

[Culture](#)

[Book Reviews](#)



Pope Francis waves to visitors from the popemobile before his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Mike Mastromatteo

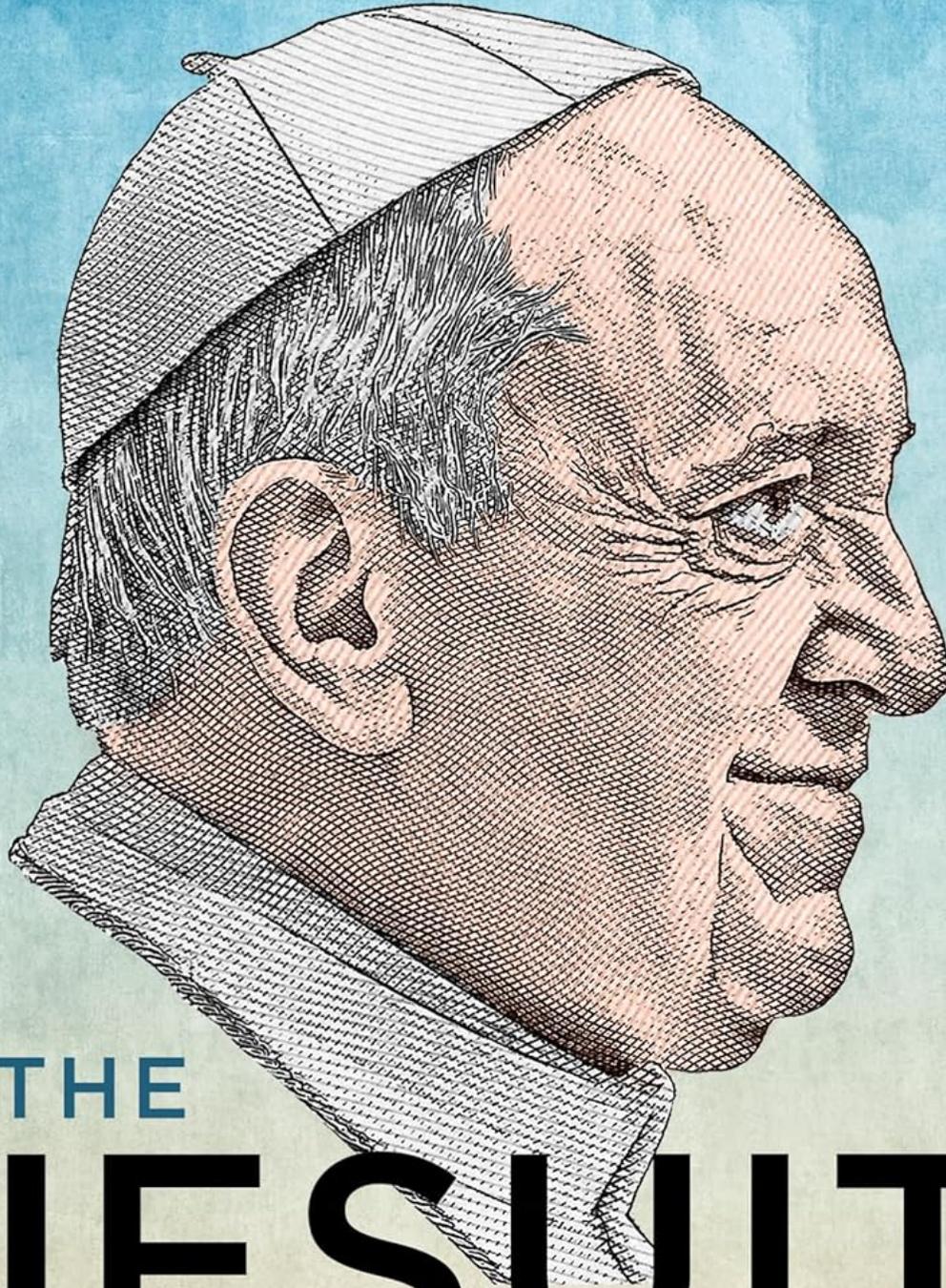
[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

October 12, 2024

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

"A tantalizing read of Pope Francis's revolutionary papacy ... Quirky, quizzical, and even occasionally quixotic, Higgins's approach is accessible and the style entertaining." —JAMES MARTIN, SJ, AUTHOR OF *THE JESUIT GUIDE TO (ALMOST) EVERYTHING*



THE
**JESUIT
DISRUPTOR**

A PERSONAL PORTRAIT OF POPE FRANCIS

MICHAEL W. HIGGINS

The Jesuit Disruptor: A Personal Portrait of Pope Francis

Michael W. Higgins

344 pages; Anansi Press

\$26.99

The Catholic Church may be on the verge of a new era of laity-supported engagement and encounter as it enters the third decade of the new millennium.

So says educator, author and longtime Vatican watcher Michael Higgins in his new release, [*The Jesuit Disruptor: A Personal Portrait of Pope Francis*](#). The book makes a compelling apology for the Argentina-born pontiff's plans to free the church from an overreliance on doctrine and tradition and draws attention to the pope's efforts to bring new talent and fresh thinking into hidebound curial operations.

As president and vice-chancellor (emeritus) of St. Jerome's University in Waterloo, Ontario, [Higgins](#) is a longtime commentator and consultant on Vatican issues. He is also author or co-author of esteemed biographies on [Thomas Merton](#) and the late [Toronto Cardinal Emmett Carter](#), as well as books on the Jesuit religious order and the church in the new millennium. In addition, Higgins serves as consultant to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for much of its church-related programming.

