

# Is the Pope Catholic?

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## Abstract

In Roman Catholic history, popes have been conservative or progressive. Pope Francis's pontificate is different. He does not fit the traditional "right" and "left" categories, although his teaching and actions have often been labeled as disruptive. He has been called "radical," "heretical," and even "Protestant." Ten years after the beginning of his pontificate, this article explores some of the significant influences on his formation and assesses some critiques he has received within Roman Catholic circles. It ends by suggesting that Pope Francis is more "catholic" than "Roman" in the sense that he is more interested in expanding the "catholicity" of Rome (i.e., its inclusivity), as it was envisaged at Vatican II, than in defending its doctrinal-institutional "Roman" markers.

## Keywords

*Pope Francis, Vatican II, The Joy of the Gospel, All Brothers, Roman Catholic Church*

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 In March 13, 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis, marking a significant transition in the Roman Catholic Church. What he has been saying and doing since being elected—for instance, his affirming attitudes toward all, his noisy silence over traditional doctrine, his ambiguous language, his thoroughgoing Marianism, and his lack of clarity on several key issues—has caused many to wonder where his thought came from.

Some have acclaimed him as the “great reformer”;<sup>1</sup> others have argued that he is bringing about a “revolution of tenderness and love.”<sup>2</sup> Yet others too have found it difficult to square his words and actions into the established patterns of traditional Roman Catholicism.

There is a general perception that Pope Francis’s pontificate has entered an irreversibly declining phase, a sort of late autumn that is a prelude to the end of a season. It is not just a question of age: Yes, Pope Francis is elderly and in poor health. But aging aside, the pontificate finds itself navigating a descending parabola. It started with the language of “mission” and “reform.” Francis’s tenure, now more than ten years old, was immediately engulfed in a thousand difficulties, particularly within the Catholic Church. Many of these problems were caused by the ambiguities of Francis himself, to the point that the push envisaged at the beginning turned out to be broken, if not wholly inconclusive.

In this article, after surveying his intellectual journey prior to becoming pope, we will pause on some questions that have been asked in relation to him. They provide a variety of interpretative keys to coming to terms with the complexity of Francis’s papacy, both inside and outside of the Roman camp. The final section will suggest a hermeneutic of Pope Francis within the dialectics of the “Roman” and the “catholic” dimensions of Roman Catholicism.

## **I. *Who Is Pope Francis?***

If you want to get to know a person, ask questions about where he comes from. Massimo Borghesi’s recent intellectual biography looks at the life of Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) from a particular angle.<sup>3</sup> Borghesi focuses on the intellectual influences (e.g., books, journals, authors, friendships, networks) that have shaped Bergoglio’s thought. In so doing, he provides a fruitful perspective on the genesis and development of the vision that Bergoglio embodies and promotes as pope. In addition to surveying all the relevant literature, Borghesi has also worked on a questionnaire that Pope Francis responded to, giving further details and filling in the blanks of previous attempts. According to this well-researched analysis, Bergoglio’s

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<sup>1</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Picador, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (New York: Paulist, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Massimo Borghesi, *Jorge Mario Bergoglio: Una biografia intellettuale* (Milan: Jaca, 2017).

intellectual biography seems to be marked by three main influences: Jesuit sources, Latin American sources, and Vatican II.

Bergoglio's formative years as a student in philosophy and theology were profoundly impacted by his reading of French Jesuit intellectuals like Henri de Lubac, Gaston Fessard, and Michel de Certeau. They introduced the young Bergoglio to the Catholic dialectical thought, which shies away from rigid Thomism and toward the dynamic synthesis of embracing opposites and enlarging the overall vision. In this Jesuit school of thought—which, by the way, became the matrix of the theology of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)—what are perceived as oppositions become “tensions,” at times painfully disruptive but also potentially creative and always to be maintained as such. Bergoglio became persuaded that human thought is always “in tension,” never fixed or stable. He distanced himself from abstract definitions and propositions. He learned always to think in programmatically “open” and “loose” thought forms.

Intertwined with this dialectical tendency was Bergoglio's early exposure to liberation theology. Since his first attempts to come to terms with its growing popularity in Latin America, Bergoglio has not been interested in the Marxist ideological and political framework of much of the liberation theology of those years. However, he was definitely attracted to the “theology of the people,” which is a side aspect of liberation theology. According to this particular way of theologizing, the people's concerns, preoccupations, and aspirations need to be theology's starting point. Rather than considering folk devotions and beliefs as a premodern stage that will be overcome by political liberation, the “theology of the people” assumes them as vital and central. Marian devotions and practices become the most appreciated expressions of the people's hearts, even if they are contrary to Scripture. Theology and pastoral practice must therefore be developed only in a bottom-up way. In this view, the Bible can in no sense be the supreme norm for faith and life. In Borghesi's terms, the future pope embraced “a liberation theology without Marxism.”<sup>4</sup> This is the context of Bergoglio's important emphasis on “the people” as the principal subject of theology and church life.

