



An effective leader: Pope Francis servant and reformer



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So dramatic has been the impact of Francis's leadership of the Catholic Church in just two years that *The Economist* believes the Pope should be studied in Harvard Business School alongside famous 'turnaround CEOs' such as Steve Jobs who reversed the fortunes of their organisations.

In 2014, *Fortune* magazine put the Pope in the top spot of its 50 greatest world leaders, for having 'electrified the Church and attracted legions of non-Catholic admirers by energetically setting a new direction'. *Time* magazine was one of many to declare him Person of the Year, an accolade not accorded to the immensely popular John Paul II until 16 years into his pontificate. By that first-anniversary mark, March 2014, Francis graced the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New Yorker*, and *Fortune* among many others, including – remarkably – the gay magazine *The Advocate*. Alongside biographies and studies of his papacy, Francis has already generated books seeking to capture the lessons of his leadership, a concept understood (as did Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric) as the ability to articulate a vision and get others to carry it out.¹

The accolades from the high citadels of cultural and economic liberalism are all the more remarkable because they were being awarded to a man whose critiques of western elites, capitalism and individualism were as relentless as they were devastating. This, after all, was a pope who at his inauguration in March 2013 had defined his own leadership in terms of radical service with an option for the poor:

'Let us never forget that authentic power is service, and that the pope, too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the Cross. He must be inspired by the lowly, concrete, and faithful service that marked Saint Joseph and, like him, he must open his arms to protect all of God's people and embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity, especially the poorest, the weakest, the least important, those whom Matthew lists in the final judgment on love: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison (cf. Matthew 25:31–46). Only those who serve with love are able to protect!'

Without altering a single core Catholic Church doctrine – which a pope is not at liberty to do – Francis had achieved what had seemed impossible before his election: to speak to the heart of contemporary western culture. The *Time* article struggled with this apparent contradiction, eventually concluding that he must be a masterful operator. New York cardinal Timothy Dolan is frequently asked who is 'behind' Francis, as if there were some master strategist or PR firm operating in the shadows. (The idea makes those who know the Pope laugh out loud: not only does Francis not have a PR strategy, the Vatican press office is usually the last to find out about his interviews.)

Yet what draws the world to Francis is precisely the opposite: as the *Financial Times* noted, Francis 'has a sincerity and authenticity that no world leader can match'.² Francis's actions, words, and gestures have awoken in western culture a dim, often unconscious, yet powerful memory of someone once loved but since lost.

As the headline over a column in the *Washington Post* expressed it: 'Like Francis? You'll Love Jesus.'³

Francis's 'secret' is none other than a radical identification with Jesus Christ, the fruit of a lifetime's immersion in contemplating Scripture and discerning spirits in the

objective – modernisation, say, or democratisation – it suggests that the objective of the reform is to conform the Catholic Church to the world, rather than better equipping the church to evangelise the world.

Francis's reforms obey these criteria. The changes he is bringing about in church governance involve creating greater fluidity between centre and periphery, Rome and the local Church, overturning Vatican centralism. Among his first moves was to name an advisory council of mostly developing-world cardinals, the so-called C-9, and put them in charge of restructuring the Roman Curia. Francis sees the C-9 as key to his governance reform; as he puts it, 'the beginning of a Church with an organization that is not just top-down but also horizontal'.

Meanwhile, the College of Cardinals itself is assuming a role in governance of the universal Church similar to that of a senate, as in the pre-Reformation era. Over two-day meetings in February 2014 and February 2015, known as consistories, Francis has asked the cardinals to deliberate on major questions: admission to the sacraments for the remarried in the first, and the structural reform of the curia in the second. His creation of new cardinals in both consistories reveals the future direction he wants for the college: to correct the eurocentric imbalance by reducing the number of curial cardinals and amplifying the presence of poor countries; among the new 2015 intake, for example, were a large number from poor, far-flung places such as Tonga and Myanmar.

The third instrument of collegiality is the most far-reaching of all – a new model of synod. Francis is converting the synod from a predictable Vatican-controlled gathering into a powerful instrument of universal church governance, such that the pastoral realities of the local Church can be brought to bear on questions of doctrine and discipline.