Advertisement

The word "disruptor" is an apt title for this new personal portrait. Higgins draws attention to the "-or" spelling, distinguishing it from the more common "-er" understanding of disrupter as something ruinous and harmful. The Cambridge dictionary defines "[disruptor](#)" as someone who changes the traditional way an institution operates, especially in a new and effective way.

Pope Francis' Jesuit formation as a priest and later bishop and cardinal is key to the book's argument. Inspired by Jesuit founder Ignatius Loyola and his spiritual exercises, Jesuits have long been noted for missionary work, education, social justice and aggressive evangelization. As the [first Jesuit to occupy the Holy See](#), Francis clearly brings the society's ethos to bear on the church.

"Throughout history, Jesuits have been both architects of the establishment and disruptors of the status quo," Higgins said in an interview with NCR. "Francis has been variously both."



Pope Francis celebrates Mass with cardinal electors in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican March 14, 2013, the day after his election. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

'What the disruptor pope has disrupted is our spiritual and intellectual complacency.'

—Michael W. Higgins

[Tweet this](#)

The Jesuit Disruptor opens with Jorge Mario Bergoglio's progress as priest, seminary teacher, provincial superior of the Jesuits in Argentina and auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires. He was elevated to the College of Cardinals in 2001.

"Once sealed as a Jesuit, he (Francis) would carry within him the ethos, the heart, of the founder's vision of service to the world rooted in service to Christ," Higgins writes. "What is especially important to note is something that the young Bergoglio

— a Jesuit-in-training — would discover only in time: being a Jesuit alive to the world is not a univocal, unalterable, fixed reality."

Higgins is clearly a fan of Francis and the more pastoral, less doctrinal approach he appears to be taking in his papacy. Higgins suggests that while his predecessors Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI emphasized strict adherence to the magisterium, Francis has been more of a listener, attempting to adapt the faith's long-standing traditions and doctrine to contemporary realities.



Michael Higgins is a longtime commentator on church affairs for Canadian and U.S. publications. (CNS/Sacred Heart University/Tracy Deer-Mirek)

"Francis doesn't contest the truth of traditional teaching," Higgins writes. "What he does is refuse to encase it in categories resistant to the changing reality of human life. He prefers an existential as opposed to a metaphysical ethics, and that is why he will not foreclose discussion."

Higgins also counters claims from some quarters that the pope is an enemy of capitalism and that he has little regard for conservative thinkers, especially of the American Catholic variety. The Jesuit Disruptor highlights the pontiff's emphasis on synodality as the best path forward for a church looking to regain a sense of authority and moral leadership. The current [synod on synodality](#) is a key opportunity for the church to demonstrate its commitment to listening and engagement, especially with the laity, women Catholics, the world's poor, migrants, the marginalized and even those of other faiths or no particular faith.

Higgins notes the bold strokes the pope makes to not only [combat clericalism](#), but also to rid the Curia of some of its administrative deadwood. The author in turn notes the true significance of the pope's southern hemisphere origins:

Francis entertains no doubt that the church's hitherto exclusive European provenance is no more. The church is no longer the noble offspring of Imperial Rome; the church's sway and its future lie in the global South. Unlike his immediate predecessor, Benedict XVI, Francis entertains no hope for the retrieval of the faith in once-Christian Europe, and the spotty revivals in parts of the continent do not augur a return of Roman Catholic hegemony. But he knows that Catholic Europe longs to reconnect in some meaningful way with the faith it has drifted away from ... Catholicism can still command a following when genuine Gospel witness is at the heart of its message as an institution.



Pope Francis listens as Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the College of Cardinals, offers best wishes for Christmas on behalf of the cardinals and top officials of the Roman Curia during a gathering Dec. 22, 2022, in the Vatican's Hall of Blessings. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The Jesuit Disruptor also brings context to Francis' emphasis on environmental stewardship. Care of the planet and the "intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet" were key messages in the pontiff's 2015 encyclical, [*Laudato Si'*](#). "The poor are his priority, and their fate is inextricably linked to the defoliation of the planet," Higgins points out. "They are the human collateral damage of economic policies that deem them of secondary interest. The market is the true god that governs."

Higgins offers a few criticisms of the Francis papacy, most notably the pope's apparent naivety in dealing with the [communist Chinese oppression](#) of the local church, and outdated attitudes regarding women and marginalized groups. Overall, however, Higgins believes Francis possesses an ideal combination of evangelical

zeal, compassion for the poor and open-mindedness to lead the church in a positive new direction.

"In spite of rumours to the contrary, Francis is in it for the long haul," Higgins writes. "Elected in part by his fellow cardinals to reform the Curia, Francis has opted for a greater reform — that of the whole church — and not a few of those who marked their ballot for the Argentine have come to rue their choice."



Pope Francis receives a hug from a child after his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Higgins is clearly a fan of Francis and his personal portrait exudes optimism and hopefulness. At times, however, the book reads as if Higgins knows the mind of Bergoglio almost as well as Francis does. Many of the author's observations seem like assertions of fact, rather than informed speculation. Nonetheless, *The Jesuit Disruptor* serves as a robust counterbalance to the biographies critical of the Argentinian pontiff. In turn, the book offers a refreshing note of optimism that the Jesuit disruptor pope is on the right track.

Francis, Higgins concludes, remains committed to an "enlivening theological enterprise" rooted in the reality of the people, grounded in experience, not ideology, a science that is a way of life open to an endlessly unfolding culture of encounter.

"What the disruptor pope has disrupted," Higgins writes, "is our spiritual and intellectual complacency, our foreclosure through fear of fresh ways of seeing the Gospel as the leaven of society, our ahistorical sense of the church that shields us from the reforming gusts of the Spirit."

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov. 8-21, 2024** print issue.