Bergoglio's early fascination with French Jesuit thought was further consolidated by his reading of the lay Uruguayan Catholic philosopher Alberto Methol Ferré (1929–2009). From Ferré he learned that human thought is always unstable, mobile, and ever renewing. This was yet another injection of Catholic dialecticism that moved Bergoglio further away from static and traditional Thomism.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 71.

Ferré suggested that with Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church had finally overcome both the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. After fiercely fighting them up front (from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century), Rome eventually came to terms with its ability to assimilate and absorb the Reformation and the Enlightenment rather than opposing them. At Vatican II, the Catholic Church took the “best” of both and launched a “new” Reformation and a “new” Enlightenment. They were no longer adversaries but contributed positively to the “catholic” accomplishment. In short, after Vatican II, the Reformation as such is over and has been absorbed within the ongoing renewal of the Church of Rome.

Building on his early Jesuit influence and Ferré’s thought, Bergoglio grew in his conviction that the Catholic Church was the “*complexio oppositorum*” (the whole that makes room for the opposites). His study of German theologian Romano Guardini (1885–1968) corroborated the Catholic dialectical dimension of his thought. Guardini argued that Roman Catholicism is a *weltanschauung*, an all-embracing worldview, the only one capable of handling multiple tensions between diverging poles and bringing them to a “catholic” unity. From Guardini, Bergoglio developed his idea of unity as a “polyhedron,” a geometric figure with different angles and lines, all of which have their own peculiarity. It is a figure that brings together unity and diversity, and Roman Catholicism is the home of unity as a polyhedron. This explains Francis’s commitment to ecumenical and interreligious unity, which downplays differences and concentrates on generic commonalities. In this view, unity is governed not by biblical truth and biblical love but by the embracing view of Rome that holds together all angles and lines of life.

Borghesi’s intellectual biography makes it clear that Francis’s pontificate comes from afar. It is the result of a long series of developments within Catholic thought, from Jesuit sources to Latin American influences up to the Vatican II matrix of contemporary Rome—and all without the correction of the word of God. One needs to immerse oneself in what happened at the Second Vatican Council to begin to make sense of what Francis is saying and doing now. All analyses of Francis being an “evangelical” or a “kerygmatic” pope are simplistic and shortsighted. He is much more than that in ways that are dialectical, open ended, and at the service of the Catholic vision to embrace the whole world.

## II. *A Hugging Pope?*

Many Roman Catholics (and also many non-Catholic observers), accustomed to associating the papal magisterium with an authoritative, coherent,

and stable form of doctrinal teaching, are perplexed if not dismayed by a pope who seems both to say and not say, to argue for something and to undermine it, to state one position and then contradict it the next breath. As a Jesuit, Pope Francis tends to use an equivocal style, a dubitative and incomplete form of argumentation, an “open” logic, a colloquial, if not casual, tone, and a pastoral style that often lacks clarity and coherence. Officially, the pope’s teachings are set in the context of the historical traditions of the church. In this sense, nothing changes. In reality, however, Francis is accentuating the developmental and inclusive dynamic of Roman Catholicism as it emerged from Vatican II. According to this trend, while there is a sense in which nothing changes, everything is nonetheless rethought, reexpressed, and updated. The “Roman” side of the teaching does not change, while the “catholic” side does change.

A book by the Sicilian Roman Catholic theologian Massimo Naro is a helpful guide in the theological universe of Pope Francis.<sup>5</sup> From the outset, Naro readily acknowledges that the theology of Pope Francis is “an innovative proposal,” even when compared with the updating trends of Vatican II. Above all, the pope’s vocabulary needs to be taken into consideration. If you want to try to enter the world of Francis, here are his central words: “mother church,” “faithful people of God,” “popular spirituality,” “mercy,” “synodality,” “polyhedric ecclesiology,” “processes to initiate,” “existential peripheries,” “humanism of solidarity,” “ecological conversion,” “dialogue,” and “fraternity and brotherhood.”<sup>6</sup> Not all are new words; some of them are terms that have already been used in Roman Catholic teaching; however, Francis now gives them a new nuance or a distinct significance.

