**Reflections June, 2023 Vol 45 No 6**

**Pope Francis: Ten Years as Leader of a World Church**

**James J. Bacik**

 The ten-year evaluations of the papacy of Pope Francis have ranged from the critics who have called it a disaster and a catastrophe to supporters who see it as a prime example of authentic servant leadership. From my perspective as a parish priest, Francis has provided welcomed support and wise guidance. As a theologian, I see Francis as an effective leader implementing the vision of a “world church” described by the influential German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1906-1984). Writing before Vatican II actually started, Rahner suggested we see it not so much as the culmination of previous liturgical, theological and ecumenical movements, but more as the tiny beginning of a new era when the Church will for the first time understand itself as a world church. Rahner envisioned fundamental changes in Church organization and practice. The Church will not be dominated by European bishops and will not function like an export firm disseminating a Vatican version of Christianity around the globe. It will function more like a communion of local churches, all rooted in their native cultures. The Bishop of Rome will engage in dialogue with other religious leaders. National conferences of bishops will have greater authority to make regional adaptations. Vatican curial officials will not dictate norms and policies to local churches but will serve their needs. Liturgical celebrations will reflect the best of local cultures. As a minority community all over the world, the Church will not be able to impose its will on society, but can focus its attention on more effective ways of humanizing diverse cultures.

 In 2013, when Jorge Bergoglio was elected the first pope from South America, he became the leader of a world church with more than two-thirds of its 1.2 billion members residing outside the West. Given this reality, Pope Francis has given great attention to local churches on the peripheries and in the global south. For example, he has visited African countries five times, including a four-day apostolic journey to the Republic of the Congo, while spending very little time in European countries.

 The Council of Cardinal Advisors, first established by Francis in 2014, includes cardinals representing the major geographic regions of Asia, Africa, South America, North America, Europe and Australia. During his decade long papacy, Francis has held eight consistories, appointing 121 cardinals from 66 countries. In the 2022 consistory, Francis appointed cardinals from Mongolia, East Timor, Singapore and Nigeria but none from the traditional European dioceses of Venice, Milan, Berlin and Paris. Of the cardinals eligible to vote in the next conclave, only 40% are European compared to the 52% who elected Francis ten years ago. For the first time, there will be a voting cardinal from the Indian state of Goa, one representing Latin America’s indigenous people and another from India’s lower Dalit class.

 In his writings, Francis often quotes national conferences of bishops, recognizing Rome does not have a monopoly on pastoral wisdom and that local bishops generally know best how to evangelize their culture. By returning primary responsibility for liturgical translations to regional hierarchies, he has limited the power of the Vatican and demonstrated respect for the competency of local experts. In sum, the pope has made significant progress in implementing the world church envisioned by Karl Rahner.

 For Pope Francis, his approach to church reform is not based on any theological analysis or theory, but on his own pastoral instincts and virtues. He has an innate distrust of top-down approaches to church renewal, much preferring bottom-up approaches based on the lived faith of ordinary believers. Trusting that the Holy Spirit guides the church, he is not afraid to think creatively or act boldly. As a Jesuit, he trusts the process of spiritual discernment in determining God’s will not only for individual Christians but also for the whole Church. His personal humility enables him to admit when he is wrong and to learn from people of good will with different viewpoints. His commitment to Christ’s command to love our neighbor emphasizes concrete ways of accompanying persons who are forgotten, weak, marginalized, poor and vulnerable.

To explain his vision of a world Church that reflects his own spirituality, Francis uses the image of a “polyhedron,” a solid multi-sided geometric figure which represents the ideal of unity in diversity. For Francis, a world church must be united in commitment to Christ and his mission while celebrating diverse expressions of the fundamental faith that enrich the whole community. In the polyhedric Church of Pope Francis, all are welcome and no one is excluded. Everyone can use their distinctive gifts and talents to create a multipolar Church that is by God’s grace greater than the sum of its parts and is a more effective instrument of the kingdom in the world.

As the leader of a global church, Pope Francis has used his influence to urge citizens of the earth to take better care of our common home and to attend to the needs of the weak and vulnerable who inhabit it. He wrote his 2015 ground-breaking encyclical *Laudato Si* to support the proposed Paris Climate Agreement, which was subsequently adopted by 195 countries and signed on April 22, 2016. Addressing all the citizens of planet earth, the pope insisted on the “immediacy and urgency” of the ecological crisis which scientific studies have demonstrated is a “result of human activity” (n23). Speaking poetically, he called creation “a caress of God” and a “precious book” of the “inexhaustible riches of God” (n30-48). Drawing on his theological conviction that “everything is interrelated,” he insisted that an “integral ecology” must join care for the earth with care for all human beings, including the most vulnerable (n49-66).

