

First five years of Francis

In 2015 the Pope gave an interview to the Mexican media giant Televisa and said, "I have the sense that my pontificate will be brief – four or five years." On March 13 he will have hit the five-year mark. He is 81 years old.

In those five years he has issued four major teaching documents – two encyclicals and two apostolic exhortations. He has shaken up the Vatican, creating new departments, collapsing old ones and expanding the scope and prominence of the Synod of Bishops. He has appointed just under half of the 120 cardinals eligible to vote for the next pope.

Sometimes dismissed as mere style, Francis has put on display a different kind of Catholic Church – a poor Church for the poor. He has modelled humility and humanity in his pastoral concern for everybody – women, Muslim teenagers in Italian prisons, gays, drug addicts, the homeless and every single refugee cast from their home and begging the world for mercy.

By putting God's mercy first, Francis changed the conversation within the Church and about the Church.

Despite this, his January trip to Chile ended badly with his defence of Bishop Juan Barros, who stands accused of witnessing the crimes of pathological abuser Father Fernando Karadima and remaining silent.

A tired and severe-looking Francis called the allegations "calumny" and demanded "proof." He later apologized, describing his own language as a "slap in the face" to abuse survivors. He then sent the Church's most respected and effective abuse investigator to Chile to look into Barros's connections with Karadima.

The course correction was welcomed, but people wondered whether the Pope really understands the gravity and causes of the Church's most serious open wound.

"He may be on the side of refugees, migrants, the sick, the poor, the Indigenous and other marginalized peoples, but he just doesn't get it when it comes to victims of abuse," Jesuit Father Thomas Reese wrote in the *National Catholic Reporter*.



Sister Nuala Kenny

But leading global expert on clergy sex abuse Sister Nuala Kenny has not lost faith in Francis. A momentary, intemperate remark is not evidence that the Pope has lost his way, she said.

“It’s like a little blip on the horizon,” Kenny told *The Catholic Register*. “I judge the Holy Father on his whole life.”

Kenny’s confidence in the Pope is based on his openness, his candour, his honesty, his insistence that he too is a sinner.

“Every single day I pray for this Holy Father because I want him to be around long enough so that he actually changes things,” Kenny said.

“Because he’s asking for the Church to recognize that we’re no longer dominant. Not only that, we’re marginalized and rejected, just as Jesus was. What we have to do is return to who and how Jesus wants us to be as disciples in this world.”

However inspiring Pope Francis has been in his own example of humility – living simply in a guest house across the road from the Apostolic Palace, repairing his battered black shoes when they wear out, paying his own hotel bill, asking for prayers – we’re not there yet. The Church has found reasons to remain divided.

The more the Catholics on the left side of the altar have praised and welcomed Francis, the more the Catholics on the right side of the altar have stewed in anger.

“Such disagreements, as is human nature, often lead to sorrow and simmering anger,” Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College associate professor in theology and science John Paul Meenan told *The Catholic Register* in an e-mail.

Writing from the Barry's Bay, Ont., campus of the conservative college, Meenan said the people on the right side of the altar are worried about "the whole moral edifice."

"He has never written anything heterodox. Some of what he has written can, however, be interpreted in a heteroprax manner, implying that there are times wherein what (John Paul II's encyclical on moral reasoning) *Veritatis Splendor* and the Church's tradition calls intrinsic evil is permitted."

It was *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope's 2016 answer to two synods on family life, that really enraged conservatives. He proposed that, through a process of discernment, some divorced and civilly remarried Catholics might be able to rejoin the communion line. Four cardinals, led by American Cardinal Raymond Burke, launched a "dubia" in 2016 intended to force Pope Francis to defend a footnote in *Amoris Laetitia* which outlined a pastoral response to people in second, unsanctified marriages.

The dubia cardinals have been hailed as heroes in right-leaning American Catholic media outlets. Meanwhile, various bishops conferences and individual bishops have issued guidelines to their priests on how to guide couples in discerning their situations.

Francis has no desire to change Church teaching, but he does want a more pastoral Church that responds to every sinner with generosity and mercy.

"Far from accommodating the Church to the world, Pope Francis wants to demonstrate that the Church provides a way of existing and interacting that is opposed to the prevailing logic of the world," said Basilian Father Thomas Rosica.

The conservatives fear Francis has been too popular, too casual, too willing to take selfies and is positively nonchalant about inviting such non-Catholics as Canadian environmental activist Naomi Klein, population control advocate Paul Ehrlich and American politician Nancy Pelosi to the Vatican.

But the Church does not answer the world by running away from it, according to Rosica.

"Pope Francis believes that this path of dialogue is a path to conversion for a Church that too often operates under the logic of a world that it supposedly rejects," he wrote in an e-mail.



Father Tom Rosica

“It is only through dialogue that the Church truly can be a sign of contradiction, especially in a world – and at times elements and leaders in the Church – that prefers monologue.”

Quebecers have embraced that spirit ever since the Pope said “Good evening” from the balcony above St. Peter’s Square five years ago, said Frédéric Barriault of the Jesuit Centre Justice et Foi in Montreal.

“Francis’ election has, in fact, galvanized the progressive wing of Quebec’s Catholic Church,” he said. “His warm, friendly, Latino style struck a chord with our own Latin-style sociability and religiosity.”

Barriault isn’t trying to oversell the Pope. The churches in Quebec do not overflow on Sunday mornings, and it will take more than a pope to rediscover the bond that once existed between Quebec and its Church.

“What I can tell you, though, is that on the parish ground the Catholics are far less depressed than they were, say, 10 or 20 years ago,” he said.

In English Canada, Pope Francis’ deep concern for refugees has spurred Catholics to action. In Toronto, Catholic sponsorship and support for refugees has reconnected Catholics with the roots of their own Church.

Just as Toronto’s founding bishop, Michael Power, died in the service of poor and sick Irish refugees who landed in Toronto in 1847, parishes have been there for thousands of refugees now arriving in Canada.

“At our high-water mark, ORAT (the Office for Refugees, Archdiocese of Toronto) was working with over 150 parishes throughout the archdiocese,” said ORAT director Deacon Rudy Ovcjak.

“A rough estimate of the number of parishioners involved in this work would be in the range of 950 to 1,900 parishioners.”

Jesuits have always had a unique bond with the papacy, but with Francis it's a bond with the Pope himself, who is one of them.

"The arrival of Francis has been a boon to the Society (of Jesus), not simply because he is the first Jesuit pope, but also because of his Jesuit way of being and doing – strong character, unequivocal, deeply spiritual, always circumspect... his creative fidelity," said Jesuit provincial superior for Quebec and Haiti Father Erik Oland.

In 2015 Pope Francis told an audience in Florence: "We are not living an era of change but a change of era."

The Pope isn't interested in squabbles between left and right, tempests over Latin in the liturgy and procedure. He has Heaven, hell and salvation to think about and the Church must be a player in that drama.

"Before the problems of the Church, it is not useful to search for solutions in conservatism or fundamentalism, in the restoration of obsolete conduct and forms that no longer have the capacity of being significant culturally," the Pontiff said.

"Christian doctrine is not a closed system incapable of generating questions, doubts, interrogatives – but is alive, knows being unsettled, enlivened. It has a face that is not rigid. It has a body that moves and grows. It has a soft flesh. It is called Jesus Christ."