Naro further suggests that there are two theological frameworks that give meaning to his words: the “theology of the people” and the “theology of mercy.” For Francis, theology begins not with biblical revelation or the abstract principles of the official church’s teaching but with the common and daily stories of men and women who must be welcomed and affirmed in their particular contexts and life journeys. This attention to the “inside” of the world and to the level where “the people” live pushes him to elevate forms of popular spirituality as authentic religious experiences. He is not

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<sup>5</sup> Massimo Naro, *Protagonista è l’abbraccio: Temi teologici nel magistero di Francesco* (Venice: Marcianum, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. For recent attempts at coming to terms with Francis’s theology, see Severino Dianich, *Magistero in movimento: Il caso Papa Francesco* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2016); Ghislain Lafont, *Petit essai sur le temps du pape François* (Paris: Cerf, 2017); and Leonardo Di Chirico, “A Window into the Theological Vision of Pope Francis,” *Christian Research Journal* 38.6 (2015): 12–19.

scandalized by the “irregular” situations of life in which people find themselves, such as divorce, cohabitation, or same-sex relationships. Instead of teaching an external standard (in theology or morality), the pope begins where people are, assuming that where they are, there is something good that needs to be affirmed.

According to Francis, “the people” are not the passive and obedient recipients of a top-down ecclesiastical magisterium but active subjects whose religious experiences are true and real (even though not squared with traditional patterns), and they therefore need to be part of the teaching itself. “The people” make the teaching as much as the ecclesiastical authorities of the Roman Church promulgate it.

This version of the “theology of the people” is far from the evangelical belief that Scripture, as the inspired word of God, is the source by which God teaches, rebukes, corrects, and trains (cf. 2 Tim 3:16). And whom does he train? Not those who want to affirm their own experiences and lifestyles but those who wish to repent from sin and reform their lives following the path indicated by the Bible. From a biblical perspective, Francis’s “theology of the people” does not have the external criterion of the word of God, which questions hearts, practices, and sinful habits and forges a new humanity that is always open to renewal in a process of ongoing sanctification.

Mercy is another keyword in the pope’s magisterium. In his way of putting it, mercy is “the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite the limits of our sins.”<sup>7</sup> In this dense sentence, there is a strategic theological point. Among other things, as Cardinal Matteo Zuppi writes in the introduction, the pope means that “at the center of the biblical message is not sin, but mercy.”<sup>8</sup> In Naro’s words, Christian theology must be freed from “hamartiocentrism,”<sup>9</sup> that is, from the centrality of sin. Sin must be replaced by the pervasiveness of God’s mercy, which “can help us to break free from hamartiocentrism and to rediscover the tenderness of God.”<sup>10</sup> In his view, Pope Francis has replaced sin with mercy at the center of his message.

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<sup>7</sup> The English translation of the papal text on the Vatican website is blurred and incorrect. It says, “... the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever *despite our sinfulness*” (italics added). However, the Latin official text says, “... *praeter nostri peccati fines*,” which needs to be translated as “despite the limits or bounds of our sins,” as the Italian, French, and Spanish versions rightly translate. *Misericordiae Vultus*, n. 2, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html).

<sup>8</sup> Naro, *Protagonista è l’abbraccio*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

In the pope's theology, sin is at most "the human limit"<sup>11</sup> but not the breaking of the covenant, the rebellion against God, the disobedience to his commandments, or the subversion of divine authority that results in God's righteous and holy judgment. If sin is a "human limit," then the cross of Christ did not atone for sin but only manifested God's mercy in an exemplary way. The words used by the pope are the same as those of the evangelical faith (e.g., mercy, sin, grace, gospel) but are given a different meaning than in the gospel.<sup>12</sup> Francis sees everything from the perspective of a metaphysics of mercy that swallows sin without passing through propitiation, expiation, or reconciliation, which the cross of Jesus Christ wrought to give salvation to those who believe in him. If everything is mercy and sin is only a limit, the "popular" and "merciful" account of the gospel taught by Pope Francis is another "catholic" variant of the deviation on which the Church of Rome was established and on which, sadly, it continues to move forward.

### III. *A Protestant Pope?*

"Here I stand": these are the famous words spoken by Martin Luther in front of the Diet of Worms in 1521. Questioned about his convictions as they had been outlined a few years before in the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther stood firm on the truth of the Bible and its good news: sinners can be justified by Christ alone through faith alone. It was clear to all what he believed. The Council of Trent (1545–1562) was the official response of the Roman Catholic Church to the issues raised by the Protestant Reformation. By rejecting the tenets of the Protestant understanding of the gospel and declaring its proponents anathema, Trent endorsed the view that sinners could not be justified by faith alone; instead, Catholicism insisted on an ongoing journey of good works punctuated by the sacraments administered by the church. Where Trent stood was and is crystal clear.<sup>13</sup>

In recent decades, though, the situation has become blurred. The 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification<sup>14</sup>—signed by mainstream

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> For an exploration of this theme, see Leonardo De Chirico, *Same Words, Different Worlds: Do Roman Catholics and Evangelicals Believe the Same Gospel?* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> It is no surprise that justification was dealt with during the first session of the council. The session lasted seven months (from June 21, 1546, to January 13, 1547), and it was the most intense topic that the council addressed. See John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church," The Lutheran World Federation, 1999, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/>

Lutherans and the Church of Rome—introduced ambiguities in language, juxtapositions of terms, and theological nuances that make it difficult to understand where the signatories stand in comparison to Luther’s and Trent’s viewpoints. After the declaration, Rome’s position on justification is harder to ascertain.<sup>15</sup> This ambiguous context is Pope Francis’s framework when he speaks on the topic.

