

IN DEATH OF FRANCIS. EVALUATIONS, EXPECTATIONS, HOPES

Only history, one day, will perhaps be able to provide a comprehensive and global assessment of Francis' papacy, which has just ended. Yesterday the pontiff, although fatigued, wanted to celebrate the earthly Easter with the blessing "Urbi et Orbi", to the city of Rome and to the world. And this morning, exhausted from his labours, he rendered his soul to God.

Our Movement, which has commented on individual choices and decisions on several occasions, now expresses its first overall assessment, without obviously claiming that it is definitive, also because individual aspects will one day have to be examined by providing documentation that is not currently available.

“Almost from the end of the world”

By electing Jorge Mario Bergoglio – born in 1936 in Argentina from parents of Piedmontese origin, a Jesuit – as bishop of Rome the Conclave, on 13 March 2013, made a choice, partly innovative and partly confirmatory, at least from a geographical point of view: the newly elected confirmed the decision, begun in 1978 with the election of the Polish Karol Wojtyła, and continued in 2005 with the election of the German Joseph Ratzinger. And, that is, the end of the Italian bishops of Rome, in place since 1522. At the same time, it softened the practice, because the Argentine pope was also the son of Italian parents.

And he, introducing himself with a “Buona sera” to the very large crowd gathered in St. Peter’s Square to greet the newly elected, specified that the cardinals had gone to look for him “almost to the end of the world”. Thus a “familiar” contact was established between the pope and the people, a characteristic that dominated the entire pontificate. Leading Francis, at times, to make spontaneous statements that embarrassed the Secretariat of State and Vatican diplomacy.

The complex relations with Ratzinger

Formally, relations were good, not to say affectionate, between the new pope and the previous one who, in a resounding gesture, had announced his resignation on 11 February 2013, formally implementing it at the end of that month. And never once did Francis admit to having had a disagreement with him. Some commentators, however, believe that the coexistence, in the Vatican, of the reigning pope with the pope emeritus was not idyllic. This is proved, they add, by the growing contrast between Bergoglio and the (for a certain period) prefect of the Papal Household, Msgr. Georg Gänswein, the former pontiff's personal secretary. There are, therefore, well-founded reasons to believe - for example - that it was Ratzinger himself (with other prelates of the Curia and elsewhere) who tried to convince Francis not to accept at all the conclusions of the Amazon Synod, which in 2019 had proposed the priestly ordination of deacons who were already married. Not only was the pope in favor of “no,” but, in *Querida Amazonia* – the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of 2020 – he avoided the topic entirely, even if it was to reject the proposal that he disliked. Therefore, anyone reading that text, without having first followed the synodal debate, would know nothing about it. An irrefutable demonstration of how, concretely, Bergoglio struggled to accept the dynamics of synodality.

Theology of the “pueblo”, or of “liberation”? Saint Romero

Regarding “Liberation Theology” (LT), it seems to us that Bergoglio, when he was in Argentina, was not an outspoken supporter of it; he was rather oriented towards the “Teología del pueblo” (Theology of the People, ToP), especially supported by the Argentine Jesuit Fr. Juan Carlos Scannone (1931-

2019), to whom Jorge Mario was very close. Compared to the LT, which insisted heavily on the importance of the economy and used Marxist categories to interpret reality and society, the ToP was more 'people-centred'. A vision, perhaps, a little "romantic", or tinged with "populism", which then found itself in difficulty when faced with the "people" (the common people) who, in various countries, supported, and support, illiberal regimes which, founded in words on the "pueblo", in practice do not at all serve the interests of the popular classes who, almost seduced, vote for them, both in the South and in the North of the world.

It should be added, however, that pope Francis, after deciding to have Monsignor Oscar Romero beatified in 2015, canonised on 14 October 2018 as a "martyr for justice" the Archbishop of San Salvador, who had been assassinated on 24 March 1980 - while celebrating mass! - by a killer hired by the Salvadoran military junta. The LT followers consider the prelate to be one of their illustrious members, although Romero did not openly declare himself to be one of their exponents.

John Paul II had treated the archbishop almost always coldly; the Polish pope considered some Salvadoran priests and catechists murdered by para-military gangs as "communist guerrillas" simply because they were on the side of the poor. In the Roman Curia itself and at the top of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Council), several cardinals were extremely hostile to Romero. In this context we greatly appreciated Francis' decision to place the "martyr of justice" bishop on the altars.