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, whom Francis named to take charge of the reforms, said in June 2013 that the pope was looking for 'a dynamic, permanent synod, not as a structured organism, but as an *action*, like an osmosis between center and periphery'. Francis wants the synod to have real deliberative power as in the councils of the early centuries of Christianity, a body outside and above the Curia, accountable not just to the pope but also to the bishops.

The idea is to embed permanently in the Church the dynamic of Vatican II – bringing to bear on church doctrine the pastoral needs and realities of the People of God, in order that the priests and pastors do not become pharisees, and that church teaching and practice remain free of legalism. The first synod process – which began in October last year and will conclude in October this year – is looking at the vexed question of how to integrate into church life those who are estranged from the Church because of divorce, while upholding Jesus's clear teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.

Restoring mercy, refocussing on mission

Ever since a direct encounter with God's mercy in a confessional in October 1953 left him convinced he

Pope Francis has a clear vision of reform and he knows how to get there

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1. On his leadership: C Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2013), and JA Krames, *Lead With Humility: 12 Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis* (New York: AMACOM, 2014). There are three detailed biographies in English: E Piqué, *Pope Francis: Life and Revolution. A Biography of Jorge Bergoglio* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014); P Valley, *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and my own *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2014; paperback September 2015). See also JL Allen, *The Francis Miracle: Inside the Transformation of the Pope and the Church* (Des Moines, IA: Time Inc., 2015) and (Cardinal) W Kasper, *Pope Francis's Revolution of Tenderness and Love* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015).

2. 'The remarkable figure of Pope Francis', *Financial Times*, 29 December 2013.

3. E Tenety, 'Like Francis? You'll love Jesus', *Washington Post*, 11 December 2013.

4. W Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), ch. 1.

manner of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order to which Francis belongs. What is unusual is the way he combines this radical commitment to God's will with a once-in-a-generation capacity for governance.

Not only does he have a clear vision of reform – that the Catholic Church needs to be purged of all worldliness in order to re-focus on its mission of presenting Jesus Christ to the world – but he knows how to get there, how to build the relationships and to model the changes, how to prioritise and to enable. He has learned to consult, to include outside voices and to build consensus; yet he is not afraid to take the tough decisions himself and carry the weight of them. Like all great leaders, he has a phenomenal capacity for living in tension, waiting until the moment is right – which in his case, means when he receives a prompting of the Holy Spirit. Once the way is clear, he moves ahead like a bulldozer, relentlessly focussed on his objective, and notoriously impervious to pressure to change course.

Centre and periphery

Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who was named head of the Argentine province of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in 1973 at the tender age of 36, has always had an understanding of reform as spelled out in Yves Congar's landmark 1950 text, *True and False Reform in the Church*, which John XXIII had by his bedside when he called the Second Vatican Council. Congar's study of reform movements in church history – some of which had led to greater zeal and holiness, and succeeded in uniting the Catholic Church, while others had spun off into squabbling and division – led him to conclusions that Bergoglio has closely absorbed.

First is that all authentic reform in the Church begins at the margins – Jesus in Galilee, among the fishermen and the shepherds – and involves the 'centre' opening itself to, and allowing itself to be shaped by, 'the periphery'. Second, that it does not question core church teaching and tradition, which in the case of the Catholic Church means taking for granted the Eucharist, Marian devotion, a male priesthood, and so on. True reform therefore always involves innovating within, not against, tradition. Third, the purpose of all true reform is pastoral, in other words, is concerned with bridging the gap between God and humanity, leading people into relationship with God through prayer, parishes, sacraments and so on. The criterion of true reform is what eases that return; if a reform has another

would be a priest, Jorge Mario Bergoglio has been certain that conversion begins in such an experience, which it is the Catholic Church's job to offer. The word for merciful in Latin, *misericos*, contains *cor*, meaning heart, and *miseri*, meaning the poor – the suffering, the sinners, those who yearn. The notion that God, the all-powerful Creator, is concerned with the distress of individuals, binding their wounds and time and again forgiving their sins, transcends human imagination and thought, and can only be 'known' through experience. Francis is making the restoration of mercy the key to evangelization through what he calls the 'Samaritan Church'. Under Francis, charity – the demonstration of mercy – is not a separate activity from evangelisation.⁴

His conviction is that the Catholic Church has spoken too much, laid down too many laws, and relied too much on the brilliance of its own arguments, rather than offering people the actual experience of God. It is as if Christians have reversed the proper order, offering the truth of Christianity without the experience of mercy – tying Jesus up in the sacristy, as he once memorably put it, and not letting him out. Yet without offering God's mercy the truth of Christianity will just be another abstract doctrine. The woman caught in adultery and forgiven by Jesus in John 8, he told a retreat in Buenos Aires a few months before being elected Pope, would not have sinned again, 'for whoever encounters such great mercy cannot depart from the law. It's what follows'.

