

The Outsider Pope: Where is Francis leading our Church? Helder Camara Lecture 2022

Thank you for the kind words of introduction. It is a great honour to be with you this evening to give the Helder Camara lecture on the question of where Francis - the Outsider Pope - is leading our Church.

Tonight I would like to give a speech in two parts. The first half will look at the opposition to Francis and the battle he has faced in his reform efforts and the second will focus on the direction he is taking the Church through the prism of last week's landmark Plenary Council assembly in Sydney, which I was able to observe and report on.

It is, of course, appropriate to examine Francis' reform efforts in a Dom Helder Camara lecture. The Brazilian archbishop's life and ministry has several parallels with the Francis pontificate. Dom Helder's vision of the Church pointed to what the first Pope from Latin America has sought to do as Bishop of Rome.

Like Dom Helder, Francis is a prophetic voice in the world today who has made a preferential option for the poorest in society not just in what he says but in the simple lifestyle he has embraced. Like Dom Helder, Francis' advocacy for the marginalised comes from a deep love of Christ and grounded in hours of silent prayer. Like Dom Helder, Francis has rooted his ministry in a theology of the people,

and seeks to implement the Second Vatican Council. Like Dom Helder, Francis has been accused of being too political and has faced attacks from those in the Church who have a restorationist agenda.

While the papacy of John Paul II arose out of the suffering of the Polish Church under Nazism and Communism, the Francis pontificate comes out of the suffering and lived experiences of the Christian faith in Latin America where the Church has so often been a prophetic voice standing for justice. Although the 2013 election of the Pope came as a surprise for many journalists - myself included - a closer examination of the shifts in global Catholicism pointed the way. Following the council it was the Church in Latin and Central America that embraced its teachings and what the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, an adviser to the council, saw as a moment when Catholicism moved from being a Eurocentric Church to a world Church.

For some, the Francis pontificate has been the personal crusade of one inspiring individual and it will soon be forgotten when he is gone. That's what his opponents are hoping. However, I would argue this papacy is much more than just one person: it is an "event" that is helping to decisively reshape the Church for the third millennium.

Now, it may be tempting to think that if an individual no less than the U2 frontman Bono praises your contribution and ministry then you're

on your way to considerable popularity, even global stardom. Just recently, Bono was in Rome meeting Pope Francis for the launch of the Pontifical Foundation, the *Scholas Occurrentes*, an education initiative. Who wouldn't welcome the endorsement from a global superstar?

But was the late theologian Hans Küng more accurate when he wrote of this Pope, soon after his election, that, and I quote: “doubtless he will awaken powerful opposition, above all in the powerhouse of the Roman Curia, opposition that is difficult to withstand. Those in power in the Vatican are not likely to abandon power that has been accumulated since the Middle Ages.”

Whatever happens inside the halls of influence in the Vatican, or at the lavishly funded anti-Francis conferences in the United States, this Pope has the support of the People of God across the Church and more broadly. Poll after poll shows this.

But it is the juxtaposition between a Pope who so evidently had the people behind him, on the one hand, while at the same time was coming up against unprecedented internal attacks from powerful forces that inspired me to write my book. To my mind, this is the story of the Francis pontificate, and it deserved further investigation. How can a Pope both make an incredible global impact yet also arise

intense opposition at the same time? And can he succeed in the battle for Church reform?

My thesis about the opposition is as follows: at its heart, the Francis pontificate is an attempt to implement a Gospel-based reform of the Church by applying the essentials of the Christian faith. It is rooted in a deep trust in the action of the Holy Spirit to update and renew the Church, including its structures.

At the same time, this Pope has embarked on his papal ministry with a steely determination and shrewd strategic approach which has often unnerved and wrong-footed those who assumed they were always going to call the shots at the highest ecclesiastical levels.

He is, of course, the outsider who has modelled his pontificate on St Francis of Assisi, that wonderful saint of poverty, peace and the environment.

This Pope, like St Francis, seeks a renewal of the Church first and foremost by living the Gospel message authentically. It is about mission rather than seeking to maintain the Church's institutional prestige or its financial position.

