

Usdin Lecture in Judeo-Christian Topics
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Next month will mark the completion of the twelfth year of Pope Francis' pontificate. The anniversary of his March 13 election will come at nearly the half-way point between the two sessions of the Global Assembly of the Synod on Synodality, quite likely the most impacting initiative of the Franciscan papacy. I was tempted to title this lecture "Synodality: will it be the legacy of Pope Francis?" because a provocative question is always a good lead for a talk, but I have also come to learn that when you label a talk in such a way, the hearers expect an answer, which in this case would be premature to offer. What I would like to do, as a bishop appointed by Pope Francis and one who watches him closely, is describe what I think has happened in these dozen years, as well as delve into some of the magisterial teaching of Pope Francis which has so far failed to impact the leadership of the church in the United States, in large part because it has not been embraced by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops as a body.

I suspect everyone who was paying attention knew that something significant was happening for the universal church when the relatively unknown Jorge Bergoglio first stepped out onto the balcony of Saint Peter's and was presented to the world as the first pope to take the name Francis. Secular and religious commentators had quickly compiled enough information from Google to inform us that this was the first American pope, that is, from *South* America and the first Jesuit pope. Some people who had an awareness of the transformation of the South American church following the Second Vatican Council and/or a sense of the impact of the Society of Jesus since its founding in the era of the Council of Trent, naturally had expectations that this pontificate would be different. Countless more people in Saint Peter's Square that night, or watching from around the world, caught a glimpse of the future as this new pope appeared dressed more simply than his predecessors, yet in the familiar white cassock. A pope who greeted the people with an ordinary "*buona sera*" (good evening) rather than a pious acclamation, and who essentially asked the people to bless him by bowing and asking for their prayers before imparting his first blessing as the leader of the world's Catholics. His message, his bearing, his style and his manner of speaking would recall for many the image of joy and simplicity conveyed by Pope John XXIII in a bygone era of the church. In a few words and gestures, he conveyed an "agenda" if there were such a thing. He noted that the cardinals had gone to the ends of the earth to find a Bishop of Rome: in those words he made it clear that he was not from

central casting nor a product of the Roman Curia, but rather comes from the “peripheries”- a word and concept that would be significant in his exercise of the office and relatively unheard of in many parts of the world. He also referred to himself by the pastoral office he had accepted, the Bishop of Rome, with its subtle hint of being part of a college of bishops and centered in a See that churches beyond the Catholic fold could in theory accept as having ancient primacy by its ancient connection to Peter.

What Pope Francis didn’t and wouldn’t say on the balcony that evening was how keenly aware he was of the reasons his brother cardinals elected him. Pope Benedict realized that the church, and especially the curia, was beyond his ability and strength to lead; it was in need of reform. In the days leading up to the conclave, Francis had preached a homily in which he employed the familiar image of Jesus knocking on the door- except that in this version, Jesus was on the inside begging to get out! He decried a church that is self-referential and that has lost its sense of mission. It seems that enough cardinals agreed that something new and different was needed, preferably from someone outside the world of the curia who didn’t owe anyone anything. The same cardinals’ motto today might be “be careful what you ask for.”

In the immediate aftermath of his election, the world could not seem to get enough news vignettes about the pope who got on the bus with his fellow cardinals instead of the papal limousine awaiting him, who paid his hotel bill in person after the conclave, who found the Apostolic Palace, home to his predecessors for centuries, to be too big while the doorway was too narrow and so opted to continue to live in the hotel created for the conclave where he eats in its cafeteria and regularly celebrates mass in its chapel. The pope who made his first apostolic voyage to the small Italian island of Lampedusa, the site of the drowning deaths of hundreds of migrants fleeing tragic circumstances in Africa, where he celebrated mass on an altar made of the wood of one of the wrecked ships whose passengers perished. Once a cardinal-archbishop known to avoid the press and to be rather reserved in Buenos Aires was now radiating the joy of the Gospel and providing visual images to a world-wide feed revealing the Gospel in action.

As a Franciscan, I heard the words “rebuild my church” when the new pope’s name was revealed. Not concerned about those who thought he might be invoking the great Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier, I was thrilled that the deep spirituality of discernment that allows Ignatius’ followers to find God in all things and do all things for God’s greater glory, would influence this new papacy along with the memory of the Poor Man of Assisi who preached peace, penance and fraternity. I knew that the

Jesuit commitment to the faith that does justice since the time of the leadership of Pedro Arrupe (1965-83) would now be influencing the very heart of the church.