In the ecumenical ceremony that commemorated the Reformation in Lund (Sweden) in 2016, Pope Francis made a perfunctory reference to the doctrine of justification.<sup>16</sup> In a generally positive comment on Luther, the pope argued that “the doctrine of justification expresses the essence of human existence before God,” thus seeming to be in accord with what Evangelicals might say about the doctrine. Recognizing justification as something essential is surely a pointer toward its primary importance for the Christian life. But notice that the pope speaks of the essential role of justification in “human existence” in general, not just in the Christian life. The context of this statement does not restrict it to Christians, believers in Christ, or disciples of Jesus. The pope is not referring to the essence of the Christian life but to human existence as a whole.

Here is the ambiguity. Does this mean that justification is essential for all human beings, regardless of whether or not they are Christians? Does it mean that justification is a constitutive component of life in general, a defining mark of the existence of all men and women? Does it mean that all those living a “human existence” are essentially justified? Certainly, this is not the meaning that either Luther or the Council of Trent gave to justification. For Luther, there was a sense in which justification could be defined as “the essence of human existence before God,” with the caveat that this would refer only to those who have received the grace of God by faith alone. In other words, justification is the essence of the *Christian life*, not of human life in general.

On the surface, then, the pope’s comment on justification seems to be very biblical and indeed very Protestant. A closer look reveals, though, that things are not as clear as they appear. While affirming the importance of justification, Pope Francis seems to confuse it with a universal property that

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sites/default/files/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Doctrine%20of%20Justification.pdf.

<sup>15</sup> See Leonardo De Chirico, “Not By Faith Alone? An Analysis of the Roman Catholic Doctrine of Justification from Trent to the Joint Declaration,” in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 739–67.

<sup>16</sup> His homily can be found here: “Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis,” Lund, Monday, October 31, 2016, Libreria Editrice Vaticane, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161031\\_omelia-svezia-lund.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161031_omelia-svezia-lund.html).

all human beings share. If this is what the pope meant, he is very far from what either Luther or Trent stood for. Indeed, he is very close to a universalist, all-embracing, humanistic “gospel” that betrays the biblical gospel of salvation in Christ alone by faith alone for those who repent and believe.

Arguably, what Pope Francis said in Lund on justification is generic and can be interpreted in different ways. It is not possible to say for sure that this is what he had in mind. Therefore, one needs to look for other references to justification elsewhere in his writings or speeches.

Another quotation is worth pondering. In his widely acclaimed 2013 Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*,<sup>17</sup> the programmatic document of his pontificate, Francis writes, “Non-Christians, by God’s gracious initiative, when they are faithful to their own consciences, can live justified by the grace of God” (n. 254). This section of the Exhortation deals with ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in the context of mission. According to Pope Francis, non-Catholic Christians are already united in baptism (n. 244), Jews do not need to convert (n. 247), and with believing Muslims, the way is “dialogue” because “together with us they adore the one and merciful God” (n. 252, a quotation of *Lumen Gentium*, n. 16). Other non-Christians are also “justified by the grace of God” and are linked to “the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ” (n. 254).

Justification according to the pope seems to be the outcome of following one’s own conscience. It is still “by God’s gracious initiative” (although not necessarily by his grace alone), but it is no longer by faith—let alone by faith alone. It is through the conscience that men and women are linked to the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ—that is, the work of Christ as it is reenacted at the Eucharist, the chief sacrament of the church. Faith in Jesus Christ is gone. The gospel appears to be not a message of salvation from God’s judgment but instead a vehicle to access a fuller measure of a salvation that is already given to all humankind through the conscience. What about faith in Jesus Christ? What about his justice being credited to the sinner? Are, therefore, all human beings justified ultimately by following their consciences? By grace but not by faith?

At this point, it becomes clear that the Lund reference to justification being “the essence of human existence” was purposefully and intentionally designed to mean that justification defines everyone’s life, not only that of the believing Christian. This reference in *The Joy of the Gospel* makes it

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<sup>17</sup> “Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis,” Libreria Editrice Vatican, 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

abundantly clear that the pope, while using the language of justification, has radically altered its meaning and made it synonymous with a universal existence embracing the whole of humanity. He is using the word in an ambiguous way, but a closer inspection reveals its nonbiblical content.

