

Francis' Papacy Analyzed from a Historical Perspective A Catholicism for the Twenty-First Century?

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Abstract In this article, the author analyses the principal innovations of Pope Francis' papacy from the perspective of the history of contemporary Catholicism, focusing on both social doctrine and ecclesiastical governance. Furthermore, the author examines the political strategies employed by Francis, referred to as 'inverted gatopardism'. In the author's view, these strategies have enabled Pope Bergoglio to manage opposition from traditionalist and conservative factions, as well as navigate internal tensions within the Church.

Keywords Papacy. Synodality. Social Catholicism. Theology. Catholic people. Pontifical social teaching.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 A Renewed Pontifical Social Magisterium. – 3 A 'New' Catholic People. – 4 Synodality and Open Doors. – 5 Religious Truth and Historical Time. – 6 Francis's Strategy: Global Impact and 'Change in Continuity'. – 7 Conclusions: An Uncertain Future.



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1 Introduction

In 2013, when Jorge Bergoglio was elected pope, the Catholic Church was going through one of its deepest crises. In Latin America, one of the bastions of Catholicism, the number of faithful had fallen at alarming levels. In 1950, Catholics represented 90%; in 1995, they were still around 80%. When Francis sat in Peter's chair, that number oscillated around 60%, while at the same time evangelical Christians exceeded 20% of the entire population.¹ On the other hand, the situation in Rome was catastrophic. In addition to suspicions of corruption in the Institute for the Works of Religion (the Vatican Bank), there were cases of sexual abuse in dioceses in different parts of the world. Furthermore, towards the end of Benedict XVI's papacy, the leaks of private documents to the press, the famous Vatileaks, deepened the crisis and raised serious doubts about Ratzinger's ability and the possibility of a possible successor to exercise authority in Rome. As Giorgio Agamben pointed out after the resignation of Benedict XVI, the Church's difficulties resembled those that, for some of the Fathers of the Church at the origins of Christianity, would precede the coming of the Antichrist.²

From a historical point of view, the crisis of the Church in the final years of the papacy of John Paul II and Benedict XVI was similar to the one experienced by the Vatican in the last decades of the nineteenth century after the end of the Papal States. In fact, when Leo XIII came to the chair of Peter in 1878, many were convinced of the imminent decline of the papacy as an institution, seen as a figurehead or directly as a museum piece.³

In this scenario, when Francis was presented for the first time to the faithful in St. Peter's Square, after his election, many analysts were quick to consider that, given the circumstances, his papacy would prove incapable of changing course. Furthermore, due to his advanced age - he was 76 years old at the time - many directly saw him as a transitional pope and began to speculate about the future conclave.

However, against many of the initial forecasts, in these eleven years Francis has not only stood his ground in Peter's chair but has also managed to mitigate the institutional crisis and, most importantly, he managed to relaunch Catholicism as a powerful voice in

1 Steil, Toniol, "O catolicismo e a Igreja Católica no Brasil"; Parker, "¿América Latina ya no es católica?"; Mallimaci et al., "Segunda encuesta sobre creencias y actitudes religiosas en Argentina".

2 Agamben, *El misterio del mal*.

3 Viane, "Nineteenth-Century Catholic Internationalism and Its Predecessors"; Menozzi, *I papi e il moderno*; Graziano, *In Rome we trust*. Díaz Burillo, "La fotografía de Pío X".

the international political debate. His travels are eloquent of these achievements. In these years, Francis visited Canada where he apologized for the role of the Church in the colonialist project of the Canadian State, spoke in the United States Congress about social inequality, visited Japan to ask young people not to abandon their utopias and, among many other interventions, advocated in Bolivia and Paraguay for a social and popular economy that goes beyond the borders of current capitalism. Recently, despite his mobility impairment, he visited Mongolia and several African countries, where he once again denounced not only the old colonialism but also the globalization of our days, which is defined as a globalization of indifference and exclusion. It is not surprising, therefore, that throughout these years, leaders belonging to social and political movements of the left and center-left from all continents have positively valued his statements, concerned about the consequences of the neoliberal boom, the social and environmental crisis and the emergence of a new radical right. Likewise, both within Protestant Christianity and among Muslims and Jews, Francis is a respected interlocutor. Moreover, among the Eastern European Orthodox, although in this case, the war in Ukraine has complicated relations between Rome and the Moscow Patriarchate.⁴

