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USA

# Francis. The Pope Who Spoke Softly—and Carried the Same Big Stick

- Features -

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**Pope Francis was better than his predecessors. He integrated climate change into the Church's concerns and widened space for discussion of social justice. His reign as Pope left the Catholic Church a marginally better place for the poor and the weak. He named more Cardinals from the Global South, where most Catholics live.**

But while he was willing to make the Church more inclusive, he refused reforms that would weaken its authoritarian and patriarchal apparatus. He protected child abusers in his own organisation more consistently than he protected their ordinary Catholic victims. This failure saw millions of Catholics in the Global North leave the Church in disgust. Under his rule, abortion remains a crime, contraception remains a sin, homosexuals must be loved and helped to overcome their 'sickness'.

In China and Russia he cooperated with the regime and was silent on abuses of ordinary Christians, hoping to gain some influence for a loyal Catholic hierarchy. He expressed sympathy for Gazans without calling for meaningful action to save them, and he called on Ukraine to surrender to Russia after a 'provoked' war.

His papacy represents more a shift in tone than substance: a pastoral rebranding that masks deep continuity with conservative doctrine.

## **Women in the Church: Elevation or Containment?**

Francis has spoken warmly about the importance of women's feminine gifts and complementarity to male leadership in the Church. Catholic women's role is presented as motherhood, femininity and pastoral care responsibilities. He has appointed women to high-profile positions, including Sister Nathalie Becquart to a deputy role in the Synod of Bishops—an unprecedented move. Women can now serve as lectors and acolytes and occupy governance roles in the Vatican.

None of this changes Catholicism's patriarchal theological core. Francis has reaffirmed, in no uncertain terms, that women cannot become priests. He has upheld Pope John Paul II's declaration that this matter is "closed," effectively treating it as infallible (the word of God, expressed by the Pope, which Catholics must accept). Attempts to raise the issue are politely brushed aside in public but internally treated as ideological threats.

Determined women are indeed a problem for men like Francis:

The 2023 International Survey of Catholic Women, which surveyed more than 17,000 Catholic women from 104 countries and eight language groups, found women across the world were keen for church reform that recognises women's leadership capacities and ongoing contribution to church communities. More than eight in ten (84%) of the women surveyed supported reform in the church. Two-thirds (68%) agreed women should be ordained to the priesthood, and three-quarters (78%) were supportive of women preaching during Mass.

Francis's hostility to feminism is unyielding. His warnings against "gender ideology" and "ideological colonization" confirm his patriarchal convictions and reflect his unbroken engagement with right- and far-right elements in the Church hierarchy ever since his years managing the Church in Buenos Aires during Argentina's 'dirty wars' dictatorship.

He has described abortion as a crime in all circumstances—likening it to hiring a hitman. His more approach is limited to allowing priests (and not just bishops) to absolve the sin of abortion in confession.

On contraception, he showed glimmers of nuance. During the Zika virus crisis, he suggested that contraception could be the "lesser evil" to prevent pregnancy—particularly in regions where mothers risked passing on birth defects. Yet this was no doctrinal shift. He reaffirmed *Humanae Vitae*, the Church's 1968 ban on artificial contraception, as authoritative.

The space for open theological debate has widened slightly, but women's bodily autonomy remains confined by moral doctrines written by and for celibate men. But, as one of the better obituaries on this website notes, Catholic women are impatient. "With regard to sexual and reproductive decision-making, the International Survey of Catholic Women found the majority of respondents wanted more freedom of conscience around such issues. This is because when they are denied by church law, women's agency was diminished and their vulnerability to situations of gendered violence increased. The papacy of Pope Francis has made no reforms in this area, leaving many Catholic women frustrated and disappointed. [\[1\]](#)

## **LGBTQ+ Catholics: to be loved and to be cured**

Francis's famous 2013 remark about homosexuals —“Who am I to judge?” — marked the beginning of a much greater pastoral openness. He supports civil unions for same-sex couples (the first pope ever to do so) and in 2023 approved blessings for same-sex couples—so long as these blessings don't imply marriage or equal status of homosexual and married heterosexual relationships.