Francis is also the first Pope in more than a hundred years to have never worked or studied in Rome. This makes him an outsider to the clerical establishment, where so many have spent time in Rome either as students or officials in the Vatican. As Cardinal Bergoglio in Buenos Aires, Francis maintained a low profile, and did not have a big network in Rome. When Benedict resigned it was actually a journalist, my colleague Gerry O'Connell of *America Magazine*, who called the future Pope to tell him the news.

Francis arrived in Rome for the 2013 conclave with a return ticket to Argentina. Why does that matter? It shows that Francis never expected to be elected, does not owe his position to anyone and can operate with complete freedom. He refuses to be scripted or controlled by the central Church apparatus.

The Outsider Pope has threatened the status quo of power in the Church. His decision to live in the Casa Santa Marta, where he makes use of a 40 square metre bedroom and study, shocked people in the Vatican who expected him to live in the grandeur Apostolic Palace. They are still unhappy about it to this day. Of course, the Pope's living arrangements are in stark contrast with the vast apartments occupied by some of the Roman Curia's highest ranking prelates.

Like the doctors of the law and the religious authorities in Jesus' time, those who wield clerical influence in the Church are deeply disconcerted by Francis. Often this expresses itself in subtle ways. The reaction in Rome to the Pope's call for a "poor Church for the poor" could be likened to Sir Humphrey, the Civil Servant in the British television series, *Yes Minister*. It goes something like this: "Of course Holy Father, I salute you for your desire to see a 'poor Church, for the poor' but I'm not sure it's entirely practicable at this moment in time."

There was one moment, early on in the pontificate, when the Pope was speaking to Caritas - the Church's charitable arm - and the talk was being broadcast into the Vatican press room so journalists could listen in. Francis was stressing the urgency of helping the poor and made the suggestion that, if necessary, some of the church-owned buildings in Rome could be sold to help! At that point, the broadcast of the talk was suddenly cut!

But Francis is not a conservative or a liberal. He is a radical who always places the emphasis on the lived practice of faith while resisting all attempts to place ideological labels on the Church. His pastoral approach and his bold gestures such as giving private tours to the homeless in the Sistine Chapel or his decision to bring back refugees on his papal plane are not decided at high-level strategy

meetings. They are his attempts to instinctively respond to the movement of the Spirit. It makes Francis an unpredictable force.

While much of the opposition in Rome often operates under the surface, the Pope has faced unprecedented public resistance to his authority in ways that would have been unthinkable during the tenure of John Paul II or Benedict XVI. Early on, the cardinal in charge of the Vatican's doctrine office made the extraordinary claim that because Francis was "more pastoral" it was up to this cardinal to "theologically structure" this pontificate. The cardinal said this despite the role of the Pope as "supreme Pastor and teacher of all the faithful" with the responsibility to promote and defend doctrine. In other words: "We can't trust the Latin American Pope to be in charge of theology."

Another curial cardinal, this time in charge of liturgy, repeatedly made statements that undermined Francis and for a year resisted drawing up a 370-word decree making it clear that women can now officially be part of the foot-washing ritual during the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.

I should point out that over the last nine years, Francis has taken definitive steps to reform the Curia and there are many good and hard-working officials serving the Pope.

Neither am I suggesting Francis is above criticism. He makes mistakes, and he says sorry for getting things wrong. Francis has offered some of the most dramatic personal apologies of any Pope, including over mistakes he made while handling the sexual abuse scandal in Chile. This is a Pope who does not rest his authority on papal infallibility but on St Peter, who himself made plenty of errors. And, crucially, he manages to keep his sense of humour in the face of all the difficulties.

What I am arguing, however, is that the guerrilla warfare launched against him by his opponents seeks to question his right to exercise papal authority. This level of opposition has not been seen in centuries.

The seeds for the most dramatic attacks on Francis were sown during the Synod meetings on the Family when the Pope and fellow bishops sought to articulate a renewed teaching on family life focused on mercy and accompaniment. In his teaching document, *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis codified this vision and opened a path for those who are divorced and remarried to receive communion. This was then bitterly opposed by a group of cardinals who publicly challenged Francis' teaching. However, this was not merely about a difference of

theological opinion but an attempt to lay a trap so they could declare the Pope unworthy of his position.