Of course, these achievements do not imply ignoring the fragility of many of the processes launched by Bergoglio, nor overlooking the tensions generated by his positions inside the Church, mainly with conservatives and traditionalist.⁵ It is worth remembering that, far from what is sometimes believed, the Catholic Church is an enormous and heterogeneous universe, made up of galaxies and an infinite number of solar systems with different theological, political and philosophical visions. Sometimes, those ideas are even contrasting and opposite, confronted with each other by the definition of what, often naively, we call 'Catholicism' or 'the Church'. Francis navigates these choppy waters.

In this article I analyze the main innovations of Francis' papacy from the point of view of the history of contemporary Catholicism, both in the field of social doctrine and in the government of the Church. Secondly, I study his political strategies, which I define as

⁴ Mauro, "Las tensiones del cristianismo ortodoxo".

⁵ Although different in many ways, traditionalists and conservatives have strengthened their connections since Francis became pope. In a way, they have formed a constellation of different but interconnected groups. They view with concern the agenda of changes promoted by Francis. In recent years, tensions have deepened. First, following the promulgation of the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, and more recently, due to the *motu proprio Traditionis custodes*, where the pope restricted the use of the Tridentine liturgy. On the traditionalist world and Catholic conservatism, see: Faggioli, *Vatican II*; Miccoli, *La Chiesa dell'anticoncilio*; Landron, *À la droite du Christ*; Buonasorte, *Tra Roma e Lefebvre*.

'inverted gatopardism'. My argument is that, at least in part, these strategies have helped Bergoglio move forward with his reforms despite strong opposition from his detractors, internal tensions, and a fragile starting point.⁶

2 A Renewed Pontifical Social Magisterium

In his major encyclicals, *Laudato si'* (2015) and *Fratelli tutti* (2020), as well as in his recent apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum* (2023), Francis proposes an update of Catholic social teaching. In these documents, the pope insists that it is necessary to encourage community ways of producing, working and living together. Not only does he ask for social justice and moderation from capitalists, but he also encourages the search for other ways of inhabiting the world. He reminds us that private property is not an absolute value and encourages us to look for new ideas in the social and popular economy to rethink the future. In this aspect, although from the opposite side, I partly agree with the reading of different neoliberal intellectuals for whom the pope decided to leave behind the social doctrine of the Church to develop a deeper anti-capitalism. For the Argentine Alberto Benegas Lynch, for example, he is directly a 'communist' pope.⁷ Francis is not a leftist, much less a communist, but it is true that, if we read his writings carefully, what he proposes means going beyond the ideas of class conciliation and social justice, the core concepts of thought on the social question of Church since the second half of the nineteenth century. In this sense, in agreement with what economists of different ideological orientations propose, Francis seems to agree that there are no structural conditions to encourage a new cycle of Keynesian capitalism and, therefore, it is not viable to keep in force the Christian social doctrine defended throughout of the twentieth century. On the contrary, the pope argues that the levels of inequality generated by neoliberalism, capitalism 4.0 and the degradation of natural resources not only make the return to the 'golden' years of capitalism increasingly uncertain, but also the actual survival of humanity itself.⁸ Therefore, capitalism, even in its Keynesian and/or neo-Keynesian modality, can no longer be the solution encouraged by a social-Catholic thought that aspires to be a

⁶ De Roux, "La Iglesia católica en América Latina a la hora del papa Francisco"; Roldán, Frigerio, *Francisco: el papa de América Latina*; Renold, Frigerio, *Visiones del papa Francisco*.

⁷ Benegas Lynch, "El papa Francisco y la tragedia de los comunes"; "Carta abierta a los fanáticos de siempre".

⁸ Sobre el capitalismo 4.0: Galiano, *¿Por qué el capitalismo puede soñar y nosotros no?*.

real option for the social, political and environmental challenges of the twenty-first century.