No pope should be remembered for only one thing, but it seems that recent popes have each introduced a memorable word or phrase into the Catholic lexicon. For John XXIII it was “aggiornamento”, the buzz-word and stated purpose of the Second Vatican Council. For Paul VI it was “evangelization”, essential to the implementation of the council and for understanding the church’s mission in the world. For John Paul II the word “solidarity” probably takes first place, although there are many and varied ways to characterize his long pontificate, and for Benedict XVI it was the rejection of “relativism” in an age of secularization. For a good while I was convinced that the Francis word would be “periphery” hardly a common theological term before 2013. It should not be a surprising phrase coming from the first Latin American pope, who brings with him the legacy of CELAM, the Latin American Bishops’ Conference and its aim to create missionary disciples, the same conference which declared a preferential option for the poor and aligned itself with the impoverished masses of the continent after centuries of being part of the privileged elite. The peripheries to which Father Jorge once sent his Jesuit novices has now become the worldwide directive from the center of the Church. The word “joy”, although certainly not unique to Francis, was also a real contender. When had we ever heard so much about the joy of the Gospel? the joy of love- especially married love and family love, even political love? the joy of the call to holiness? More far-reaching than any of his encyclicals or even the apostolic exhortations on the theme of joy, is the joy that he so obviously expresses in every personal encounter with refugees, migrants, the imprisoned, those who dwell in ghettos, the hospitalized and those in nursing homes.

The joy of the Gospel was the title of his first apostolic exhortation which really served as a programmatic essay about how his papacy would unfold and his vision for the church. In his easily accessible manner of writing, Pope Francis called upon the church to set aside scolding and moralizing for a moment, to take a step back from the culture wars and to prioritize the essentials of evangelization: proclaiming the good news of Jesus and inviting all people to an encounter with Christ. In that document he taught priests how to preach, reflected on the mission of the parish, and invited everyone to be a part of a church in mission. Christopher Lamb, who writes for the British Journal *The Tablet*, lists five words to characterize the first decade of this pontificate: missionary, synodal, disruptor, fraternity and pastoral.

But now my hope and prayer is that “synodality” becomes the lasting Franciscan contribution to our Catholic vocabulary. This pope who is a man of deep prayer, who

is schooled in the Ignatian spiritual tradition of discernment, who bears witness to the freedom of the Holy Spirit, took the brave step of convening the bishops of the world and the entire people of God to learn again to “walk together,” which he reminds us is the foundational meaning of synod. It is also a phrase used by St John XXIII in his famous moonlight speech on the eve of the opening of the largest convening of bishops in history; “*tutti insieme in fraternita*”, everyone together in fraternity walking towards peace. Pope Francis is also reformulating the use of synods so that they are not only periodic events for convening bishops in affective collegiality but that they become the new way of operating and mode of being the church at every level. If this attempt is successful, its impact will be comparable to that of the Second Vatican Council, opened by another smiling pope who seemed to be nearing the end of his days.

Pope Francis is really the first post-conciliar pope in that not only does his pontificate come after the council, but that he was not present at the council. John Paul I took his name from the two conciliar popes and like John Paul II had been active at the council as a bishop. Joseph Ratzinger, the future Benedict XVI, was a *peritus*, or theological expert as a young priest participating in the council. Francis instead lived in the so-called developing world, in Latin America, where it can be argued that the Second Vatican Council had its most transformative impact. From colonial times, the Latin American church was institutionally aligned with the ruling powers and the wealth of the continent. It was a church chartered by Spanish royalty in the so-called “Age of Discovery” and incorporated many of its values. Even though there was a long history of rural and peasant clergy being close to the people and defending indigenous rights in many places, the institutional church was largely seen as upholding the status quo of privilege. Following the Second Vatican Council, visionary bishops and theologians caused the whole Latin American Church to consider the reality of the poverty of the vast majority of their people and commit itself to a preferential option for the poor.

The Latin American Bishops’ Conference (CELAM) which is regional rather than national, was a prophetic voice in the larger church because of its becoming, however imperfectly, a church of the poor. Its major assemblies gave rise to new language and a new way of being church and inspired theologians and pastors to take these insights even farther, giving birth to *comunidades eclesiales de base*, lay-led communities who reflected on the gospel in the light of their own circumstances and tried to confront inequality and injustice with a vision informed by scripture and tradition. The Latin American church inspired liberation theology, characterized by a reading of scripture through the eyes of the poor and celebrating the salvific liberation of Christ that is not

only about life after death. The proponents of this theology often clashed with the institutional church because of its use of Marxist analysis and its occasional willingness to justify violence on behalf of the oppressed.