Meanwhile, doctrinally, the Church still describes same-sex acts as “intrinsically disordered.” Trans identity continues to be treated with suspicion, if not outright condemnation. Asked what he would tell a parent whose child comes out as gay, Francis replied “I would say first of all to pray— then, to not condemn, to talk, to understand, to make space for the son or daughter. Then, it depends [...] there are many things one can do with a psychiatrist” he told the Italian newspaper La Stampa in 2018.

Nevertheless, his pastoral concern was sincere. As our regular writer Paul Martial notes, in Africa, Francis has spoken repeatedly “against any form of criminalization on a continent where 27 countries out of 54 repress same-sex relations. As well as his call for the conversion... of religious people to welcome members of LGBT communities, while most prelates, in a nauseating competition with other religions, continue to spearhead the stigmatization of homosexuals.”

## **Gaza: A Papal Voice for the Suffering—but Dont Talk about the System**

Francis has consistently called for a ceasefire and the protection of civilians in Gaza, expressing “deep concern” about the humanitarian catastrophe. He has prayed for the people of Palestine, spoken with families of kidnapped and killed civilians, and criticized the “spiral of violence” in the region. He has also decried the blockade and collective punishment of the Gazan population, demanding “peace built on justice.”

Still, Francis has avoided direct political language. He has not explicitly named Israeli apartheid and despite his constant invocation of ‘peace’ he has not called for an arms embargo. He has not even supported the Palestinian-led calls for boycotts. His framing remains within a humanitarian, not liberationist, lens—focused more on suffering than structural injustice.

## **Ukraine: Peacemaker or Apologist for Empire?**

The historians can discuss whether Francis' Russia sympathies reflect his latino leftist geopolitical references, or his desire to strengthen ties with the Kremlin in order to improve the position of the Russian Federation's rather marginal Catholic Church. Ukrainians were dismayed when in August 2023, Francis praised “Great Mother Russia” and the legacy of “great Russian rulers,” including Peter the Great and Catherine II—figures deeply associated with imperial conquest and Russification.

His 2024 comment urging Ukraine to consider the “courage of the white flag” of surrender sparked international outcry. He was silent when the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church called Putin's war a ‘holy’ endeavour to rebuild the “Russian World’ with its unique spiritual role. But he thundered against Kyiv when it tried to close down

Ukrainian churches that declared loyalty to the Moscow Patriarch.

## **China: selling out the faithful for a place at the top table**

Francis has resisted making any critical remarks about the state of human rights and religious freedom in China. His consistent focus was reaching a deal on recognition of the Catholic hierarchy inside China. In return for this he compromised on Church autonomy and above all on the privacy and religious freedoms of China's estimated 10m Catholics.

As Filipino journalist Randy David noted in 2023, “this policy of patient appeasement has not been without its critics. Hong Kong's retired Cardinal Joseph Zen, a venerable prelate who has been criminally charged for not registering a fund-raising initiative to help those who have suffered repression in the hands of HK's China-backed regime, has called the controversial agreement a ‘sell-out.’ In a BBC interview, he said: ‘A bad agreement makes the situation worse. Without an agreement, we have to tolerate many things but that's okay. Our faith tells us that we have to suffer from persecution. The communist regime never changes its policies. They don't need to compromise. They want a complete surrender.’

## **Child Sexual Abuse: half-hearted and insincere reforms**

Francis inherited a Church confronted with a long, global history of child sexual abuse by priests and monks. Francis has taken several significant steps: lifting pontifical secrecy in abuse cases, setting up reporting systems, defrocking (expelling) some high-profile abusers, and pushing for diocesan accountability through *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*.

But these reforms are extremely limited. Bishops still investigate each other in secrecy. Survivors report being sidelined and kept in the dark. There is no global requirement for the Church authorities to report abuse to civil authorities. Perpetrators and enablers have in almost all cases been pushed to quietly retire rather than being held accountable.

The 2018 Chile scandal revealed the heart of the problem: Francis initially, instinctively sided with the bishops accused of cover-up. He only reversed his stance after public outrage. Despite his public apologies and compassionate language, Francis has failed to deliver the structural, survivor-centered justice that many demand.