As Pope Leo XIII did with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* a century and a half ago, Francis attempts, with his documents, to demarcate the borders of an updated Catholic social thought. To do so, he relativizes one of the quintessential neoliberal dogmas of faith par excellence: private property. Without euphemisms, Francis quotes Saint John Chrysostom for whom “Not to share one’s goods with the poor is to rob them and to deprive them of life” and Saint Gregory the Great who argues that “when we give the poor what is necessary to them, we are not so much bestowing on them what is our property as rendering to them what is their own”. The clarity with which Francis highlights this aspect in the current geopolitical context is, without a doubt, a political fact.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the social doctrine of the Church, Francis’s position is also challenging since he discusses the bases of social Catholicism outlined at the end of the nineteenth century. During that period, the Church had established that property was an untouchable pillar of society, resulting from the natural existence of social inequalities and that, therefore, it was not something historically circumstantial or replaceable. Of course, these inequalities had to be maintained within certain margins, which were established through the idea of social justice.⁹ None of this, however, is found in *Fratelli tutti* where we can find considerations like these:

Always, together with the right of private property. There lies the most important and prior principle of the subordination of all private property to the universal destiny of goods, of the land and, therefore, the right of everyone to use it.¹⁰

Likewise, Francis expands the concepts of periphery and marginality. From his point of view, neoliberalism tends to turn everyone into inhabitants of some periphery. The peripheral and marginal are not only made up of those who actually live in the peripheries, global or social, but of all those who, in one way or another, relate to and participate in the social economy and non-capitalist forms of production. Thus, unlike what happened with the idea of social justice conceived by social Catholics and reworked by the theology of the people in the twentieth century, the utopian horizons of Francis’ Christianity do not longer seem to have a necessary logical place for capitalists. On the contrary, the pope’s definitions promote a progressive dissolution

⁹ Mauro, “Más que un upgrade doctrinario”.

¹⁰ *Encíclica Fratelli tutti*, nos. 119-20. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.

of social classes from within, seeking the internal borders of capitalism for the benefit of new cooperative, supportive and self-managed ways of producing, consuming and living together.

In the current geopolitical context, however, Francis tactically supports policies in favor of the three Ts: "Tierra, Techo y Trabajo" (Land, Shelter and Labor) and those that encourage a capitalism with a 'more human' face, a Green New Deal in the terms of the Democratic left in the United States, but making it clear both in his encyclicals and in his interventions in global meetings with social and popular movements, that it is no longer enough, nor should it be enough, to return to the economy of consumption and redistribution of the golden years of capitalism. On the contrary, there is a concern in Francis to encourage the exploration of different possibilities - even decrementalist in economics - as well as a clear vindication of community and cooperative logic when organizing labor. Thereby, he indirectly calls into question the medium-term need for a business class and, therefore, the existence of capitalist relations of domination, in favor of self-managed forms of labor, production and distribution. In fact, if we read carefully, when he refers positively to capitalists, he actually conceives them not as capitalists, but, in any case, as organizers of labor, since the purpose of their actions should not be profit or gain but the common good.

Likewise, Francis's concern for restoring utopian politics is particularly seductive for many sectors of the global left that still live under the shadow of the political and ideological defeats of the twentieth century. In 2019, during his trip to Japan, Francis spoke extensively on the topic and invited everyone to approach the future in its "variety and diversity" of possibilities. On that occasion, he also asked the youth to look at "great horizons" and "what awaits them if they dare to build them together" because without "dreams" and without "memory", he concluded, they are destined to become "zombies".¹¹

In part, because of all this, his impact on the social and popular movements of Latin America, as well as on the left and center-left sectors of Europe and the United States, has not ceased to grow in recent years.

3 A 'New' Catholic People

Among Francis' innovations we must include his reformulation of the notion of 'Catholic people'. On several occasions, the pope pointed out that Catholics should not fear diversity and considered that diversity enriches the Catholic people and allows it to grow and evolve.

¹¹ "El Papa a los jóvenes japoneses".