Is Pope Francis's justification what Luther stood for? And, more decidedly, is this what the Bible teaches about justification? The pope is saying radically different things. Therefore, before listing Pope Francis as a friend of the Evangelical faith, we must understand what he is saying on his own terms. Beyond commonalities in the use of words, he belongs to a different world.

#### **IV. A Heretical Pope?**

Roman Catholics as individuals and groups may have different opinions about the pope. After all, the Church of Rome is not a monolith, and even Catholic people are polarized by their views of the pope. But what happens when negative voices become more frequent, more outspoken, and more radical in their criticism, as seems to be the case in recent months? While public opinion is still heavily influenced by the overall positive image that Francis has and continues to consider him a kind of hero, within Catholic circles, the "wait-and-see" approach toward some awkward aspects of his teaching is coming to an end. Groups of intellectuals, priests, and even cardinals are voicing their growing embarrassment and are doing it publicly and with a severe tone. In raising their concerns, they point not to peripheral elements but to crucial matters of doctrine. The irony is that the one who is supposed to guard the Roman Catholic deposit of faith is charged with allegations of introducing confusion, if not heresy.

At least three criticisms of Pope Francis are worth considering. Let us briefly look at them chronologically.

In September 2016, four cardinals (three of whom have recently died) sent to the pope five questions (in Latin, "*dubia*," doubts)<sup>18</sup> concerning the interpretation of key parts of his 2016 postsynodal exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*.<sup>19</sup> In the explanatory note, they give voice to the "grave disorientation and great confusion" that exist in the Catholic community. According to the cardinals, the contrasting interpretations of the papal text

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Pentin, "Full Text and Explanatory Notes of the Cardinals' Questions on 'Amoris Laetitia,'" National Catholic Register, November 14, 2016, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/full-text-and-explanatory-notes-of-cardinals-questions-on-amoris-laetitia>.

<sup>19</sup> "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of the Holy Father Francis," Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html).

arise from its ambiguity and the apparent contradictions with previous official teaching on the readmission of divorced people to the Eucharist. Although they asked the pope to clear any ambiguity, Francis never responded and perhaps will never do so. Their doubts will remain unanswered.

In July 2017, more than 200 Catholic priests and intellectuals from around the world wrote “a filial correction concerning the propagation of heresies” to the pope,<sup>20</sup> thus elevating the tone of the criticism to the denouncing of doctrinal deviations. Their observations were no longer questions but real corrections made to the pope’s teaching. The word “heresy” was evoked in looking at the demise of the traditional teaching on marriage and the sacraments, as they see happening and severely threatening the future credibility of their church.

Finally, at the end of July 2017, Father Thomas Weinandy, a Capuchin priest, a former chief of staff for the United States Bishops’ Committee on Doctrine, and a current member of the Vatican’s International Theological Commission, made public a letter sent to the pope.<sup>21</sup> In it, he argues that “a chronic confusion seems to mark your pontificate obscured by the ambiguity of your words and actions. This fosters within the faithful a growing unease. It compromises their capacity for love, joy and peace.” Moreover, Weinandy charges Francis with “demeaning” the importance of doctrine, appointing bishops who “scandalize” believers with dubious “teaching and pastoral practice,” giving prelates who object the impression they will be “marginalized or worse” if they speak out, and causing faithful Catholics to “lose confidence in their supreme shepherd.” This is hard language coming from a mainstream Roman Catholic theologian who has spent his whole life in the service of his church and the Vatican. These three criticisms are extremely serious and perhaps a tipping point in Catholic circles as far as the uneasiness toward Pope Francis is concerned.

## **V. An Interfaith Pope?**

The 2020 encyclical *All Brothers* has been rightly called the “political manifesto” of Pope Francis’s pontificate. In fact, there is much politics and

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<sup>20</sup> “Correctio filialis de haeresibus propagatis,” July 16, 2017, [http://www.correctiofilialis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Correctio-filialis\\_English\\_1.pdf](http://www.correctiofilialis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Correctio-filialis_English_1.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> “Fr. Thomas G. Weinandy Explains His Critical Letter to Pope Francis,” *Catholic World Report*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/11/01/fr-thomas-g-weinandy-explains-his-critical-letter-to-pope-francis/>.

much sociology in *All Brothers*,<sup>22</sup> a very long document (130 pages) that looks more like a book than a letter. Francis wants to plead the cause of universal fraternity and social friendship. To do this, he speaks of borders to be broken down, of waste to be avoided, of human rights that are not sufficiently universal, of unjust globalization, of burdensome pandemics, of migrants to be welcomed, of open societies, of solidarity, of peoples' rights, of local and global exchanges, of the limits of the liberal political vision, of world governance, of political love, of the recognition of the other, of the injustice of any war, and of the abolition of the death penalty.