Evangelii gaudium, the joy of the Gospel

On 24 November 2013, the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* came out, in which Francis presented not so much the possible reforms he would undertake but, rather, the *animus*, that is, the perspective with which to look at and interpret his mission as bishop of Rome, and therefore, according to Catholic theology, pastor of the universal Church. And he saw the source and light of his actions precisely in the Gospel. It was an important underlining to place and frame exactly his way of being as "primus" of the College of Bishops and of the entire People of God.

If we evaluate the acts and decisions of his pontificate with this prism, we can glimpse their internal logic but, it seems to us, it also manifests hesitations and contradictions because he was unable to dissolve some lumps that, perhaps once inevitable, given the circumstances of the time, today, precisely with the freedom that the Gospel offers, could certainly be cut away. But how, if for many bishops and faithful those knots were and are a faithful translation of Jesus' message, while for other bishops and faithful they are historical choices, perhaps legitimate then, but frankly unsustainable today? This tension between the vigilant custody of the past, and the need for formidable changes in the Roman Catholic Church, ran through his entire pontificate. But, "opening processes", Francis was convinced that what he could not or did not know how to do today, others would soon accomplish after him.

Intransigence on priestly celibacy, abortion and end of life

Bergoglio has always tried to bypass, or hinder, a free discussion on the possible "optionality" of celibacy for priests in the Latin Church. No Synod has been able to deal, in depth and freely, with possible changes to the current law. But the Amazon Synod in 2019 had proposed that married deacons be consecrated priests there. However, shortly before the apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (which totally ignores the hypothesis) was released in February 2020, Ratzinger, the pope emeritus, together with Cardinal Robert Sarah, published a book that staunchly defended the inviolability of priestly celibacy in the Latin Church. An obvious way to influence Bergoglio and push him to oppose the hypotheses of the Synod of 2019.

Even on another distinct issue, linked to sexuality, Francis was harsh: he repeatedly called “hitmen” doctors who, in compliance with state laws, provided assistance to women who, by decision of conscience, wanted to terminate their pregnancy. And even on the end of life (allowed by law in some countries) he was far from the increasingly explicit expectations, in favor of freedom of conscience, that arise from both the secular and Christian worlds (especially those linked to the Reformation).

The poor: the papacy's worry

“How I would like a Church that is poor and for the poor!”: thus, in reference to the name he chose, Francis exclaimed on 16 March 2013, meeting a very large group of representatives of the world media, who had come to Rome specifically to follow the conclave that had elected him three days earlier. He has often returned to the subject, and in the management of the finances of the Holy See and the Vatican City State he has tried to introduce structural changes to realize that desire. Has he succeeded?

The answer, it seems to us, must be articulated. In the meantime, to give a hammer blow to a ritual that might have seemed princely, he decided not to live in the Apostolic Palace, but chose to keep, for his rest, the small room that, as a cardinal, he had occupied in Casa Santa Marta during the Conclave. He then consumed his meals in the refectory of the same "Vatican guesthouse" where, in normal times, dozens of prelates who live there meet.

He made a similar choice for cars: whether he was visiting a Roman parish or abroad, he wanted a modest one, not a presidential one.

As for the Vatican's complex economic-financial network, he made simplifications and changes to avoid past scandals, such as those involving the IOR (the Institute for the Works of Religion), or the one that implicated Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu. The latter was sentenced in March 2024 by a Vatican court to five years and six months imprisonment, for embezzlement and aggravated fraud, in connection with the ill-advised sale of a building in London that allegedly caused the Vatican to lose millions of dollars: but the cardinal, always proclaimed himself innocent, appealed against the sentence.

The difficult reform of the Roman Curia

This sensational affair aside (and we will see how it ends!), Francis himself confirmed that the Vatican finances were unable to balance income and expenditure; and he had reduced the salaries of the Curia cardinals by 10 percent; again, in February 2025 he had created a brand new "Commission for donations to the Holy See", in order to urge the faithful to help him and the Vatican institutions to be able to carry out their work as best as possible and also - as happened in the first Christian communities - to help, starting from Rome, the poorest and most marginalized dioceses and sister Churches of the South of the world. But, speaking specifically of the problems "ad intra", an adequate solution to the economic treatment of those who work in the Vatican and fear a reduction in their pension remains to be "imagined".

But the most problematic knot that can be glimpsed behind this affair is the fact that, substantially reaffirming what was affirmed in 1929, as a consequence of the Lateran Pacts, even the new Fundamental Law of the Vatican City State, issued by Francis on 13 May 2023, states: “The Supreme Pontiff, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, has the fullness of the power of government, which includes legislative, executive and judicial power”. Such a concentration of the three powers, for centuries now unacceptable in the West, added to those claimed by the Bishop of Rome as head of the universal Church, opens up gigantic and unresolved legal, ecclesial and ecumenical problems.