During his trip to Paraguay in 2015, he spoke extensively on the topic and noted that “diversity is not only good but necessary” and that “the richness of life lies in diversity”. On the same occasion, he added emphatically: “uniformity nullifies us”.¹² From this perspective, his defense of immigrants has gone beyond humanitarian or charitable issues, giving rise to a kind of synthesis between the notions of people and diversity. For Francis, the ‘others’ do not threaten any essential identity but, far from it, they are one of the privileged ways to ‘enrich’ and develop it. In a recent television interview, he pointed out that the main current challenge is, precisely, to build a “unity that does not tear down differences but rather lives them in communion through solidarity and understanding”. Likewise, during the Third World Meeting of Popular Movements, held in Rome in 2016, he asked to remember that “Jesus, Mary and Joseph also experienced the condition of refugees”.¹³

Throughout much of the twentieth century, definitions like these would have been totally exceptional in the Church. For the Catholics of the first half of the twentieth century, despite their great differences, the Catholic people were an entity defined by an essence from the very beginning. A nature that had to be kept unchanged, defending it from the different threats arising from modernity and liberalism. Far from it, Francis proposes to think about the Catholic people in history and in dialogue with diversity.¹⁴

From this point of view, the pope criticizes current globalization and demands a ‘Christian globalization’. In 2014, in a television interview, he explained that “misunderstood globalization was like a sphere” where “particularities were annulled”. In the opposite direction, a Christian globalization should be like a polyhedron in which each one, while “maintaining their identity”, could be enriched at the same time in the interaction with what is different. A globalization as a “dialogue” between peoples who do not renounce their “roots”. Francis concluded in that interview that it is the only way to achieve a real exchange that does not “destroy” weak interlocutors and “their cultures”.¹⁵

12 Cristaldo, “La comunidad gay de Paraguay”.

13 Francisco, *Discurso a los participantes en el encuentro*.

14 From a different point of view, Loris Zanatta proposes a different interpretation on the subject. In his opinion, Francisco defends a closed and uniform perspective of the Catholic people related to what he defines as ‘Jesuit populism’. Zanatta, *El populismo jesuita*: “El populismo jesuita”.

15 *Entrevista del papa Francisco a Enrique Cynerman*.

4 Synodality and Open Doors

Francis is also leaving his mark on the way we think about power and authority in the Church. From his first encyclical, he put on the table his concern to return to the path of the Second Vatican Council. In recent years, the issue has returned to the center of his papacy. Francis has launched the so-called Synod of Synodality, to be concluded next year, and whose purpose is precisely to think about reforms and, more importantly, more collegial forms of decision-making within the Church. Beyond the conclusions reached by the participants, which are not decisive since the Synod is only advisory, its own constitution and the new features introduced in its operation propose important new features. On the one hand, it is interesting to take note of the modality in which it is being carried out. The axes of discussion were initially raised from Rome, but these guidelines have been reviewed from the bottom to the top. Each parish, each diocese, each Episcopal Conference has been debating and formulating resolutions. The purpose of the meeting in Rome is that all these materials feed the general debate. On the other hand, it is also necessary to highlight the innovations in the composition of the Synod. For the first time, 54 women, including both lay and religious, are participating in the Synod, out of a total of 364 members with the right to vote. One of the presidents is the Mexican nun Dolores Palencia – the first woman to occupy that place in the history of the Church.¹⁶ In the Synod, furthermore, all positions are reflected: those closest to the papacy of Francis but also the most critical. The purpose is not necessarily to synthesize them but to identify possible directions while preserving diversity. In this aspect, Francis has tried to maintain the center of the ring. To achieve this, he criticizes the conservative and traditionalist sectors that encourage what he calls *indietrismo* (going backwards), but also the more progressive sectors, as is the case with the leaders of the Synodal Way of the Church of Germany. According to Francis, these sectors forget that the Church is diverse and that any change must be built by listening to all Churches, including the most conservative ones, which, like the African ones, reject many of the changes promoted from Germany.¹⁷ For some of his biographers, this position is the result of the influence of the philosophy of Romano Guardini, who defends a non-Hegelian dialectic in which opposites coexist in permanent tension. The equilibrium is

¹⁶ Elizalde, “Dolores Palencia”.