Pope Francis has disseminated these themes in many speeches and in his other encyclical, *Laudato si'* (2015),<sup>23</sup> on care for the environment. Not surprisingly, he himself is by far the most cited author in the work (about 180 times), which evidences the circular trend of his thinking (the need to be self-strengthening) and the “novelty” of his teaching with respect to the traditional themes of the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

Only in the eighth (last) chapter of the encyclical does the pope deal with the theme of fraternity with religions, and here the document becomes more “theological.” This section can be considered an interpretation of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together that Francis himself signed in Abu Dhabi with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, in 2019.<sup>24</sup> More than just a reflection, this section is a jumble of quotations (better: self-quotations) that, by overlapping plans and juxtaposing issues, ends up confusing rather than clarifying. Despite this, its basic message is sufficiently clear: we are all brothers as children of the same God. This is Pope Francis's theological truth.

When *All Brothers* talks about God, it does so in general terms that can fit Muslim, Hindu, and other religions' accounts of God or gods, as well as the Masonic reference to the Watchmaker. To further confirm this, *All Brothers* ends with a “Prayer to the Creator” that could be used both in a mosque and in a Masonic temple. Having removed the “stumbling block” of Jesus Christ, everyone can turn to an unspecified divinity to experiment with

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<sup>22</sup> “Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of the Holy Father Francis: On Fraternity and Social Friendship,” Libreria Editrice Vaticane, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

<sup>23</sup> “Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home,” Libreria Editrice Vaticane, 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, “A Document on *Human Fraternity* for World Peace and Living Together,” Libreria Editrice Vaticana, February 4, 2019, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html).

what it means to be “brothers”—brothers in a divinity made in the image and likeness of humanity, not brothers and sisters on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ who has died and risen for sinners. *All Brothers* genetically modified the biblically understood meaning of fraternity by transferring it to common humanity. In doing so, it has lost the biblical boundaries of the word and replaced them with panreligious traits and contents. Is this a service to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Many people, the vast majority of people, will not read Pope Francis’s long encyclical *All Brothers*. They will only hear a few sentences or lines repeated here and there as slogans. However, what everyone will retain lies in the effective opening of the document: “ALL BROTHERS.” After quoting this famous greeting of Francis of Assisi, the pope goes on to fill the words with his own meaning: we are all brothers (and sisters). It is a very powerful universalist and inclusive message that communicates the idea that the lines of demarcation between believers and nonbelievers, atheists and agnostics, Muslims and Christians, and Evangelicals and Catholics are all so fluid and relative that they do not undermine the bonds of fraternity that they all share. The French Revolution had already launched “fraternity” as a secular belonging to human citizenship (together with “freedom” and “equality”), but now the pope defines it in a theological sense. We are “brothers”—not because we are citizens, but because we are children of the same God. According to Pope Francis, we are all children of God and therefore brothers and sisters of all those among us.

In *All Brothers*, there is the understandable anxiety aimed at dissolving conflicts, overcoming injustices, and stopping wars. This concern is commendable, even if the analyses and proposals are political and therefore can be legitimately discussed. What is problematic is the theological key chosen to overcome divisions: the declaration of human fraternity in the name of the divine sonship of all humanity. The pope uses a theological category (“all brothers as all children of God”) to create the conditions for a better world.

What are the theological implications of such a statement? Here are a few: First, *All Brothers* raises a soteriological question. If we are all brothers because we are all children of God, does this mean that all will be saved? The entire encyclical is pervaded by a powerful universalist inspiration that also includes atheists (n. 281). Religions, in the broad sense, are always presented in a positive sense (nn. 277–79), and there is mention neither of a biblical criticism of religions nor of the need for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the key to receiving salvation. Everything in the encyclical suggests that everyone, as brothers and sisters, will be saved.

Second, there is a christological issue. Even though Jesus Christ is referred to here and there, his exclusive and offensive claims are kept silent. Francis wisely presents Jesus Christ not as the cornerstone on which the whole building of life stands or collapses but as the stone only for those who recognize him. Above Jesus Christ, according to the encyclical, there is a “God” who is the father of all. We are children of this “God,” even without recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Jesus is thus reduced to the rank of the champion of Christians alone, while the other “brothers” are still children of the same “God,” regardless of faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, there is an ecclesiological issue. If we are all “brothers,” there is a sense in which we are all part of the same church that gathers brothers and sisters together. The boundaries between humanity and church are so ill-defined that the two communities become coincident. Humanity is the church, and the church is humanity. This is in line with the sacramental vision of the Roman Catholic Church, which, according to Vatican II, is understood as a “sign and instrument of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). According to the encyclical, the whole of the human race belongs to the church, not on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ but on the basis of a shared divine sonship and human fraternity.

