul II by sowing confusion on settled moral issues and by allowing divorced and remarried Catholics to receive communion. The *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat declared to his large audience that Francis by his words and deeds has needlessly multiplied divisions in the Church, bringing it to the edge of schism. He called the Pope’s efforts to curtail the Tridentine Mass a “micromanaged cruelty.”

The tenth anniversary of the Francis papacy also prompted more positive appraisals of the pope’s ministry. His biographer, Austen Ivereigh said Francis has transformed the internal life and culture of the Church by insisting that true power is exercised through service. For example, the Roman Curia is now charged with serving the world-wide episcopate and actually treats visiting bishops with greater respect than in the past. *America* magazine defended the pope’s unprecedented practice of giving interviews, pointing out that his unscripted comments are not expounding doctrine but offering pastoral advice designed to evoke in his audience their own encounter with the God of “closeness, compassion and tenderness.”

The highly respected ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz wrote the best theological assessment of the Francis papacy that I have seen. It was originally presented by Gaillardetz in a lecture given in the Vatican and is available in *Theological Studies.* *The National Catholic Reporter* published a brief excerpt in which Gaillardetz praised Francis for his emphasis on the baptismal priesthood that has empowered lay Catholics to participate more fully in the life of the Church. At the same time, he criticized the pope for his “regrettable foot dragging” on ordaining women to the deaconate and virtuous married men to the priesthood, as was recommended by the 2019 Amazon Synod. Gaillardetz provided an appropriate tagline: Francis has opened wide a door to a “thoroughly reformed church,” but has been “reluctant to step through it himself.”

For me and many others committed to the Vatican II reforms, Francis has validated our efforts and reenergized us for the ongoing task of appropriating the conciliar teachings, directives and spirit. There were times since the Council ended in 1965 when reform minded Catholics did not feel supported by the Vatican. For example, in the 1980s the American bishops produced influential pastoral letters on the economy and on peace that generated a great deal of public interest. As our bishops tried to produce a third pastoral on women’s issues, Vatican interventions squelched the project and made it virtually impossible for our bishops to produce another pastoral letter on controversial public issues. This and other Vatican warnings and restrictions made some of us feel like we did not have full papal support for carrying out some of the controversial conciliar reforms.

Pope Francis, who did not participate in the Council, has totally changed that perception. His commitment to the conciliar reforms has been consistent and explicit. One of my theologian friends spoke for many when he exclaimed, “it certainly is energizing to have the pope on our side.”

With praise for pastors and parishioners, the pope has emphasized the crucial importance of the parish in the reform of the Church. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel,* he insists “The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it preserves great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community” (n28). Carrying on the mission of Christ, the parish is “a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach” (ibid). Francis views the parish as a genuine “home with open doors” for all and not a “ self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. “ The parish is a “family among families” with a “Welcome” sign on its door. It makes Christ present where people “earn their daily bread.” He wants parishes to be “schools of service” where parishioners nourished by the Eucharist learn to share in Christ’s mission to reach out to the outcasts and those on the margins of society.

Francis has called for closer collaboration between pastors and parishioners, what we could call a “synergistic relationship” between the baptismal priesthood and the ordained priesthood. The lay faithful are not “guests” in the parish. The parish is their home and they are called to take care of their parish home. Pastors must remember their roots, their previous life as members of the baptismal priesthood. They must cultivate the habit of collaboration with their parishioners as their normal everyday way of interacting, which prepares for more formal consultations on new pastoral initiatives. Pastors and parishioners should collaborate in bearing Christian witness in the secular world of work, culture, politics, art and social communication.

Francis has consistently based his reform efforts on a theology of baptism that sees it as the primary sacrament and not holy orders. By virtue of baptism, we all share in the priesthood of Christ and his mission to spread the kingdom. Francis has institutionalized this priority of the baptismal priesthood by officially installing men and women as lectors and catechists and by appointing lay women and men to leadership positions in the Roman Curia. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*n12*), Vatican II declared “The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the Holy One cannot err in matters of belief,” blessed as they are with a “supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*).” Francis, who during his ministry in Argentina developed a very positive appreciation of the popular piety of ordinary Christians, has an instinctive trust in the collective wisdom of the people of God, which has motivated him to call various synods that begin with broad-based listening sessions to determine the interests and concerns of the people.

In its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II taught that the liturgy is the “source and summit” of the Christian life and designed its reform to promote “full, active and conscious participation” in the Mass. Through word and gesture, Francis has helped the whole Church continue the process of mining the riches of the liturgy. His well-publicized statement that receiving communion is not a “prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” encourages all of us to open our hearts to the spiritual power of sharing in the eucharistic banquet. His symbolic act of washing the feet of two young women on his first Holy Thursday, which drew a lot of publicity, reminds us that the liturgy calls all of us to a life of service. He has defended his controversial decision to restrict the use of the Tridentine liturgy granted by Pope Benedict by maintaining that he was trying to preserve Church unity and be faithful to the Vatican II reforms. By insisting on the conciliar directive that bishops conferences are responsible for liturgical translation, he has opened up the possibility of better English translations in the future that will enhance participation in the Mass. Finally, the Pope has provided excellent advice to preachers that can improve the spiritual impact of homilies: Base the homily on the central message of the biblical texts; Frame the homily as a dialogue between God and the people; Be succinct; Draw on personal encounters with Christ; and Incorporate vivid images (*The Joy of the Gospel* n135-159). Francis himself models these points in his frequent preaching, which draws on his own relationship with Christ and includes memorable metaphors, for example, describing the Church as a “field hospital” and dedicated pastors as shepherds who take on the “smell of the sheep.”

Celebrating the family as the “domestic church” and the “fundamental cell of society,” Francis has urged pastors to find creative ways ,to improve marriage preparation programs and to accompany their parishioners striving to form true marital partnerships. The pope has taken a number of concrete steps to assist pastors in this ministry. In 2015, he called the Synod on the Vocation and Mission of the Family and followed up with his 2016 Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of Love* that included an inspiring meditation on Paul’s *Hymn to Love* (1Cor 13:1-13) and pastoral advice for couples in troubled and irregular marriages. In 2021, he initiated a year-long study of the content of *The Joy of Love*. And in 2023, Francis initiated a Vatican led process of creating a catechumenate for married life, modeled on the catechumenate for adults entering the Catholic Church. The pope has taken these steps because “many couples receive only superficial preparation for marriage,” making it difficult to withstand the inevitable crises that come their way. Subsequent failures can leave deep wounds, even cynicism about the God-given “vocation to love.” Therefore, Francis called on pastors to exercise “zeal and creativity” in accompanying married couples on their journey together so they can be true “guardians of life,” raising children, caring for their elderly and serving others in need. On family ministry, the pope has not only supported the good work of pastors and parishioners but has offered wise guidance and concrete plans to improve this crucial parish ministry.

In summary, for me and others dedicated to implementing the Vatican II reforms in parish life, Pope Francis has provided welcome support, wise guidance and realistic hope for further progress.

My next Reflections will examine Pope Francis as the leader of a world church and will include his emphasis on a “culture of encounter” and his checkered record on women’s issues.