However, one point, emphasised by the pope, seems precious to us: in the reorganisation of the Curia, which he envisaged in 2022 with the apostolic constitution *Praedicate evangelium*, Francis put the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus first, as the primary task of the Curia and the ‘form’ of its decisions. This insistence opens up a clearer perspective - certainly implicit even before, though sometimes obscured - that must/should animate all those who collaborate with the pope to serve the Church. And eradicate the “clericalism”, even in the Curia, so often denounced by Bergoglio.

Without entering here into a detailed examination of the complex document, we note that it equates, under the name of “Dicasteries”, those that were previously “Congregations” or “Councils”, and that for some of them - such as the one for Evangelisation - the pope himself is prefect, and the cardinal who leads it “pro-prefect”.

But perhaps the most important change, compared to before, is that the possibility of leading an office, or even a dicastery, is no longer linked to ordination (presbyteral or episcopal), but to the “papal mandate”, that is the call of the pontiff. Consequence: even a layman, or a laywoman, could have reached the rank once reserved only for cardinals. And so it was: without making a complete list, suffice it to say here that the Dicastery for Communication has Dr Paolo Ruffini as prefect, and that for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, since 6 January 2025, has Sister Simona Brambilla, appointed “prefect” (or shall we say “woman prefect”?) of it. Surely these appointments will not be isolated, one-off, but will become increasingly repeated for various Dicasteries.

How should we judge the “promotion” of a woman, and of the others who will soon reach top levels in dicasteries of the Curia? Some national and international media have spoken of a “revolution,” others of a “surprising change.” Only a few observers have noted that Francis’ choice actually strengthens papal power, the only source on which the promotion was based. Others, however, have argued that Baptism is more than enough to reach the leadership of a Dicastery.

Finally, we note a singular contradiction of the pope: since the cardinalate is a human institution, and therefore modifiable in principle, why did he not include female cardinals in the restricted College that elects the Bishop of Rome? Perhaps because he knew that, in perspective, he had to foresee in the conclave not only three or four women, as a symbol, but exactly half of the voters? A hypothesis, this last one, completely indigestible for a good part of the “Sacred College”.

“The Church is woman”

Francis’s appointments of women to top roles in the Roman Curia are part of his repeated and ostentatious opposition to the ordination of women to the diaconate or, “worse,” to the presbyterate and episcopate. He appointed two Commissions – one in 2016 and one in 2020 – which did not resolve the problem: in fact, both from a historical point of view (were there women deacons in the first centuries?) and a theological one (were they really ordained, similarly to men deacons?) they could not find a shared conclusion.

The topic could have been addressed by the second session of the Synod on synodality (October 2024), but in practice Francis removed it from a real debate, mortifying the asserted “synodality”. In fact, in various interviews, in the months preceding the Assembly, he reiterated his firm opposition to the ordination of women deacons: an evident – and unacceptable for a Synod worthy of the name – pressure to prevent an explicit majority in favor of that ordination from forming within it.

In the end, the Final Document of that Synod, approved on 26 October 2024, will state: “There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church:

what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue" (n. 60). Now... we will see how the debate continues, and how it finally ends.

By repeating over and over that "the Church is woman," and by entrusting women with top positions in the Vatican but, at the same time, by refusing to accept the ordination of women, it seems to us that Francis was trying to manage a contradiction that is in itself unmanageable. That is, entrusting the territory of the "sacred" solely to men, and confirming only the "service" to women. However, as women increasingly occupy top positions in the Curia, the tension, historical and theological, between the two "worlds" will not resolve itself, but will become unmanageable. And it will show - we believe - that women must finally be allowed to decide what they want to do. There are some, in fact, who desire the current ordained ministries of the diaconate and perhaps, in perspective, the presbyterate and episcopate; others, however, reject these ministries as they are today. At root, it seems to us that we need to review the meaning of ministeriality, de-sacralising and de-clericalising it, so that it returns to being 'diakonia', that is, secularly, 'service'.

It can perhaps be predicted that the woman question will remain unresolved until a Council of fathers and mothers comes to proclaim that all ministries in the Church are possible for both men and women. And the magisterium of the last popes, from Paul VI to Francis, hitherto absolutely opposed to such an eventuality, will have to be completely overcome.