As superior of the Jesuits in Argentina and later as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, the future Pope Francis would not characterize himself as a liberation theologian. While supportive and close to priests who worked in the slums and who lived a radical option for the poor, Jorge Bergoglio did not advocate violence nor support those who did. Yet despite well-publicized conflicts with priests who were tortured and imprisoned for their stands, Bergoglio worked behind the scenes on their behalf. Even the influential Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff who said that Francis was not a liberation theologian, acknowledged that the Argentinean “theology of the people” espoused and practiced by Francis was indeed what liberation theologians were calling for.

It is no wonder that Francis has so little patience for those who reject the Second Vatican Council or refuse to see its significance as a Kairos moment in the life of the Church. For Francis it is a denial of the Holy Spirit’s guidance to attempt to restore pre-conciliar thinking and practice. Just as most Catholics would point to the liturgical changes set in motion by the council as its biggest effect, Francis has lost a lot of his popularity and even created strong opposition to himself by greatly restricting the use of the pre-conciliar mass which his immediate predecessors had made more available. Francis understands clearly the interconnectedness of the various documents of the Second Vatican Council and realizes that a refusal to celebrate the liturgy of the council brings with it a negativity about other dimensions of the council: greater appreciation for Scripture, the ecumenical movement, a theology of the laity which sees baptism as the foundational sacrament, and social justice as integral to the mission of the church

On various occasions, Pope Francis has stated that his ecclesiological vision is precisely that of the Second Vatican Council and he has lost little time in accelerating its implementation. In his call for missionary disciples and the church’s conversion to mission, concepts directly taken from the CELAM Assembly at Aparecida, he engages Scripture, has incorporated a Sunday of the Word of God into the church’s liturgical calendar, has called upon priests and deacons to preach more effectively, and understands how the scriptures provide a path to greater ecumenical understanding and unity. In emphasizing the role of the laity in the church’s mission, the Holy Father has provided an apostolic exhortation on the council’s universal call to holiness, inviting the whole church to celebrate the “saints next door” and become saints

themselves. He has repeatedly condemned clericalism, arousing no shortage of critique and resistance from within the ranks of the clergy. He has reformed the structure and mode of working of the Roman Curia, calling for it to be focused on evangelization as the priority of the church, and engaging the local bishops and local churches in a process of decentralization in which synodality will feature prominently. He has made pilgrimages to the Holy Land and even into war zones in the company of other Christian and non-Christian leaders, and through his major encyclicals on the environment and universal fraternity, Pope Francis has moved the social teaching of the church from a theological specialization to the very heart of the church's mission and identity.

It is primarily through the lens of Vatican II that we should try to understand the still mysterious concept of synodality for the church's mode of being. Francis builds on the legacy of the Second Vatican Council's restoration of the Synod of Bishops as a permanent reality in the church. *Lumen Gentium* provided a renewed look at the traditional ministry of the bishop, the Council restored the office of diocesan bishop to being much more than a "branch officer" for the church's headquarters in Rome. The council also discussed the importance of collegiality among all bishops who share responsibility for the universal church with Peter and under Peter. During and after the council, there was considerable discussion about how to exercise this collegiality and whether it was meant to be merely affective or actually to be effective. There is no intermediary structure between the local bishop and pope, except for the national and regional conferences of bishops which are more about fraternal (or affective) collegiality than effective governance with some notable exception. The synod of bishops as envisioned by the Council, would be convened by the pope, discuss pertinent issues in the life of the church at the pope's request, and provide a global perspective to the pope from various parts of the world where the bishops are ministering.

Pope Francis himself, as a bishop, did not appreciate synods that seemed to merely rubber stamp decisions and directives made by the Pope and Roman Curia. He lamented his own experience of bishops sharing opinions and critiques outside the synod hall but who had been much more reserved in the Holy Father's presence. At his first Synod as Bishop of Rome, the extraordinary synod on the family, Francis instructed the participating bishops to speak boldly and listen charitably. Another of the frequently repeated words in the Francis lexicon is *parrhesia*, or boldness, which he insists is necessary in the synodal process if real discernment, listening and dialogue is to take place. The Acts of the Apostles describes such *parrhesia*. But in the synodal setting, time for silence, prayer, reflection and discernment is just as important.