¹⁷ The editor of the French Catholic magazine *Le Nef*, Christophe Geffroy, has criticized Francis for adopting a “double standard” in his decisions. According to Geffroy, the pope is inflexible with traditionalists and tolerant of progressive sectors of German Catholicism (“8 reflexiones del director de la revista *Le Nef*”).

difficult and unstable, but, for now, Francis has managed to contain the centrifugal forces in the universal Church and move forward in the midst of tensions.¹⁸

From this place, Francis proposes what he defines as a Church “on the way out”, which travels through the social and existential peripheries. A Church that always keeps its “doors open”. This is perhaps the most radical definition of his papacy and the one that has generated the most resistance from conservative groups. Francis’ argument is that, according to the Gospel, no one can close the door on anyone or, put differently, no one can cast the first stone. A position that infuriates conservative sectors, who would like to make the Church an exclusive club, with few accesses and countless accreditations and moral conditions.¹⁹ The key word that summarizes Francis’ vision of the Church is mercy and the neologism created by him is Spanish: “To be the Church is *misericordiar* (to have mercy)”. Tensions increase. Cardinal Gerhard Müller, for example, directly accused Francis of being a ‘heretic’.²⁰ In this sense, it is not surprising that, as made public months ago, priests of this tendency asked to “pray harder” for the pontiff to die.²¹

5 Religious Truth and Historical Time

Recently, supported by Pope Francis, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández at the head of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith released a new document titled *Dignitas Infinita*.²² As the title suggests, the document maintains that human dignity, given by God, is absolute in its essence and that it belongs to all human beings regardless of their conditions and circumstances. In turn, the document asks Catholics to combat the “throwaway culture” that daily affects the concrete lives of human beings and analyzes some of the main faults: poverty, violence against women, planned eugenics,

¹⁸ Borguessi, *José Mario Bergoglio*.

¹⁹ In 2021 the United States Episcopal Conference voted mostly a document indicating the necessary requirements to access the sacrament of the Eucharist. The resolution was a reaction to Francisco who had pointed out that the Eucharist “was not the reward of the saints, but the bread of sinners”. Tensions and conflicts with these sectors are constant. Among the most notorious is the confrontation with the American cardinal Raymond Burke who has questioned the apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016) and has called to disobey the Pope. Similarly, the dismissal of Tyler’s bishop, Joseph Strickland, close to Catholic traditionalists, has increased the rejection of Francisco. Dias, “Targeting Biden, Catholic Bishops Advance Controversial Communion Plan”.

²⁰ Bastante, “El sector ultra del Vaticano cruza otra línea”.

²¹ Fraguas, “Varios curas de Toledo desean la muerte al Papa”.

²² “*Dignitas infinita*: texto íntegro de la declaración”.

marginality, abortion, discrimination. In an interview, Fernández explained that the document takes up

Francis's thoughts about the infinite value of each human person beyond all circumstances. In this, Francis's thought is radical: every human being has an immense and inalienable value, even if he has disabilities, even if he is a migrant, regardless of his sexual orientation, because nothing can take away that dignity. This has consequences for any issue at hand and is the basis of the Pope's social humanism.²³

The document immediately generated debates within the Catholic Church and also, as it is often the case with Francis' Church, outside. From the very beginning, the traditionalist sectors of Catholicism questioned the scope of the concept of dignity and, above all, its main intellectual author: Víctor Fernández. For these groups, the pope's right hand is a serious enemy, and they consider that his arrival at the former Holy Office meant crossing a red line.²⁴ If we look at things from his point of view it is true. Through the appointment of Fernández, Francis wants to ensure the continuity of the theological guidelines of his papacy after his death or resignation. At the same time, criticism from conservatives and traditionalists also points to the content. For traditionalism, *Dignitas Infinita* ties the hands of the Church and prevents it from acting as a moral censor. Furthermore, they argue, the affronts analyzed in the document are not hierarchical and are placed in series as if they had the same importance. Is poverty and exclusion, violence against women or discrimination exercised against members of LGBT community an affront to dignity comparable to abortion or the rejection of the truths of faith? What about the repentance that, in their view, should be required of Catholics? What about punishment? Can the Church tolerate Catholics sinning without consequences? From Francis' point of view, these questions are not important. The Church is not there to judge or keep moral accounting of people: there is no debit and credit where priests must write down the sins of their flock. None of these tasks make sense because the Church that Francis defends, as we already emphasized, is defined by mercy and accompaniment. Jesus did not establish it to persecute but to preach love. Along these lines, Fernández explains that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith that he presides has nothing to do with the former Holy Office and its persecutory logic. He said it explicitly when he took office, quoting Francis himself. Recently, he returned to the topic to conclude that, if great theologians have not emerged in recent

²³ Vidal, "Las claves de fondo de *Dignitas Infinita*".