In order to model this focus on God's mercy, he visits 'places of pain' – prisons, drug addiction centers, homes for the disabled – on his trips, while spending a large part of his time in St. Peter's Square at the Wednesday general audiences with the elderly, disabled and homeless, such that the traditional 15-minute papal address has become a part of a much broader teaching of actions and gestures.

In a society marked by relativism and religious indifference, the temptation for Christians is to hunker down, raise barriers and focus on itself, becoming consumed by internal politics and bureaucracy and emphasising the law. Francis sees this as a temptation – one that guarantees the continued shrinking of the Christian Church – and the very specific sickness of the Catholic Church in recent times.

His answer is a relentless outward focus, asking Catholics to choose (as he put it on the eve of the conclave) between a 'self-referential', 'worldly' church that lives from its own light, and a missionary, evangelising church more closely identified with those on the margins, offering concrete acts of mercy that allow God to convert hearts. Hence he returns, time and again, in his teaching documents and in his speeches, to the culture change he wants to see, using striking phrases: a church that is poor and for the poor; priests who smell of sheep, not of the sacristy; a church that is a nurse not a policeman, a battlefield hospital rather than a customs house.

There are 'two ways of thinking and of having faith', he told the cardinals in February 2015. 'We can fear to lose the saved and we can want to save the lost.' In the

same homily he contrasted 'the thinking of the doctors of the law, which would remove the danger by casting out the diseased person, and the thinking of God, who in his mercy embraces and accepts by reinstating him and turning evil into good, condemnation into salvation and exclusion into proclamation'. Thus, he wants the synod not to focus just on how to improve preparation and support for marriage, but on how the Church can reach out to those who have suffered marital breakdown.

Pope Francis places the papacy not at the service of the institution of the Catholic Church but of those Jesus came to serve and save

Combatting spiritual worldliness; creating spaces for the Holy Spirit to act

One of the most bewildering aspects of Francis's papacy is the way he reserves some of his harshest words for bishops, priests and Vatican officials. His immense popularity in the world beyond the Catholic Church contrasts with the grumbling about him in Rome, where some complain that he seldom has a good word to say about his own officials. Francis regards the greatest temptation to befall the Catholic Church is that of 'spiritual worldliness', in which the gospel is presented a way that is confused with interests that are not those of the gospel. There is one quote that repeats itself like a mantra throughout Bergoglio's writings and homilies over 40 years, from Henri de Lubac's 1953 *Méditations sur l'Église*, which describes spiritual worldliness as 'the greatest danger, the most perfidious temptation' for religious people. Hence his constant complaints at careerism, clericalism, and the seeking of wealth and privilege, his stressing that the Catholic Church is not a non-governmental organisation but a love story, his placing the papacy not at the service of the institution but of those Jesus came to serve and save.

Pope Francis sees his role, in fact, as purging the Catholic Church of spiritual worldliness in order to create spaces for the Holy Spirit to act. One of his primary lessons is that where the Holy Spirit is present, there will be constant surprises, joy, and a fearlessness in speaking out. Francis embodies this confidence in his own way of communicating – in direct, unfiltered, spontaneous interviews, in casting aside prepared texts in order to speak off the cuff, in rising quickly out of his chair in order to embrace others in acts of great warmth and tenderness. He has discerned the need for *parrhesia*, a Greek word that can be variously translated as apostolic courage, prophetic directness, or bold proclamation.

Parrhesia is what he called for in his famous brief remarks to the cardinals in March 2013 that persuaded many to elect him. It stems from the Pope's conviction that the Holy Spirit is in charge of the church, and that his task is to allow it to course more freely by opening up new spaces – building bridges and unblocking channels.