Recognizing the importance of *Laudato Si*, a U.N. official declared that the pope “played a significant role in the negotiations for the Paris Agreement,” especially by providing a powerful moral argument for controlling global warming and by securing strong climate commitments from the Polish and Latin American delegations.

Since the signing of the Paris Agreement, Francis has continued to advocate for an integral ecology to protect the earth and its most vulnerable inhabitants. For example, in 2020 before the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, he joined other religious leaders pleading with the international community to take “speedy, responsible and shared action to safeguard, restore and heal our wounded humanity and the home entrusted to our stewardship.” In a written address for the joint meeting, Francis recognized the presence of various religious and spiritual traditions, but insisted “no cultural, political or social borders or barriers prevent us from standing together.” On the tenth anniversary of the Francis papacy, Christina Figueres, one of the major architects of the 2015 Paris Agreement, lauded the pope for his integrated approach to the environmental crisis, suggesting that the pope’s voice is “one of the strongest in the world, if not the strongest.”

As the leader of a global church, Pope Francis has made numerous efforts to reach out to other religious leaders. For example, in 2016 in Havana, Cuba he had an historic two-hour meeting with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia which they characterized as “open” and “unambiguous.” In a joint statement, they affirmed “we are not competitors but brothers,” united by the “mission to preach the Gospel of Christ in the world today. They urged “Catholics and Orthodox in all countries to learn to live together in peace and love.” Mindful of a millennium of division between their Churches, they expressed hope that their meeting would contribute to the “re-establishment of the unity willed by God.”

During his 2021 pastoral visit to Iraq, Francis met with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highly esteemed 90-year-old leader of Shia Islam, seeking his help for Iraq’s long beleaguered Christian minority. After the historic meeting, the Shia leader released a statement affirming “his concern that Christian citizens should live like all Iraqis in peace and security and with their full constitutional rights.”

During his decade long papacy, Francis has been a tireless advocate for peace and reconciliation in our violent world. In his 2023 World Day of Peace message, the pope lamented the war in Ukraine, which not only harmed those directly involved, but also those suffering the collateral damage of limited grain shipments and escalating fuel prices. He went on to encourage all of us “to heal our society and our planet, to lay the foundations for a more just and peaceful world, and to commit ourselves to pursuing a good that is truly common.”

In pursuit of peace, Francis has given special attention to countries embroiled in regional conflicts and civil wars. A good example is South Sudan, a very poor African country that gained independence from Sudan in 2011 and has been plagued with civil conflicts between warring factions. In 2019, Francis hosted a retreat for rival leaders of the predominantly Christian nation, urging them to work for peace in their troubled land. In February 2023, Francis made a “pilgrimage of peace” to South Sudan where he sternly urged the leaders to revive the now stalled peace process and stop the continuing bloodshed.

For the most part, Francis has not been very successful in using his moral authority to halt violence in a world he describes as fighting a “Third World War piecemeal.” In 2015, he did play a crucial role in brokering the restoration of U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba.

On women’s issues, Francis has gotten mixed reviews. His supporters note some positive achievements: halting the spurious investigation of U.S. women religious; appointing women to high positions in the Roman Curia; enabling women to hold official positions as acolytes, catechists and lectors. Of special note, Francis has invited women to be voting participants in the upcoming October 2023 Synod in the Vatican. There are many questions about how these women will be chosen and what experiences and outlooks they will bring to the discussion, but most commentators see this as a positive development.

Critics of the pope are upset that he is closed minded on the issue of women’s ordination and has not pushed forward the synodal proposal to ordain women to the deaconate. They detect a patriarchal bias in his comments on women: for example, calling women theologians “strawberries on the cake” and comparing Europe to a “grandmother, no longer fertile or vibrant.” As someone said, “Pope Francis sometimes sounds like an elderly Latin American male.”

My own take is that Francis has made significant progress expanding women’s role in the church, but holds a position on gender complementarity that precludes more radical progress. Specifically, he has endorsed the “iconic argument” of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) who insists it is metaphysically impossible for women to be ordained priests because only males can truly represent Christ, the bridegroom who sustains and guides his bride the Church. Francis himself has said the path to women’s ordination to the priesthood seems to be closed. For those who find this closure distressing, Karl Rahner, a contemporary of Balthasar, has rejected the iconic argument and insisted there is no legitimate historical or theological reason not to ordain women priests, which frees the Church to pursue that possibility. If Francis does not come to discern this possibility, another pope could.

For me, reflecting on Pope Francis and his ten years as head of a world church has generated some personal reactions: pride that Francis is such an authentic human being and dedicated servant leader; gratitude that he has supported parish renewal; appreciation that he has been such an effective advocate for an integral ecology; respect for his perseverance as a spokesperson for world peace; and hope that his long range strategy for comprehensive Church reform will prove fruitful in building up the Body of Christ and spreading the kingdom of justice and peace in the world.