

Assessing the Francis Decade

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The smiling Argentinian stood on the balcony and simply said: Buonasera – Good Evening. A perfectly natural greeting but in a most unnatural setting. Jorge Bergoglio's manner in announcing himself to the world as Pope Francis was also indicating that he was a man of the people and would continue to be so. There would be profound drama and implications in such a statement.

Some of those implications have played out recently in the Pell conspiracy documents and controversy that followed the Australian cardinal's death. A stubborn rump of the church would see Francis as having strayed too far from what they consider to be orthodox. Francis responded with merely a shrug of the shoulders and got on with the job.

That job, as has become increasingly clear, is to reinstate in the mind and functioning of the church, the great reforms and refreshment that the Vatican Council of the 1960s offered. Francis, like many of those who lived through the times of the Council, had watched with increasing dismay as a succession of recent Popes and their acolytes, had come close to burying the Vatican II reform agenda – the outcomes of an Ecumenical Council, the highest teaching authority in the Catholic Church,

Much of this struggle was not about theology but ecclesiology, how the church functions and its role. A man with known views on these matters, Francis would have reasonably assumed he had a mandate for such change as he emerged from the conclave. What became increasingly clear, however, is that the Argentinian Pope understands what is involved in seeking serious cultural change. He began, not by issuing edicts, but by prompting people to reflect and challenging his leadership cadre, the bishops of the world, to think about what the church could do to engage more constructively with the world of today and the lives of its peoples.

He spoke of images such as "field hospitals", "the smell of the sheep" and "enlarging the tent". He was blunt about the "evil of clericalism" as a key factor in the sexual abuse scandals. He called on ordinary Catholics around the world to be "active and assertive" in helping him reform the church – an implicit (and well informed) statement of his lack of confidence in his bishops, who had been selected by earlier pontificates, principally on the basis of being obedient, but not perceptive thinkers. He repeatedly riled up the Curia, the Vatican's bureaucracy, for its detachment from the real world and the real lives of believers.

Francis has for some time been wanting the People of God to assert their legitimate role on the journey of salvation. His approach has been one of emphasizing this fundamental element of the Vatican II perception of church, as a people on a journey, walking and discerning together. He has increasingly given form to this vision in his initiatives around Synodality, a form of governance, inspired by Vatican II principles, but applied in the world of the 21st century, in which the sense of the faithful is as relevant as, and informs, the papacy.

Francis used the 2019 Synod on the Amazon, to showcase how communities and local bishops can together grapple with the needs of their peoples and bring forward proposals for change. In that case there was the recommendation that married men be ordained to the priesthood. Many were disappointed when Francis did not endorse that proposal, but it has become clear his principal purpose at the time was to demonstrate the process of synodality, of joint discernment and decision making. Reshaping the culture and openness to change is the more important first step.

His emphasis on synodality has now been expanded world-wide, with an international process building to final international sessions later this year and next. Again, Francis realises that solving problems by papal decree is not a solution in the longer term. Rather the goal is to build cultural change at the local level and through that imbed process. He acknowledges that this will involve working with tensions, which is the case for all human families. It is only in this way that major changes relating to the role of women and married clergy will move forward.

This is very confronting for a clericalist and managerialist episcopal class who have had no experience, or even a disposition, to such an approach. Indeed, a key challenge that Francis confronts, even after 10 years, is that the bulk of today's clergy have been formed by a model of church that harks back to the pre-Vatican II era, which only serves to highlight how successful was the post council rearguard.

George Pell was correct in his assertion that the majority of younger clergy (certainly in Australia) are not of the Francis mind. There has emerged a clear strategy among several senior Australian bishops of deciding to 'wait out' the remainder of the Francis pontificate, in the hope that conservative forces will prevail at the next conclave or that forces in a refreshed curia will be able more successfully to corral a new pope. This creates the situation where there is real dissonance in the church. This is characterised by a pope who invokes a vision of church articulated 60 years ago, not enthusiastically supported by many bishops and local clergy, but supported by an ever-dwindling cohort of aged believers, who represent a remnant of a larger group who have mostly given up on change and left the tent.

Francis seems alive to this scenario and posturing. He is also realistic about what he alone can achieve, or what can be achieved through this pontificate. He sees himself essentially as a transitional figure. One that was needed to halt the regression to a triumphalist and exclusivist church, where the people were expected to know the rules and simply obey. The church that Francis is trying to create is one that requires imagination, openness, humility tolerance and co-responsibility.

The likelihood is Francis will seek to entrench the notion that a pontiff should make his contribution and move on. He will probably model this with a one-way ticket to Buenos Aires and a modest retirement after the 2024 synod session. While Francis has brought a welcome sense of humanity and reality to the papacy, it remains an open question as to whether the focus and apparatus of changing culture will deliver reform on the big issues. Much will depend on the resolute commitment of his successor to those same principles.

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