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The Legacy of Pope Francis

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

After a honeymoon period of public acclaim as the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis' words and actions faced more criticism in later years. Whether his words and actions remain consequential will depend significantly upon his successor.

COMMENTARY

There is no doubt that Pope Francis was a [charismatic and inspiring](#) figure to many. However, controversy also dogged him in various ways. Various quarters within the Catholic community worldwide remain dissatisfied with his handling of child abuse by clergy as they wanted him to implement a zero-tolerance policy. He met backlash for [derogatory language](#) about homosexuals, despite a seeming openness. While regarded by some as too progressive, others saw him as a conservative with old-fashioned values.

Given that the Catholic Church is the world's largest religious organisation with vast resources and soft power, as well as being a nation-state, it is worth reflecting on the legacy of Pope Francis and the potential changes that may occur under his successor.

Environment

Pope Francis' encyclical (papal letter) *Laudato Si'* (2015) became a beacon signalling that the environmental crisis should concern us not merely on a pragmatic or economic level, but as a matter of deep ethical and spiritual concern. As a voice on this, Francis was arguably [deeply inspirational](#) and effective.

As an encyclical, Francis' writings are not binding on future popes, but they would be very hard to ignore. Also, given the Church's investment in this, it is hard to see any

rollback. However, with climate talks seemingly not going forward and many ordinary people seemingly not enthused, it is hard to say [how effective Francis](#) and other advocates for fighting climate change have really been.

Much will depend on Francis' successor and how far it remains on the Church's agenda. Francis' concern for [indigenous people](#) and what they may teach us about the environment is also something a successor may take on or ignore.

Women

Catholic feminists have attacked Francis for his language, which seems to leave women in traditional household roles. However, he has also opened doors for women by appointing them to unprecedented [positions of authority](#) within the Vatican. Most notably, the role of Secretary General of the Governorate of Vatican City State was bestowed on Sister Raffaella Petrini, something unimaginable before his time.

Whether this affects any lasting change remains to be seen. Any successor can simply reappoint men to the senior Vatican roles, making Francis' changes a blip, or a precedent may have been set that allows the Church to give women more senior roles. Francis has changed nothing doctrinally or in terms of [women's positions](#) regarding the priesthood. As such, it remains simply an experiment that may or may not continue.

China

In 2018, the Holy See and the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) entered into a [formal arrangement](#) for the bishops of the official Catholic Church in the PRC to be recognised by the Vatican. This arrangement needs to be [periodically renewed](#) and agreed upon, and on the surface, it seems remarkable. However, Catholic and PRC officials had been meeting behind the scenes for decades, and Francis' arrangement merely formalised this.

Opposition mainly came from the underground Catholic Church in China, which had long marked its identity as an oppressed group. While a successor can let the agreement lapse, this seems unlikely as it would create tensions with the Catholics in China who have embraced these changes and the PRC government. That it merely formalised previous informal arrangements suggests it will not be overturned.

Globalisation

Perhaps Francis's biggest structural change in the Church is his appointment of many new cardinals from the [Global South](#). When Francis was elected in 2013, over two-thirds of the eligible Cardinals were from the Global North, and over half were from Europe alone. Now Europe has a minority of cardinals, and the majority of those eligible to elect a new pope (aged under 80) are from outside the Western world.

Francis' appointments reflect the global dynamics of the Church. Most of the [world's Catholics](#) are in the Global South, and these voices are now more prominent in the power structures. How far this affects the election of a new pope remains to be seen. Factionalism between more liberal and more conservative voices may be most significant.

Interfaith

Given the [heated debates](#) over Francis' words in his dialogue with youths at the Catholic Junior College, Singapore, it is clear that despite interreligious dialogue (IRD) being enshrined for Catholics in the documents of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, it remains a matter of contestation. Different figures in Singapore either [praised or condemned](#) Francis' words of encouragement to be brave and open.

While some contrast Benedict XVI, the previous pope, and Francis in this, this may be overstated. While a cardinal, Benedict had stayed away from the first (interfaith) Assisi Day of Prayer held by his predecessor John Paul II in what was seen as a sign of disapproval. However, as Pope, Benedict held his own Assisi Day of Prayer and even invited a Humanist (atheist) representative. Francis has changed nothing in doctrine or practice. However, his pastoral approach in personal encounters may seem different from his predecessors. A successor cannot change official Catholic teaching supporting IRD, but their personal style will be significant.

Compassion

Compassion may seem core for a religious leader, while it is inherent in Catholic social teachings. Still, few really exemplify it in practice or touch people with their practice of it. Many have expressed some amazement that Francis was in [daily contact](#) with the Christian community in Gaza during the current war there.

He expressed his concern for them and all people in that terrible situation. He also spoke out against war in all forms, as seen in his words spoken in the final [Urbi et Orbi](#) ("To the City and the World) Easter address before his death. His words for the poor, the marginalised, and oppressed, especially in the phrase "the [globalisation of indifference](#)" also struck a chord as he drew from his Jesuit and Latin American liberation roots.

As a principle, compassion, or agape (love), will not change, but whether another figure can exemplify it like Francis is open to question. It certainly sets a tone. A different figure with a different persona could seemingly set a different agenda for Catholics.

Reputation

The global child [sexual abuse scandal](#) has rocked the church for decades. From a slow start, Francis did far more than any predecessor to address this and arguably sought to change structures too. He was not without criticism for missteps; some see the Church as not having gone far enough. Certainly, its reputation is sullied.

Early on, Francis' personal example brought great support from many, far beyond the Catholic or even Christian fold. Visiting prisoners, [living simply](#) without papal pomp, [washing the feet](#) of both non-Christians and women, and showing a gracious and personal touch in encounters endeared him to the world. While events and words have shaken his early honeymoon period, he personally endeavoured much for the Church's reputation. A less charismatic pope or one with a different agenda may affect the Church's reputation for the better or worse.

Succession

The [successor as pope](#) will have a huge influence on what continues from Francis' time. Much could simply be swept aside, or he may have set a precedent. The Church may wish to choose a compromise candidate who is simply a safe pair of hands. There are also those lobbying for a much more conservative figure who will be more adversarial in the global culture wars. A figure of the Global South may also emerge who takes the discussion in a different direction.

Given the secrecy of the process, it is impossible to make any reasonable guess on who will succeed Francis. Whoever succeeds him will have a huge global following and a considerable influence on our fractious world.

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