Furthermore, what was presented as theological concerns quickly morphed into political resistance.

This burst out into the open when, in 2018, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, a former papal ambassador to the United States, issued a dossier of baseless accusations while calling on Francis to resign. This was a blatant ecclesial-political manoeuvre designed to damage the Pope. What made it more extraordinary was the fact a papal ambassador took such a step given that Viganò had made an oath of loyalty to the papacy and had spent decades serving the Holy See. In the Vatican, this would have been unthinkable until recently.

This political resistance did not come out of a vacuum. In April 2018, I sat in a conference centre in Rome, listening to a high-profile cardinal from the United States give a long speech on the “limits of papal authority,” an implicit attack on Francis. Given this cardinal was renowned as a standard-bearer of Catholic orthodoxy - who in the past would have demanded full obedience to Popes John Paul II and Benedict - the topic of the speech seemed quite ironic. The atmosphere on that day was one of defiance. One of those in the

audience listening was Archbishop Viganò. Four months, later he released his dossier against Francis.

It must be remembered that Viganò has strong links in the United States including among some wealthy Catholic donors who oppose Francis. A number of the US donors have, like Archbishop Viganò, have supported President Donald Trump or are entwined in the politics of the Republican party. Catholicism has become their religion of choice. In the past donors could expect good access to the papacy, particularly at the early morning Masses celebrated by John Paul II. Francis has cut off that access. For his Masses, it's more likely that a Vatican gardener will be able to attend than a super-rich donor.

A number of these wealthy Catholics want the Church to relentlessly focus on a few “wedge” culture war issues such as abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage. While not changing the Church's teaching, Francis has steadfastly resisted attempts to be drawn into the culture wars. He has spoken out strongly on the defence of the unborn but insisted that being pro-life is to defend all life, including opposition to the death penalty. On the latter, the strident anti-abortion voices often stay strangely silent.

A number of the donors, who have allies among the Church hierarchy, are distressed by Francis' outspoken advocacy for migrants and care

for the environment which we saw with his landmark encyclical, *Laudato si'*. At the time *Laudato si'* was released Catholic Republican politicians in the US such as Rick Santorum and Jeb Bush both publicly criticised Francis. There was also a wrecking ball attempt in Rome with Francis' encyclical leaked to a journalist critical of this pontificate as a way to lessen its impact.

Although it is seven years since its publication, the release of *Laudato si'*, which updates the Church's social teaching by linking the cry of the earth with the cry of the poor, has not been communicated to ordinary Catholics in the U.S. and is better known outside the Church.

The same is also true of other major papal teaching documents such as *Amoris Laetitia*: recent findings of a synod survey in England and Wales show this teaching, including its opening to giving communion to remarried divorcees, is not widely known.

It must be said that across the English-speaking world, a significant portion of clergy and bishops continue to resist or ignore Francis' teachings, and have decided to "wait this Pope out".

The opposition to Francis also has a megaphone. There is one US Catholic media network, and the largest religious affairs broadcaster in

the world, that has become a platform for some of the deeply hostile coverage of the Francis pontificate. This network pushed the now-debunked claims made against Francis by Archbishop Viganò while also carrying out fawning interviews with President Trump and his former chief strategist Steve Bannon. One of their prominent shows each week dedicates itself to trying to take down the Pope's reform efforts and rarely hears from someone with a different point of view.

More significantly is what stories this network chooses to ignore.

When the Pope published his book, *Let Us Dream*, it received coverage from media across the world. This book was a serious attempt by Francis to address the Covid-19 crisis through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching. But the Catholic network I have mentioned offered no coverage bar a short blog post. Certain Catholic media have consistently pushed a hostile or skewed narrative about this pontificate with the message that Francis is a dangerous liberal dismantling the Church's tradition or a kind of "dictator Pope" who is trying to enforce his will on the Church. You might expect lines of attack from commentators working for mainstream media outlets, but it is extraordinary that these narratives are pushed so relentlessly by Catholic outlets.

