

Beyond the Criticisms: In the Footsteps of Pope Francis

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Listening to most commentators, in print and on television, who have taken turns expressing judgments on the pontificate of Pope Francis, it almost seems as if there is a race to see who can collect the most criticisms. A relentless blame game unites progressives and conservatives, laypeople and clergy, Vatican analysts and international political observers alike. This runs starkly counter to the sentiment of ordinary people, who recall his unconventional behavior, highlight his moderation in lifestyle, and emphasize the simplicity of his gestures—through which he has shown an ability to sit alongside the marginalized of the earth, sharing their emotions and listening to their needs.

In the hearts of the faithful remains the image of a Church where the face of Jesus has been clearly visible—poor among the poor, and for the poor—present amidst the sicknesses and struggles of the world, yet distant from worldly powers.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Francis is often described as “the Pope of the People,” “the People’s Pope.” These expressions do indeed capture the essence of his mission, but they also lend themselves to a misleading interpretation of the message he conveys. In two ways: on one hand, they promote a reductive view of the theological strength of his teachings; on the other, they reinforce the simplistic idea of a “populist” Pope, concerned only with popular sentiment and therefore inattentive to institutional matters and ineffective in the face of international political challenges.

What has been a clear merit in the eyes of the common person has instead become a source of reproach for analysts and commentators of various backgrounds. To clear up any confusion, it is necessary, first of all, to recall Bergoglio’s constant emphasis on a form of *popolarismo* (popularism) that is distinct from populism—an outlook open to diversity and inclusion, in contrast to one that is identity-based and nationalist. He distinguishes between an “irresponsible populism” rooted in personal interest, economic domination, and the thirst for power, and genuine closeness to the people, grounded in compassion and mercy (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 159–161).

All this is not simply an expression of the Pope’s personal character but rather the result of a clear prophetic vision rooted in a deeply theological framework. His Jesuit formation and experience in Latin America have fortified Pope Francis in his conviction that ideas must be translated into concrete actions. Hence his focus on the individual, as a lens through which to see the whole—aimed at a true act of *diakonia*, being a neighbor to each person.

This is why it becomes essential to listen to the cries of the suffering, to accompany the daily lives of the poor and the excluded, and to bear the burdens of those in need. Francis does not serve as the voice of the marginalized out of a mere humanitarian impulse or personal inclination, but out of a profound desire to lead the Church toward the real application of conciliar principles—principles that, to this point, have remained largely unrealized or only superficially enacted.

This theological motivation has driven a spiritual renewal within the Church, beginning with actions taken within ecclesiastical institutions themselves. He has been accused of establishing a Curia that is “Francis-centered,” if not outright autocratic, when in fact he should be commended for directly challenging the power dynamics within the Vatican—dynamics that had become bloated with individual authority, personal ambition, and secular lifestyles.

In this light, his streamlining of administrative roles, his exhortation—through his own example—to a lifestyle of simplicity, and above all, his reform of the Vatican Bank and other financial entities, should all be rightly appreciated. The Pope has had to contend with internal conservative factions that have tried to block these structural changes and, at the same time, have fueled criticism of his openness to substantive innovation—criticism that has often been masked as a defense of ecclesiastical tradition but has, in truth, aimed at denying greater participation in Church governance at even the highest levels.

The goal is to reassert the supremacy of form over substance and to preserve the Church’s established status quo. In theory, one may proclaim the importance of the Council Fathers’ teachings, while in practice, reasserting an attitude of closure.

Pope Francis’ message, which points in precisely the opposite direction, is neither demagogic nor “revolutionary.” It is entirely in line with the Church’s Magisterium. Some have tried to downplay the doctrinal significance of Francis’ pontificate, but the inclusion of the laity, the opening to women, and the embrace of those who have felt—and have been—excluded by both society and the Church, have been the real manifestation of teachings that had previously remained confined to paper or ideas.

It is too often forgotten that at the heart of Francis’ choices lies the belief that to be Church means to be the People of God, in keeping with Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium*. There it is emphasized that the path to salvation is not charted for human beings as isolated individuals, since they are ontologically relational, but for a global community. Its universal character—marked by the absence of spatial boundaries and temporal limits—offers the gift of divine grace to every person, regardless of religious belief, and even in the absence of faith.