The "status quo" of ecumenism

Since the last century, the woman-ministry issue has challenged all Churches. Orthodoxy, in general, has been against women in ordained ministries. However, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria chose to ordain a woman deacon in May 2024 in Zimbabwe. And the Greek-Orthodox Archdiocese of North America - linked to the Patriarchate of Constantinople - seems intent on reinstating 'deaconesses', which were also mentioned by the first ecumenical council, the Nicaea Council of 325.

The Reformation world now accepts women in all ministries, which until a few decades ago were reserved only for men. Critics on the Catholic side object that, for example, the bishops of the German Evangelical Church are not such, strictly speaking, as they do not have apostolic succession, considered decisive by Rome and Orthodoxy. Of course, the Lutheran and Reformed world rejects such objections. The first women pastors were ordained in the Scandinavian Lutheran Churches in the 1950s; then came the women bishops. Today they are the norm.

A separate note on the Church of England, because for Anglicans the matter is, in part, different. When, in 1992, a Synod of the Church of England discussed in a very animated way whether to admit, or reject, women priests, there was a dramatic clash between the supporters of the "no" and the "yes". Finally the majority approved and the first ordinations took place in 1994. A few years later the ordination of women bishops was also approved. But there was no ecclesial peace: a small part of the supporters of the "no" asked to enter the Roman Church corporately (that is, not as individuals, but as a group). And for them pope Ratzinger established three 'personal ordinariates', that is dioceses just for them in Great Britain, the United States and Australia. Pastors who then wished to become Catholic priests had to be ordained again, Rome having doubted that they were in fact anything but simple laymen beforehand; and, if married, they could continue to live in the married state. A partly grotesque affair that shows how the celibacy of priests is sometimes... negotiable (but not for the normal presbyters of the Latin Church!).

On the other hand, the Anglican Church is a model of unity in diversity, because in its 'Five Guiding Principles' of 2014, it stipulates that women should be guaranteed access to all orders of ministry, and at the same time that those who cannot accept the ministry of woman bishop and woman presbyter should still be considered part of the Church of England, effectively allowing that of the 42 provinces (national churches) of the Anglican Communion, 38 now ordain women to the diaconate, and 33 also to the presbyterate, while the others do not.

Francis, during his pontificate, has maintained good, even personal, relations with the heads, in the East and in the West, of the various non-Catholic Churches. He met the leaders of all Churches, even the Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill, in Cuba, while on his way to Mexico.

About the Waldensian Church (in Italy, the oldest non-Catholic Christian community, often persecuted by the Roman Church in the past), we recall that when he visited their Temple in Turin in 2015, he stated: "It is by the initiative of God, who never gives up in the face of man's sin, that new paths are opened to live our brotherhood, and we cannot escape this. On behalf of the Catholic Church I ask your forgiveness. I ask your forgiveness for the non-Christian, even non-human attitudes and behaviors that, in history, we have had against you. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgive us!".

These highly praiseworthy behaviors, however, have not led Francis to favor "intercommunion" between Churches that are historically separated; he has ignored what was stated by Faith and Order (an organization of the World Council of Churches, composed of 120 theologians from all the Churches, including a dozen Catholics), in its assembly in Lima in 1982: every Church believes that Christ is present in the Eucharist; however, the Scriptures do not specify the "how". Therefore, in respect of the "how", every Church understands that mystery: they could, if they wanted, communicate together, diverging in their "explanations", but accepting, in faith, the same mystery of the "divine presence". This thesis is totally rejected by Orthodoxy and, officially, also by the Roman Church; however, it is accepted by various Churches linked to the Reformation.

Suffice it to recall that, with the Concord of Leuenberg (Basel) in 1973, the Lutheran and Reformed Churches decided to mutually recognize the validity of their respective ministries, and therefore also to be able to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. A historic agreement, if one considers that already at the time of Luther and Calvin, who gave a different and irreconcilable explanation of the "Eucharistic presence", members of Lutheran and Reformed Churches refused to concelebrate. A "no" that lasted until Leuenberg!

Apart from this, in several ecumenical meetings it happens to see non-Catholics receiving communion during the Catholic mass, and Catholics who, despite the official Vatican "no", receive the Lord's Supper by a pastor or a woman pastor.

Finally: for reconciliation between the Churches, the theological and historical question of papal primacy and papal infallibility, dogmas defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870, remains an insurmountable obstacle. Even *The Bishop of Rome*, a substantial document published on 13 June 2024, drafted by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, taking into account the contributions of Vatican II, post-conciliar studies and the point of view of non-Catholic Churches, while suggesting significant concrete reforms to make the exercise of the pope's *munus* collegial and synodal, leaves unchanged and untouched dogmas that are indigestible to the ecumenical world.