Part II:

In many respects, the opposition that Francis faces shows that he's moving with purpose and clarity and it reveals a sickness in elements of the Church's life and culture which Francis is trying to heal.

I firmly believe that after almost 10 years of this pontificate definitive, irreversible reforms have been made. As one cardinal put it to me:

“The Church does not have a reverse gear.”

A leading example of attempts to implement the Francis vision at the grassroots level can be seen in the Plenary Council process here in Australia. I see the council most advanced renewal attempt in the English speaking world and having covered the event in Sydney I think there are three ways in which it points the way for the kind of Church the Pope is calling for.

The first is a **synodal, listening Church which implements - and I stress *implements* - the Second Vatican Council**, that decisive moment between 1962 and 1965 when the Church defined itself as the People of God, connected itself with early Christianity and sought to read the signs of the times. As Ormond Rush, an adviser to the Plenary Council and one of the foremost interpreters of the council told, told me in Sydney: “synodality is Vatican II in a nutshell.”

Now, more than 60 years on from the council, we are in what can be described as a decisive, third phase of Vatican II. What the Francis pontificate has tried to do is move beyond debates over which interpretation of the council should be definitive and towards an implementation. In Francis, we have a Pope who has made the acceptance of the council a non-negotiable and he has described the non-acceptance of the council as the great problem for the Church today.

The Plenary Council assembly, as an event, epitomised that vision of the council. Out in the hall we saw bishops seated at tables with lay members listening and discerning together: it was a living example of the vision of the Church where bishops and people, although with distinct roles, walk together.

When a moment of crisis came, and the vote on the role of women in the Church failed to receive a majority, the bishops were forced to stop and listen to the cry of the people in the room. The bishops could have ploughed on. But this was an example of a Church seeking to overcome the mentality of clericalism, the disconnect between the leadership of the Church and those whom they are called to serve. After crisis talks, a series of re-worked motions on the role of women were passed which seek to make this collaborative form of decision making a reality.

The agreement on the role of women at the Plenary is critical given that, in the synodal discussions taking place across the world, the position that women occupy in the Church is consistently a headline item. Francis has recognised this with his various appointments of women to senior bodies in Rome and he'll soon appoint two women to the Vatican department appointing bishops. What we are hearing from the synod processes is that the direction of travel needs to go further and faster.

While the question of a female diaconate is likely to remain hotly contested, the agreement that was made on female deacons at the Plenary Council is symbolically highly significant as it means Australia becomes the second church, after the Amazon, to indicate its support for women deacons. If this is a reform that comes it is likely to be through local churches, rather than from the Roman centre.

The second way is a Church that **replaces fear with trust in the Holy Spirit**. Francis' pontificate draws deeply from the insights of the Vatican II theologian Yves Congar who called for the Church to recapture a trust in the spirit to renew the Church, ensuring it could witness to the Gospel in ways that speak to people today. Francis repeatedly warns against the temptation of the "restorationist" mentality which seeks to go back to pre-Vatican II ways, particularly

when it comes to the liturgy. It's tempting to think of the Catholic Church as the custodian of the past which simply safeguards unchanging doctrines. For Francis, however, the Church is driven by a living tradition, and must not drift into becoming a "museum faith".

It can be summed up in the historian Jaroslav Pelikan's line:
"Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

What it means is that, yes, the Church can do new things and can update its structures, pastoral styles and habits. The Plenary Council is an example of taking an old structure and doing something new with it. Plenary Councils have taken place in Australia in the past but they did not address questions such as protecting the environment or the rights of indigenous peoples. Plenary Councils of the past did not have female members. The Church in Australia deserves some credit for taking a leap into the dark and embarking on this council in its attempt to build a Church that is fit for purpose, and alive to the work of the Holy Spirit today. This is what Francis is seeking from the entire Church as it becomes more synodal.

But trusting also means being ready for the messiness of synodality. We saw this in Sydney when the votes on women failed and a number of members made their feelings known in the hall. This clearly shocked the bishops. There was high emotion. People were in tears. A

slew of negative media stories ensued. Nevertheless, these fights have to take place and unless the crisis is embraced you don't get renewal.