Hence the immediate invitation extended by Pope Francis “to those who feel far from God and from the Church, to those who are fearful and indifferent” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 113).

Thus, Francis’ work, though in continuity with John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has been marked by a fundamental break with the past, because it has shifted the primary focus of the Church’s gaze and strongly accelerated the process of spiritual renewal.

Of course, such an approach is not welcome to those who wish to maintain their privileges, who prefer to speak only with the powerful, and who seek to remain in positions of authority. These are the people who want to force the changes of history into the mold of outdated interpretations and to preserve principles that no longer align with today’s complex reality.

Instead, the path that has been undertaken must continue. We must insist on all the openings—whether achieved or merely attempted—that have met resistance in the name of doctrinal or hermeneutic orthodoxy, which, in reality, conceals a desire to recentralize Church institutions, to restore the distance between the Curia and the faithful, and to narrow the scope of the People of God.

We cannot go backward. We cannot downplay the imprint left by the Pope in the hearts of the faithful, nor disperse the gestures he has made toward the world’s peripheries and on behalf of the most afflicted. Doing so would mean closing the doors of hope—especially in a time marked by indifference and inhumanity.

The Church is called to remain a *pilgrim of hope*, to continue being the voice of those who have no voice.

Criticisms from within the Church have been compounded by those coming from the secular world, which—as is now customary—has engaged in an acrobatic ideological analysis. Both factions, the conservative and the progressive, have pronounced the Pope’s actions inadequate: the former because they see him as too innovative and disrespectful of tradition; the latter because they view him as not reformist enough, citing the lack of concrete results despite the many initiatives launched.

Even in this instance, the essence of the Pope’s mission has been misunderstood. As he himself has emphasized, his work does not—and cannot—have a political nature, but is fundamentally spiritual, for he is called to walk toward the encounter with Jesus Christ. Therefore, Pope Francis’ actions cannot be judged through the lens of politics, nor can the outcomes of his initiatives be evaluated using worldly perspectives or, above all, worldly timelines. One must keep in mind that this is the universal Church being discussed, with values and traditions layered over centuries, and with an audience dispersed across the globe, living in diverse—and at times even irreconcilable—political, economic, and social conditions.

This is the true meaning behind the appeal to the “transcendent dignity” of the human being—a principle that allows us to recognize the flaws of globalization and the limitations of a purely economic view of social reality. As a result, it brings to light—and condemns—the growing marginalization of the most vulnerable and the spread of a “throwaway culture,” in which certain segments of humanity seem expendable in favor of others deemed worthy of limitless living, thereby excluding from any form of protection those who “are no longer useful” or “not yet useful” (Fratelli tutti, no. 18).

And to leave nothing out in the attempt to dismantle Pope Francis’ pontificate, his so-called “political naiveté” is portrayed as a flaw—criticized for denouncing those who build walls, for his stance on those who have trampled the dignity of migrants, for alleged ambiguity regarding the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and for his positions on the Israeli–Palestinian situation. The image thus constructed is one of a Pope who has undermined established international relations and fractured the unity of the Church.

Once again, it is forgotten that the Church must aim to preserve the harmony of unity among all peoples, while respecting and embracing diversity, and to foster the union of nations within a universal order without suppressing their distinct identities. In this way, for the People of God as a whole and for every individual, the goal is the real and effective building of a model of coexistence—one inspired by dialogue among leaders, the elimination of inequality, and encounters with otherness. In this context, no form of war can be justified, and there must be no concession to “hegemonic ambitions, abuses of power, fear of others, or the perception of diversity as a threat” (Message for the 53rd World Day of Peace, December 8, 2019).

Peace thus becomes the universal common good—the criterion by which the exercise of power is judged and the compass by which international relations are guided. Without ambiguity and without compromise.

Therefore, let us silence all the reactionary criticisms aimed at halting the Church’s journey along the path of dialogue with the marginalized. Let us continue in the unwavering defense of social justice and peace, in the light of the principles of charity and global solidarity. This path, laid out by Pope Francis, seeks the synthesis of the particular and the global, the simple and the complex, theory and practice. It responds not only to the evolution of the times, but, above all, to the urgent need for a courageous critical voice in the service of humanity and of life itself.

Alberto Scerbo