Instead, Francis dodges and weaves to absolve the Catholic hierarchy. His PR trip to Northern Canada where indigenous children were massively abused and neglected to death in state-approved Church facilities failed to convince local activists. “A careful reading of the apology shows an attempt to soften or deflect the church's culpability for the devastation experienced by Indigenous Peoples, by situating residential schools within the larger context of ‘policies of assimilation and enfranchisement,’ presumably those of the government. He referred to stories told to him about ‘how the policies of assimilation ended up systemically marginalizing the Indigenous Peoples’ and how the ‘system of residential schools’ denigrated Indigenous languages and cultures. While this is all true and caused irreparable damage and loss, what the Pope fails to do is explain how the rampant physical and sexual abuses, tortures and deaths of thousands of Indigenous children and babies at the hands of Catholic priests, nuns, clergy and staff, had nothing to do with government policies of assimilation.”

In countries where scandals have dragged on for years: Canada, Chile, Ireland, France and Germany in particular, the result has been a massive decline in church-going and identification with the Catholic Church. In recent years, about half a million Germans have disaffiliated from the Catholic Church every year. [\[2\]](#) In France, only 5% of 'Catholics' attend a regular religious service.

## Climate and Capitalism: dragging the Church into the 21st Century

It is on climate change and economic justice that Francis stands out as a genuine reformer – at least by Vatican standards. His "Ecological Encyclical" *Laudato Si'* (2015) declared environmental destruction a moral and spiritual crisis. [Michael Löwy](#) called the initiative "an event of global significance from a religious, ethical, social, and political perspective."

Given the enormous influence of the Catholic Church, it is a crucial contribution to the development of a critical ecological consciousness. While it was enthusiastically received by true environmentalists, it also aroused concern and rejection from religious conservatives, representatives of capital, and ideologues of "market ecology." This is a document of great richness and complexity, proposing a new interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition—breaking with the "Promethean dream of world domination"—and a critical reflection on the causes of the ecological crisis. In certain aspects, such as the inseparable association of the "cry of the earth" and the "cry of the poor," it is evident that liberation theology—particularly that of the eco-theologian Leonardo Boff—was one of its sources of inspiration.

[...] I would like to highlight one aspect of the Encyclical that explains the resistance it encountered from the economic and media establishment: its anti-systemic character.

For Pope Francis, ecological disasters and climate change are not solely the result of individual behaviour—although these play a role—but of "current models of production and consumption."

Bergoglio is not a Marxist, and the word "capitalism" does not appear in the encyclical. But it is very clear that for him the dramatic ecological problems of our time are the result of the mechanisms of today's globalised economy, mechanisms constituted by a "structurally perverse global system of commercial and property relations" .

Lowy goes on to say that the main weakness of *Laudato Si'* is that it lacks a clear radical alternative to the system he so clearly denounces. This is the contribution of ecosocialism.

The Pope's follow-up, *Laudate Deum* (2023), accused world leaders of "insufficient action," and warned that time was running out. Francis linked ecological destruction with the suffering of the poor—asserting that climate justice and social justice are indivisible.

In this area, at least, Francis' moral clarity has inspired secular activists and progressive movements alike.

# Conclusion: A Papacy of Tension and Missed Opportunity

Francis II was not the enemy of progress. But he was not its champion, either.

Francis was very critical of all efforts to engage ordinary people in any discussion about Church teachings, including Germany's "Synodal Way". Francis called such initiatives a threat to the unity of the Church.

His papacy was been defined by an emotional intelligence rare in Church leadership—a warm pastoral tone, openness to dialogue, and gestures of humility that softened the Church's public image. Yet beneath that surface lies a familiar institution, doctrinally frozen, structurally patriarchal, and more concerned with optics than justice.

For feminists, LGBTQ+ believers, survivors of abuse, and communities living under occupation or war, Francis's legacy is one of gestures over transformation. He invites conversation—but protects the powerful from confrontation. He comforts the poor and the needy—but rarely liberates.

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Source [ESSF](#).

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[1] *The Conversation*, 21 April 2025, ["Pope Francis tried to change the Catholic Church for women, with mixed success"](#).

[2] Germans have to register their religious affiliation with civil authorities, and this information is used to calculate the state subsidy to religious groups. The decline in Catholic affiliation reflects the number of people who contacted civil authorities and requested a change in their registration.