Laudato si'

With his encyclical *Laudato si'* Francis has given a boost to the entire Roman Church, but with important repercussions also in the Ecumene, in the secular world and in the political one, so that all

together we become aware that we have one earth, only one earth: therefore, taking care of it, as our “common mother”, is the task of all, whatever their respective philosophical and religious visions. For all Christians, then, and first for the faithful of the Roman Church directly questioned by the pope, the awareness of ecological responsibility is not an optional, but a constitutive part of the faith of those who never forget that from “the beginning” God has entrusted his creatures with the care of Eden.

Francis's vibrant call for a conscious assumption of responsibility for the well-being of the earth and the cosmos has inspired and strengthened numerous groups committed, together with people of every faith and culture, to the protection and salvation of the planet.

“No” to war!

The defence of the earth is combined, in Francis' thinking, with his diurnal commitment to peace, thus denouncing the hotbeds of war (Russia-Ukraine, the Middle East, Congo, Myanmar...) that destroy both the earth and its inhabitants, starting with children. But, for the most part, the World's Powers did not listen to the pope's heartfelt words, and continued their bloody quarrels. That is not why Bergoglio has stopped shouting “peace, peace, peace”, calling for the disputes to be overcome with honest negotiations.

With the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Francis called for universal brotherhood, that is, the growth of a climate that would make war “impossible” and, instead, foster dialogue and friendship between peoples. Religious and cultural differences between peoples - the pope noted - should not be reasons for irreducible contrasts but, on the contrary, bridges for connection and common growth. This is the context for the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, known as the *Abu Dhabi Declaration*: an agreement signed on 4 February 2019 by pope Francis and the grand imam of al-Azhar (Egypt), Ahmad al-Tayyib, the foremost authority of Sunni Islam. A remarkable document, but the child of an interreligious dialogue understood in a bilateral sense, which ignores the other Churches.

More freedom of speech and debate

Compared to the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, there has been a very notable difference with that of Francis, in the sense that an end has been put (despite some unpleasant exceptions of persistent inquisitorial spirit) to the condemnations of leading theologians who also address taboo topics. Even in some episcopates it is not uncommon to hear dissenting voices with respect to official practices and doctrines; voices that – as instead happened in the past – are not immediately silenced. In short, it is no longer a crime to discuss, even in public, complicated and, often, divisive topics.

More articulate would be the evaluation of the Vatican's attitude, under Bergoglio, to the *Synodaler Weg* of the German Catholic Church: it seems to us, in fact, that the Curia has attempted to cage - or empty - some bold reforms proposed by that Assembly. But it is not by silencing them that problems are solved.

In the background, a delicate and difficult issue appears here: how can unity and diversity in the Church be reconciled? To give an example, would it be unthinkable that the German Church could decide to ordain women deacons, and that of another country reject the idea? The issue is becoming more acute and urgent every day. Maintaining the post-Tridentine “uniformity” forever appears to be an answer no longer adequate to the times.

The intermittent fight against clergy paedophilia

Francis has collected, and expanded, the current norms to eradicate the scandal of pedophilia in the clergy, both diocesan and religious, which does not concern a few "bad apples", but represents a systemic and structural problem that has to do with clericalism and the consequent abuse of power and conscience, before sexual abuse. Francis has launched the cry "Zero tolerance for child abuse". However, sometimes, bishops responsible for having "tolerated" pedophile priests in their diocese, have been kept in their positions. And, in Italy, of which he is the "primate", he tolerated the Bishops' Conference refusing to establish an independent commission to examine that terrible phenomenon at least since the 1960s. And the Italian Bishops' Conference, up to now, has not really addressed the problem of fair economic compensation for the victims of "ogre" priests.

In short, the idea of putting the unspeakable suffering of young victims first, rather than defending the "good name" of the Church, is not yet a common heritage of the ecclesiastical hierarchies. So far, and we really want to thank him, in Italy only Monsignor Ivo Muser, bishop of Bolzano-Bressanone, has established an independent commission to ascertain how many and who were, over the last sixty years, the pedophile priests in his diocese.

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These, among many others that we do not examine here, are the lights and shadows that, in our opinion, characterize the pontificate that has just ended. Naturally, we wish Francis – who in the last weeks of his life suffered so much because of his painful illness – the joy of the Kingdom of God finally achieved; and we express the hope that, with the new bishop of Rome elected by the imminent Conclave, we will be able to see the lights in the Church increase and the shadows thin out. We will give, even though we are aware of our limits, our contribution to the arduous undertaking. Convinced that *Ecclesia semper reformanda*.

NOI SIAMO CHIESA

21 April 2025