²⁴ Lorenzo, "El nombramiento de Tucho Fernández".

decades, this has been, at least in part, because the Church dedicated itself more to the control than to the development of Catholic thought.²⁵

Regardless of this, the most novel and revolutionary aspect of the document is the type of relationship it proposes between history and religious truth. This is one of the great taboos in the Church, which theologians, most of the time, prefer not to enter. Can history change the truths of faith? If the truth is one and revealed, can it be affected by history? How do doctrine and time coexist? If there is change, what type of change is it?

Fernández defends the permanence of the tension between both poles. As in the dialectic of Romano Guardini's philosophy – which as we noted some biographers of Francis consider influential in his pontificate – opposites coexist in a permanent tension that, unlike what Hegelian dialectics proposes, are not resolved in a third instance of improvement. Truth and history are in tension, and the Church, like everything that exists, does not escape this existential condition.

Fernández explains that, as Joseph Ratzinger also stated in his debate with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the truth of faith is unique, revealed by God, and therefore unalterable and absolute, but, at the same time, the understanding of that truth is historical and, therefore, like everything that exists, is conditioned by the circumstances of its reception.²⁶ Conservatives and traditionalists accuse Fernández and Francis of accepting relativism. Fernández defends himself: there is no relativism because truths are unique. Revelation is not under discussion, but, he adds, the understanding of that revelation can be discussed because the understanding is human and historical. This statement is at the heart of *Dignitas Infinita*. When we talk about “human dignity”, Fernández explains, it is clear that “it is not something that the church has always recognized with the same clarity: there has been a growth in understanding. It develops, understanding deepens”. As an example, he recalls that in 1452 Pope Nicholas V approved slavery in a letter to the king of Portugal, but that in 1537 Pope Paul III excommunicated those who defended it because he considered that they were human beings. To which he concluded:

even in a time of slow change [such as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries], a pope said practically the opposite of a precedent in just 80 years of difference [...] This is an example that shows how the understanding of the truth evolves and that it does not always grow with the homogeneous direction of preceding documents.²⁷

²⁵ Francisco, *Carta del Papa Francisco al nuevo Prefecto de la Fe*; Fontevecchia, “Víctor ‘Tucho’ Fernández”.

²⁶ Habermas, Ratzinger, *Dialéctica de la secularización*.

²⁷ “‘Tucho’ Fernández presentó el nuevo documento”.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Church struggled to adapt to the rapid changes in Europe at the time. The Papal States had been defeated by the Italian army and Pope Pius IX, locked in the Vatican, declared war on modernity, liberalism, democracy and nation states. When the smoke of cannon fire and rifle fire cleared, Catholics inherited a rigid doctrine that prevented them from interacting with the world. Leo XIII, the pope who succeeded Pius IX, quickly realized the consequences of this extreme position. A position, furthermore, with weak theological support. All of Pius IX's critical resolutions had been the result of the political circumstances of the Holy See and not the conclusion of a serious theological debate. Leo XIII then decided to open the cage and build bridges with what was happening in society and politics. To do so, he published a seminal encyclical, *Libertas praestantissimum*. On the one hand, he reaffirmed what his predecessor said, but on the other hand, he denied it. In that document, Leo XIII argued that, in reality, the problem was not freedom, democracy, the state or the nation, the main political artifacts of modernity, but rather their excesses. What Pius IX had condemned, he explained, were those 'excesses', or in other words, the anti-Christian deformations of the principles and not the ideas themselves. Small detail. Therefore, he argued, rather than opposing, what Catholics had to do was mobilize to Catholicize these phenomena and make them Christian. In a flash, as if by magic, Leo XIII threw the key to the cage that his hurried predecessor had built to the bottom of the Tiber River and put Catholicism into motion. What was forbidden became disputed territory that could even be something desirable.²⁸

With *Dignitas Infinita*, in a way, Francis's papacy repeats the logic of that turn of Leo XIII a century and a half later. He reaffirms that the truths of faith are absolute and that their revelation is a gift from God. But, at the same time, he assumes that, from the moment these truths exist, they exist in history, and the Church and Catholics have the fundamental task of understanding and interpreting them in dialogue with the lives of Catholics. Obviously, it is not something new. The entire history of Christianity is the history of the interpretation of revelation. But until today, Catholics had not said it out loud, with such clarity. Nor had they dared to state so clearly that this exercise of understanding should be done by listening to believers and society, because theology, Fernández explains, must "allow itself to be stimulated" by the "people of God".²⁹

Francis seeks to lay the foundations of a Catholicism for the twenty-first century, capable of evolving without fear or guilt. A Catholicism, in Kantian terms, ready to assume its coming of age.