After the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and up to Vatican II (1962–1965), Roman Catholicism related to the “others” (be they Protestants, other religions, or different cultural and social movements) through its “Roman” claims and called them to return to the fold. The “brothers” were only Roman Catholics in communion with the Roman pope. The others were “pagans,” “heretics,” and “schismatics,” excluded from sacramental grace, which is accessible only through the hierarchical system of the Roman Catholic Church. With Vatican II, it was Rome’s “catholicity” that prevailed over its “Roman” centeredness. Protestants have become “separated brothers,” other religions have been viewed positively, and people in general have been approached as “anonymous Christians.” Now, according to Francis’s encyclical, we are “all brothers.” The expansion of catholicity has been further stretched. From being excluded from the “Roman” side of Rome, we are now all included by the “catholic” side of Rome.

## **VI. A Liquid Pope?**

Since sociologist Zygmunt Bauman coined the expression *Liquid Modernity* (2000), the adjective “liquid” has been applied to almost all phenomena: liquid society, liquid family, and liquid love. In our world, liquidity seems to describe well the vacillating, uncertain, fluid, and volatile features of

contemporary life. Everything is mobile, plastic, and soft; nothing can be put into solid, stable, and lasting casts.

To the already wide range of associations, liquidity has been added as a descriptor for a specific religious tradition—in this case, liquid Roman Catholicism. In an article in *First Things*, George Weigel, a conservative American intellectual, writes about it in a worried tone.<sup>25</sup> For some time, Weigel and other exponents of Roman Catholic traditionalism in the United States have expressed their frustration (to put it mildly) at the massive injection of liquidity into Roman Catholicism by Pope Francis, which includes the uncertain teaching on doctrinal and moral subjects of primary importance, a kind of intolerance toward the preconciliar liturgy, the constant pickaxing of the Roman Catholic institution with repeated criticism of clericalism, the ways the pope acts outside the box and so destabilizes customs, and the welcoming and merciful message at the expense of the doctrinal and moral requirements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. All of these make Francis a “liquid” pope who is liquifying an institution that has made its rocky and immutable structure a distinctive identity trait.

In addition to Francis, Weigel sees the Roman Catholic Church troubled by other sources of liquidity. Weigel’s article indicates his alarm at the requests that are emerging from the so-called Synodal Path of the German Catholic Church, including a series of conferences of the Catholic Church in Germany to discuss a range of contemporary theological and organizational questions. Supported by the majority of German bishops, these requests include celibacy becoming optional for clergy (married life being the other option), opening ministries to women (the diaconate first, then one day the priesthood perhaps), and recognition (with ecclesiastical blessing) of homosexual unions. These are just some of the controversial proposals that are about to arrive at the Vatican. There are growing concerns all over the Roman Catholic world about the German Synodal Path. In this regard, Francis’s liquidity is just a pale version of the turboliquidity coming out of Catholic Germany.

Weigel and the circles of Catholic traditionalism in the United States witness these processes of liquefaction horrified. For them, Roman Catholicism is a canonically compact religion, sacramentally coherent, institutionally stable, and doctrinally integrated. They have in mind a Roman Catholicism that is more “Roman” than “Catholic,” anchored to its

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<sup>25</sup> George Weigel, “Liquid Catholicism and the German Synodal Path,” *First Things*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/02/liquid-catholicism-and-the-german-synodal-path>.

unchangeable dogmas, tied to its consolidated tradition, characterized by fidelity and obedience on the part of the faithful, and centered on its ecclesiastical hierarchies. Liquid Roman Catholicism, for them, is a pathology of catholicity that runs the risk of Protestantizing Rome and dispersing its uniqueness in the bewildering contemporary age.

It is interesting to observe these internal conflict dynamics in Roman Catholicism from the outside. Often, in the past, Roman Catholic apologetics contrasted evangelical fragmentation with Roman Catholic solidity, denigrating the former and exalting the latter. It was not a credible argument in the past, but it is even less so today. Roman Catholicism is as divided internally as any other religious movement of global reach. Moreover, traditional Roman Catholic apologetics contrasted the stability of Rome with the volatility of the Reformation. This argument too was superficial and one-sided, and it is even more so now. Roman Catholicism is undergoing significant transformation processes. The fact that Rome is deemed to be *semper eadem* (always the same) needs to be seen in light of its ongoing updating and development.

