

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



Pope Francis meets with cardinals Aug. 29, 2022, at the Vatican. The meeting was to reflect on the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* ("Preach the Gospel") on the reform of the Roman Curia. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Richard Gaillardetz

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

February 28, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Editor's Note: *Some elements of this commentary are drawn from a lecture the author gave in Rome to the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences on Oct. 21, 2022. The full text of that lecture will appear in the March issue of Theological Studies.*



The 10th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis offers an opportunity to consider the contributions and missteps of this remarkable pontificate. As a comprehensive assessment is impossible, I will consider the related contributions of this pontificate to the theology, structure, and exercise of ministry and authority.

The theology, structure, and exercise of ministry

From the beginning of his pontificate Francis has emphasized the priority of Christian baptism.

In a little noted [2016 letter](#) to Cardinal Marc Ouellet in the cardinal's role as president of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, the pope contended that "looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people." For the pope, "laicity" is not a negative term, identifying the non-ordained;

rather it identifies the fundamental missionary calling conferred upon all of us in baptism:

Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God.



Pope Francis baptizes one of 27 babies during a Mass on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord in the Sistine Chapel Jan. 13, 2019, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Francis has argued for the priority of baptism as an antidote to the association of holy orders with the conferral of power, a contributing factor to the evils of clericalism. In much of his writing the pope has moved away from the rigid lay-clergy binary encouraged by his predecessors and toward a more expansive and relational understanding of public ministry in the church.

This shift in theology has been matched by a few tentative institutional adjustments. Francis has opened the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte [to both men and women](#) while also establishing [a new instituted ministry of catechist](#). These overlooked papal initiatives have provided a more formal status and ritual expression to a range of ministries open to the laity.

The pope has also determined that non-ordained religious brothers [could be appointed to positions of leadership](#), including those of provincial and even superior general, in communities that include priests. Were these papal initiatives to be fully and creatively implemented, as they have yet to be, they could go a long way toward deconstructing the strict lay-clergy binary that has hobbled the church for centuries.

These laudable developments, unfortunately, must be weighed against the pope's regrettable foot-dragging on the question of the ordination of women to the diaconate and the ordination of married men to the priesthood, both of which had been requested by the 2019 Synod of Bishops for the nine-nation Amazon region. To date, these requests [have been ignored](#) by the pope.

In another troubling development, Francis has adopted a deeply problematic theological justification for a male-only priesthood by appealing to Hans Urs von Balthasar's theory of gender complementarity and his claim that there are [distinct Marian and Petrine ecclesial principles](#) active in the church.



Pope Francis uses incense to venerate a Marian statue as he celebrates the opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon in St. Peter's Basilica Oct. 6, 2019, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The Marian principle refers to the active receptivity characteristic of the whole church while the Petrine principle is exercised by ordained church leaders. The pope has not adequately explained, however, why the whole church can embody the Marian principle but only males may exercise the Petrine principle. Here we find one of the more regrettable instances of continuity with his predecessors.

The theology, structure, and exercise of authority

Synodality has been the principal leitmotif of this papacy. Francis has seeded our ecclesial imaginations with a stirring theological rhetoric that foregrounds dialogue, accompaniment and a culture of encounter.

The pope's attention to the concrete reform of ecclesiastical structures has been uneven but not without promise. He has made far greater use of episcopal synods than did his postconciliar predecessors. He has reconfigured the preparation for and conduct of those synods, considerably expanding participation. He has enhanced processes of consultation and created a space for honest discussion and even disagreement among synodal participants.

Perhaps the most tangible effort at the reform of structures of authority is evident in the long-awaited constitution dedicated to the reform of the Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, which [finally appeared](#) in 2022.

It is too soon to know how effective these reforms will be, but this document, if well implemented, could do much to dismantle what has for centuries been a fundamentally monarchical papacy. Most notable is the pope's assertion that the power of governance may be exercised by the laity in virtue of a canonical mission. Now, in addition to being members of curial dicasteries, laypeople can actually lead them.



Pope Francis greets participants after speaking at a Vatican conference, "Pastors and lay faithful called to walk together," Feb. 18 in the Vatican Synod Hall. The meeting was sponsored by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Francis has made it clear that, if authentic church authority is to be a genuine service rather than a burden, the structures and exercise of authority must undergo a pronounced "decentralization" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, Paragraph 16). Although I am in sympathy with his broader intention, the language of "decentralization" is not entirely helpful; it does not do justice to the complex interplay between the local and universal dimensions of church life. Although he has generally avoided the term itself, I am convinced that the language of "subsidiarity" better articulates the pope's own distinctive understanding and exercise of ecclesial authority.

