

Catholics mark a decade of drama and debate

The crisis, the kairos moment, the crux of the matter, the hinge of history – none of these are easily discernible, usually. But for Catholics, this last decade has been unusual.

The decade gave us a clear, obvious turning point in the history of the Church. It was not merely the election of a new pope, even if he is a pope of firsts – first Jesuit, first from the Western hemisphere, first from south of the equator and the first to dare name himself Francis. The pivot began with Pope Benedict XVI's resignation in February 2013.

Though it was accurately reported that Benedict's was the first voluntary abdication from the active papacy in 819 years, in fact Pope Celestine V's desire to resume life as a hermit monk in 1294 was nothing like Benedict's decision to make way for a new leader of a global Church. The medieval papacy is not the papacy of today.

The pope now, like the Church he leads, must embody Christ and a trinitarian faith in Christ for every culture and every nation on Earth. Even in historically Christian nations, our embodied faith is always groaning and struggling to be born. Through the first years of this decade, as the Vatican itself melted down in scandals, the 85-year-old Pope Benedict knew he had given all he could. It was time for another to bear this burden.



Pope Francis greets the crowd after stepping onto the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on his election night at the Vatican March 13, 2013. Paul Haring, Catholic News Service file photo

From the moment Pope Francis stepped onto the balcony above St. Peter's Square and greeted his people with "Buonasera" (good evening), as if he and they had just happened upon each other in the street, like old friends, the Catholic world was overtaken by an amazing rebirth. Catholics suddenly saw their Pope on the cover of *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire* – even the LGBTQ-focused *The Advocate*. A pope was man of the year, newsmaker of the year – a phenomenon.

By 2015, Francis was asserting the Church's Christian, moral voice in global affairs. He released the encyclical [*Laudato Si'*](#) just months before the United Nations convened in Paris to confront the harrowing prospect of a global ecological disaster.

Climate change was a constant theme of the decade, and there were others:

The Shame of the Church

Both popes of the past 10 years were scarred by Catholic abuse scandals in countries around the world. Benedict faced scandals in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and Brazil in 2010. But Francis, elected because he was willing to name the problem and bring Church law to bear on it, saw scandals claim the careers of two of his cardinals, Australian George Pell and American Theodore McCarrick.



Pell

Pell was head of the Vatican's secretariat of the economy and one of Pope

Francis's closest advisers as a member of the C-9 group of hand-picked consultants. He was convicted in 2018 of assaulting two boys in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, in the 1990s and given six years in jail, [a sentence he continues to appeal](#).

McCarrick resigned in 2018 amid allegations of inappropriate relationships with seminarians and abuse of minors. His misdeeds dated back many years and, according to reports, were known to many Church leaders in the United States and the Vatican. Found guilty in a Vatican trial, McCarrick was laicized in 2019.

A year earlier, Pope Francis went from vociferously defending a recently appointed bishop in Chile to acknowledging evidence that the bishop was guilty of covering up sex abuse. The Pope summoned all the South American country's bishops to the Vatican and extracted letters of resignation from the lot.

"We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them," Pope Francis wrote in a letter to all Catholics that summer, after a [Pennsylvania Grand Jury report](#) alleged 300 predator priests over a span of 70 years had been systematically protected from criminal responsibility related to more than 1,000 cases of abuse.

He subsequently convened [a global meeting of bishops](#) in February of 2019. The following month he published new Church norms that detailed strict regulations regarding mandatory reporting of abuse, protection of minors and penalties for abusers and anyone who covers about abuse.

In Canada, former Antigonish, N.S., Bishop Raymond Lahey was sentenced to 15 months imprisonment and 24 months probation in 2012 after Canada Border Services agents found thousands of images of child pornography on his computer as he re-entered the country in 2009.



After six years in the making, more than 80 members of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops voted unanimously in 2018 to implement the stricter protocols contained in a revised document on sex abuse prevention.

As the decade closed, the Archdiocese of Montreal hired a retired judge to look at how Rev. Brian Boucher escaped their attention for 20 years before his conviction, the [Archdiocese of Vancouver released a list of priests credibly accused](#), the Diocese of London confirmed the accuracy of [a list of accused priests released by a third party](#) and the Jesuits began [a process of compiling a list of credibly accused priests](#).

Canadian [Sr. Nuala Kenny](#)'s new book sums it up with its title, *Still Unhealed*.

End of Life

The decade swung against legal protections for human life in Canada. In 2009, a private member's bill that sought to allow doctors to assist their patients commit suicide was voted down and the MP who proposed it quit politics. The Canadian Medical Association remained staunchly opposed to voluntary euthanasia.

Ten years later, the government is again bowing to a court decision and will expand availability for death on demand. Before next year is over, the disabled, those fearful of future dementia, mature minors, and anyone who suffers may be able to order up death at the time and place of their choosing.



Scheer

Over one per cent of Canadian deaths today are administered by a doctor or nurse practitioner. [Doctors who will not refer for this medical service for reasons of faith or conscience are threatened by their professional college in Ontario.](#)

At the other end of life, the idea that the criminal code will ever again apply to abortion was pronounced dead and buried by every political party during the 2019 election. Even Conservative party leader [Andrew Scheer's personal, faith-supported view that abortion is a tragedy made his party unelectable in most of the country.](#) His loudly and fiercely repeated pledge that he would block any proposals in Parliament to make abortion illegal was not enough to convince voters who believe a social conservative should never be allowed to hold power.

Free to worship

It was a decade of suffering for millions of believers. Christians suffered for their faith in a variety of contexts around the world. But Christianity's greatest, most violent losses have been in the Middle East.

There were 20 to 25 million Christians in the region in 2011. In Syria, they were 15 per cent of the population at 1.2 million. By 2018, more than half of Syria's Christians had fled and the exodus continues.



Bennett

A few lucky ones have made it to Canada, where the government opened up to Syrian refugees in 2015 and had welcomed over 40,000, most of them Muslim, by January of 2017.

Canada had an Office of Religious Freedom from 2013 to 2016 headed by an ambassador – [Fr. Deacon Andrew Bennett](#) – with a mandate to bring Canada's

values to bear wherever religious persecution arose. The office was dismissed as mere pandering to Canadian religious voters and replaced with an amorphous Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion.

In January this year, the Dutch-American non-profit Open Doors estimated that 73 countries with 245 million Christians “showed extreme, very high or high levels of persecution,” up from 58 countries with 215 million Christians in 2017.

There are one million Uighur Muslims in China lost in a vast system of re-education camps. More than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled their burning villages for muddy refugee camps in Bangladesh. In northern Nigeria Boko Haram has killed thousands of Catholics. The decade was a dangerous world for believers.

Hope

These last 10 years have lifted up the search for truth. Truth and Reconciliation has been our goal, as Canadians slowly freed themselves of the dangerous myth of their own innocence. We have confronted our collective responsibility for the residential schools and their goal of extracting the Indian out of the child.

Even if the [CCCB has been reluctant to invite Pope Francis to Canada](#) to fulfill the TRC’s Call to Action number 58 with a personal apology, Catholic school children are being taught this history. They are learning it was wrong. They will want to do better. That’s hope.

“Loving the truth means not only affirming it, but rather living it, bearing witness to it,” Pope Francis told a gathering of journalists in 2016. In the age of fake news and social media cesspools of hate, there’s a very short and direct path from truth to hope.