For Francis, it is better for the plates to fly in disagreement than for a false peace, or for the Church to look strong and harmonious on the outside but on the inside be in serious trouble. In Rome, the mentalities of *Bella Figura*, putting on a good show, or *Gattopardismo*, advocating change but in reality keeping existing power structures the same, are both challenged by the synodal reform.

By contrast, the Australian church showed it wasn't interested in cosmetic reform. This was an honest discernment, and a process built on trusting that the Holy Spirit would lead the assembly even if it meant being taken to the abyss of disaster.

The third way is **finding the creative tension in disagreement but avoiding division**. At the beginning of the 2014 synod on the family, Francis encouraged the bishops to speak frankly, using the Greek word *parrhesia*. What struck me about the Plenary Council assembly is how people were able to speak frankly, openly and honestly. One of the pathologies of the Church in recent decades has been the crack down on speaking freely on difficult topics, but during his pontificate Francis has taken away the fear people might have had about speaking out. This is based on a deeply held Catholic principle that "both/and"

is almost always preferable to “either/or” and that it is through hearing differently held views that a creative way forward can be found.

Although people disagreed with each other at the plenary council, they were still talking to each other. During synods in Rome this isn't always the case, and it's almost impossible to imagine the deeply polarised US Church being able to get everyone into the same room for a synodal gathering. The ability to hold different views in tension, and then find consensus, was a strength of the Plenary Council and it is something Francis wants to see across the Church. It means that synodal Church stands as a counter-culture witness to a culture which continuously demands people to make “either/or” choices on political or other contested issues, and then separates them into camps. By contrast, Francis' vision seeks to draw people out of their social media echo chambers and into a culture of dialogue and encounter. A synodal Church seeks to bring harmony out of the cacophony of voices.

It was clear, however, that within the Plenary Council a small group inside the hall had decided they would act as a block to certain motions as they sought to impose some narrow ecclesial-political positions on certain topics onto the assembly. In a number of respects the dynamic in Sydney reflects the wider dynamic of the Church. Opposition to the synodal process is strong and targeting the synod has become a proxy battle for those wanting to undermine Francis.

The block in Sydney was similar to the opposition block in the 2019 Amazon synod when the bishops from the Amazon region all called for the ordination of married men as priests. This initiative was stopped because the cardinals of the Roman Curia, who took part in that synod, resisted. There are legitimate questions for Francis and the Holy See about how they are planning to handle what is likely to be intense resistance at the synod summit in the Vatican in 2023.

What was interesting in Sydney, however, is that despite their best efforts the group seeking to block change were unsuccessful - the consensus was formed around the motions despite an attempt by an organised group to resist. Nevertheless, if a certain Catholic media outlet in Sydney is to be believed, they are planning to fight on. The problem with some of the opposition to the synodal reforms is the refusal to play by any kind of rules. You might think you are playing a game of rugby or football but often you find the dressing rooms have been flooded or the floodlights turned off so the legitimate hammering out of different positions cannot take place.

Conclusion:

Finally, I like to think that what Pope Francis is trying to implement is a Church that lives by the 'upside-down economics of the Gospel'. He wants a Church that is a prophetic voice on the margins of society; a

Church which is outward-looking and refuses to rest inside “the sacred precincts” of its own security. Francis wants a Gospel vision:

The last is first.

The outsider is the insider.

‘Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’.

He’s made this case at the very top of the Church with his appointment of cardinals, many of them bishops working on the peripheries and those who would never expect to receive the red hat of a cardinal. He’s made service not status the guiding principle. Some in the Church may be hoping that a future Pope will turn the clock back and are already maneuvering to ensure an anti-Francis candidate emerges from the next conclave. Time will tell. By the end of August will have chosen around 63 per cent of the candidates who will elect his successor, although that does not guarantee anything.

Whatever happens, however, the Francis papacy has set down a definitive marker that cannot be erased. Even if the opponents of this papacy are successful in finding a candidate at the next conclave willing to undo the reforms the Francis pontificate will remain the lodestar pointing the People of God forwards.

Thank you for listening.

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