Most Catholics are more familiar with the principle of subsidiarity as it has been employed in Catholic social teaching. However, when applied to the church, the principle might be transposed as follows: *The primary responsibility for the realization of the individual Christian vocation, and the fulfillment of the mission of local ecclesial entities, lies with those individuals and local entities themselves. Only when the realization of these goals appears unattainable at the lower level and/or a local matter threatens the faith and unity of the church universal should there be intervention from higher levels of church authority.*

In the pontificates of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI there was some reluctance to apply this principle to the life of the church; then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger famously warned of the dangers of a [sociological reductionism](#). Frankly, the concern does not seem well-founded. The church is both a human and divine reality. To be sure, it must never be reduced to a sociological construct, but neither can the church be exempt from the sociological principles that describe all human institutions.

Advertisement

The primary feature of ecclesial subsidiarity preserves the relative autonomy of ecclesial life and decision-making at local and regional levels. This feature of the principle tracks well with the pope's concern for "decentralization"; indeed, a respect for the integrity of the local church has marked much of this pontificate. Consider the pope's promulgation of *Magnum Principium*, which returned primary responsibility for the translation of liturgical texts [to episcopal conferences](#), as Vatican II had intended.

However, we have also seen instances where the pope has acted in accord with the secondary feature of the principle of subsidiarity, the right of higher authority to intervene in the face of local incapacity or in order to preserve the unity of faith and communion. Here we might consider the pope's suspension of ordinations [in the](#)

[French Diocese of Fréjus-Toulon](#) or his recent interventions directed [at Opus Dei](#), [the Knights of Malta](#), and [the Monastery of Bose](#) in the face of significant ecclesiastical dysfunction. This Jesuit pope's exercise of authority has exemplified a balanced ecclesial application of subsidiarity; he respects local autonomy but is not afraid to intervene where the welfare of the whole church demands it.

The most severe criticism leveled at this papacy has concerned perceived failures regarding his papal teaching authority. Francis is hardly a liberal on matters of doctrine. In his 2016 volume [A Church of the Poor](#), theologian Clemens Sedmak contended, rather, that what we see in this Latin American pope is a "joyful orthodoxy." Although there have been instances where Francis has contributed to a genuine development of church doctrine, as with his treatment of the possibility of eucharistic Communion for some in "irregular" relationships, Francis has by no means repudiated church teaching.



Pope Francis greets people during an audience with participants in a meeting sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, Nov. 30, 2019, at the Vatican. Bishops, religious and laypeople were taking part in a meeting to discuss the pope's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"). (CNS/Vatican Media)

The pope does believe that doctrines should not be treated as ends in themselves; they serve us when they draw us into life-giving relationship with Christ. The Gospel need not "always be communicated by fixed formulations learned by heart or by specific words which express an absolutely invariable content" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, Paragraph 129).

Francis has begun to fulfill John XXIII's call, over 60 years ago, for a genuinely pastoral magisterium. Although the integrity of the Gospel is certainly preserved authoritatively in the church's essential dogmatic tradition, in a synodal church it is more often kept alive and enriched in the simple expressions the Gospel finds in the lived faith of ordinary believers, what the tradition has referred to as the *sensus fidelium*.

Notwithstanding a dramatic shift in the years remaining for this papacy, history will likely see the Francis pontificate less as groundbreaking than as transitional.

Notwithstanding a dramatic shift in the years remaining for this papacy, history will likely see the Francis pontificate less as groundbreaking than as transitional.

[Tweet this](#)

Undeniably, Francis has offered a fresh and comprehensive re-reception of the teaching of Vatican II. His rhetorical appeals to the priority of baptism and the

church as field hospital, his repudiation of clericalism, his many calls for a more Gospel-inspired exercise of authority — all have been matched by provocative but largely symbolic gestures and tentative structural adjustments.

Francis has opened wide a door that might well lead to a thoroughly reformed church inspired by conciliar teaching but, for the most part, he has been reluctant to step through it himself. For that, I suspect, we must wait for another bishop of Rome.

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. [View the full series.](#)

A version of this story appeared in the **March 3-16, 2023** print issue under the headline: Pope Francis has opened the door for real church reform, but hasn't stepped through.