²⁸ Pollard, *El Vaticano y sus banqueros*, 69-93.

²⁹ "La teología debe dejarse estimular".

6 Francis's Strategy: Global Impact and 'Change in Continuity'

None of these changes could have been carried out without the support cultivated by Francis at a global level. His gestures of austerity and his simple and direct communication style, supported by the use of social networks and the Vatican media ecosystem, have allowed him to build a closer bond with Catholics and with the world in general. The use of direct channels of communication with the faithful has helped him build his own, less mediated, political and spiritual capital, which relies on the papal institution but goes beyond it. Francis is Francis because he is the pope, but mostly because he is Francis. This has been key to giving it specific weight within the Catholic Church, where different trends and sectors wage constant battles. In part thanks to his social prestige and his moral authority, recognized by many of the main leaders of the entire ideological and political spectrum throughout the world, he has been able to hold his ground as a leader of Catholics.

At the same time, the way in which Francis exercises government and introduces changes is equally relevant. Contrary to what is usually assumed, the model of change implemented by Bergoglio was not based on the model of the Second Vatican Council, founded on the idea of reform and *aggiornamento* in a disruptive key, but, rather based on the model of Leo XIII from a century earlier, founded on the idea of continuity and updating.³⁰ In his speeches, as the theologian Emilce Cuda emphasizes, Francis clings to the idea of continuity much more than to the idea of reform and that, there is no doubt, has been a great political success.³¹ Words do matter and Francis knows it. Thus, not only has he avoided using a concept such as "reform" - too associated in the Catholic world after the conflicts that marked the life of the Church in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s - but also, with this decision, he has weakened the confluence of conservative and traditionalist sectors within the Church by depriving them of a signifier capable of bringing them together.³²

In political science and history, political leaders who announce major transformations but who, in fact, do nothing more than carry out cosmetic or superficial changes are usually called *gatopardistas*. The concept comes from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's famous novel, *The Leopard*. In the novel, one of the characters, Tancredi, tells his uncle Fabrizio: "If we want everything to remain as it is, we need everything to change". Francis has followed the opposite path. In his

30 I defend this interpretation in: Martínez, Mauro, "El surgimiento del papado contemporáneo".

31 Cuda, *Para leer a Francisco*.

32 Mauro, "El papa Francisco ¿Un gatopardista al revés?".

interventions, he highlights the continuities with previous papacies, including that of Benedict XVI and John Paul II, even when, in fact, he promotes profound transformations that are substantially changing the life of the Church. His papacy could be defined by inverting Tancredi's phrase: "If we want everything to change, we need everything to stay the same".

7 Conclusions: An Uncertain Future

Will Francis manage to consolidate the course taken in these years? What will happen after his death or resignation? It is difficult to know, especially in an institution like the Church, which is much more than an institution. The Church is a universe in itself, with its entire galaxies and countless solar systems within it. Each one with its principles, its logic and its criteria. However, Francis has not wasted any time. The recent appointment of Víctor Manuel Fernández to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith is a key decision and a strong signal for the future. Fernández is a man totally identified with Francis's ideas and he is relatively young. At sixty years old, he will probably remain in office when Francis is gone. It is true that a new pope could remove him, but it is also true that it would not be easy to remove him without making waves. Furthermore, as the recent publication of the document *Dignitas Infinita* attests, Fernández is determined to hold office without any compromise. On the other hand, the College of Cardinals that will be in charge of the next conclave has already been mostly appointed by Francis, which increases the chances that his successor will be someone close to his ideas. Likewise, this does not guarantee anything because many appointments do not depend on his will, but on pre-existing situations that cannot be altered. The papacy is a kind of monarchy, but with limited prerogatives. More in fact than in law, it is true, but ultimately limited. The succession, therefore, remains a mystery. It is clear, however, that, in these eleven years, Francis' papacy seems to have succeeded in establishing political and theological changes that will not be easy to modify in the future, regardless of who takes his place.

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