The key elements to come to terms with in this issue are twofold. First, one needs to consider the dual nature of Roman Catholicism, which is, at the same time, “catholic” (liquid) and “Roman” (solid). Its genius has always been to combine the two faces in order to make them coexist and reinforce each other. Today, it is its liquidity that seems to be prevalent, but its solidity will not fail, as Roman Catholicism comprises both. The second key element is the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which fostered change.<sup>26</sup> Vatican II has given Roman Catholicism such an injection of liquidity that today it is impacting the solid structures of Rome as never before. Will the long-term outcomes of Vatican II be able to liquefy them completely? Unlikely.

Rome will remain liquid and solid, perhaps in a different arrangement than it combines them today, but it is still “catholic” and, at the same time, “Roman.” Weigel and other Roman Catholic traditionalists dream of a return to a more “Roman” Catholicism, but have they not yet understood that their religion is also increasingly “catholic” at the same time?

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<sup>26</sup> As Shaun Blanchard has reminded us in a recent article; see Shaun Blanchard, “The Reform Was Real: Continuity and Change at Vatican II,” *Commonweal* 149.3 (March 14, 2022): 20–26.

## VII. A More “Catholic” Than “Roman” Pope

After celebrating the 500 years of the Protestant Reformation, with its call to the church to submit to the authority of Scripture and its recovery of the good news that we are saved by Christ alone through faith alone, it is appropriate to ask whether Rome is still grappling with the same issues that gave rise to it. Luther took issue with the pope and his theology and practice of dispensing God’s pardon through indulgences. Luther’s standard was the biblical gospel, and he challenged the Catholic Church to embrace afresh the gospel. Rome responded by absorbing some of Luther’s concerns about grace and faith within the sacramental system largely shaped around Roman elements and within its synergistic theology significantly marked by Catholic components, thus reinforcing the overall Roman Catholic synthesis rather than reforming it according to the word of God.

Ever since, the Roman Catholic system has been swinging and bending one way or another to accommodate either progressive or traditional trends, either reiterating Roman emphases or introducing Catholic ones and then rebalancing the whole. However, the church was not reformed because it did not recognize the external and supreme authority of Scripture and the gospel of salvation by faith alone. As it stands, it will never be renewed according to the word of God. It will certainly accommodate “Catholic” movements like the Charismatic renewal and “Roman” movements like the Marian groups and then refix the overall synthesis. It will even accommodate an emphasis on biblical literacy while commending unbiblical devotions and beliefs: both—and, Roman and Catholic!

Roman Catholicism is what it is because it inherently combines the “Roman” element with the “catholic” one. Both are essential components of the synthesis offered by the Roman Catholic system. The genius of Roman Catholicism is its being at the same time Roman and catholic, one *and* the other, one never *at the expense of* the other.

It is “Roman” in the sense that it is organically attached to the city and the Church of Rome and, by extension, to the institutions, canon laws, dogmas, hierarchy, and political outlook associated with it. Much of this derives from a complex history marked by an imperial ideology.

It is “catholic” in the sense of being inclusive, global, embracing, and open to different movements, trends, and trajectories. The Roman elements provide stability and continuity, while the Catholic element fosters development and renewal. Roman Catholicism is able to hold the tension deriving from its dual identity and maintain it at a manageable balance.

What is happening with Pope Francis is to be understood against the background of the tensions between the Roman and Catholic poles within Roman Catholicism. Francis is strongly pushing Rome's "catholic" agenda, embracing all, affirming all, expanding the boundaries of the Church, and expanding its traditional boundaries.

Some traditionalist circles are reacting strongly because they see the danger of losing the Roman elements represented by the well-established teachings and practices of the church. They see the Catholic swallowing the Roman. They see the risk of the Catholic taking precedence over the Roman and therefore severing the dynamic link that has characterized Roman Catholicism for centuries. Whereas with the previous pope (Benedict XVI), the overall balance was more in favor of the Roman than the Catholic, with Francis the Roman Catholic pendulum is swinging toward the catholicity of Rome. Francis's critics believe that he has gone too far and want the pendulum to reverse toward more reassuring Roman elements.

What is happening now with the criticism of Pope Francis is business as usual in the Roman Catholic Church: at times, the pendulum swings one way before readdressing the overall balance. It could be argued that the Second Vatican Council was a great push toward the Catholic element, and the reigns of John Paul II and Benedict XVI were subsequent attempts to moderate it in terms of reinforcing the Roman elements. With Francis, the Catholic is again winning the day. These tensions will continue as long as Roman Catholicism exists. They are inner movements within the system. Pope Francis is the living embodiment of this tension.

Nothing is going to break abruptly, and more importantly, no biblical reformation is possible under these conditions. Roman Catholicism will be stretched and go through a stress test but will be able to handle both Francis's catholicity and his critics' insistence on the Roman component. The synthesis will be expanded, but the gospel will not be allowed to change Rome. This is why the Reformation is not over.