Francis has clarified that synods are not meant to function in parliamentary fashion, there are no parties and it is not simply a matter of winning the majority to one's side of an argument. Real synodality would not have winners and losers; if people are not open to a change of heart through dialogue, they have yet to learn the synodal method.

Despite many critiques of the process, Francis is not afraid of learning from failures or arriving at an impasse. If the synodal process is truly guided by the Holy Spirit, there is no difficulty in having to re-consider a theme and trying repeatedly to get it right. To take an example that precedes the current synod on synodality, many observers across the ideological spectrum considered the Synod on the Amazon (2019) to have been a failure. Some because it did not result in the ordination of married deacons to the priesthood nor women to the diaconate, others because of their horror that such issues even came to the floor. In the aftermath of that synod, Pope Francis revealed the fruit of his own discernment and said that it was not the moment to act on such proposals, because everyone came with their pre-conceived views on the topics and no one was open to change. While the west in particular focused on such hot button issues, Francis himself was eager to call attention to a region of the church where there was a long history of living in right relationship with the natural environment, even though that balance was under attack by aggressive deforestation and other forms of development insensitive to the local ecology. He was also interested in the promotion of an appropriately local theology and liturgy which would celebrate the uniquely Amazonian contribution to the universal church. The furor over the supposed introduction of a fertility goddess into the prayer sessions of the synod and the subsequent theft and destruction of an Amazonian image demonstrated how far some participants and observers were from the understanding of Pope Francis' reasons for the synod.

Consistent with Pope Francis' energetic implementation of the Second Vatican Council, his ecclesiological vision is not limited to matters focused on the structure and internal operations of the Church. Despite the importance of reorganizing the Roman Curia, calling for better celebrations of the post-conciliar liturgy and especially the preaching therein, and considerable attention to the abuse of clerical offices right up to the rank of cardinal, by the pope's emphasis on mission, his vision is even more focused on the engagement of the church in the world. Like Vatican II's most innovative and progressive document, *Gaudium et spes*, the pope is concerned about the relationship between the church and the rest of the world. Beyond his intra-Christian activity in reviving ecumenism after decades of little activity of notice, the pope has frequently engaged with the Jewish community and famously co-authored a book with

Rabbi Abraham Skorka in Argentina. The pope has made visits to places where Muslims are the dominant population and has sought to enhance mutual respect and the need to work together for peace. He authored a joint document on human dignity with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb. Long before the current war in Gaza, the pope visited the Holy Land in the company of a rabbi and an imam, and also hosted peace talks between Israel and Palestine in the Vatican gardens. He speaks regularly about the Third World War currently being fought piece-meal and he has not shied away from war zones in order to personally bring a message of peace.

Francis is in line with all of his recent predecessors as a force for peace among nations and eager to serve in mediation to bring peace about. Yet even here, there is a particular style, an imitation of Jesus and an expression *vicinanza*, a nearness, which is also a very frequently repeated word in Francis' vocabulary. Francis traveled to Iraq, the first pope to do so. He met with indigenous leaders in Canada who had been harmed by the Church's ministers and at 86 years old, Francis, in a wheelchair, traveled to Congo and to South Sudan as a messenger of peace and to demonstrate his solidarity with those who have suffered the ravages of war. To victims of war in the Eastern part of Congo, brought to him in Kinshasa, he said,

I am close to you. Your tears are my tears; your pain is my pain. To every family that grieves or is displaced by the burning of villages and other war crimes, to the survivors of sexual violence and to every injured child and adult, I say: I am with you; I want to bring you God's caress. He gazes upon you with tenderness and compassion. While the violent treat you as pawns, our heavenly Father sees your dignity, and to each of you he says: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (*Is* 43:4). Brothers and sisters, the Church is and will always be on your side. God loves you; he has not forgotten you. But men and women should remember you too! [Papal address, Kinshasa, Feb 2023]

We have all witnessed his tireless preoccupation with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Trying to walk a diplomatic tightrope so that he might be able to serve as a negotiator for peace did not win him much support. He always tries to read the full situation and find room for movement on each side, but he could not deny that Russia was the aggressor and he even jeopardized great advances in ecumenism with the Orthodox by his harsh words about Russian Patriarch Kiril's support of "Putin's war". Every Sunday he reminds the pilgrims in Saint Peter's Square to pray for "martyred Ukraine" and he also prays for Russians, many of whom have a distorted view of the war through no fault of their own and the many who want to have a peaceful coexistence with Ukraine. For the past two Good Fridays, the pope has used

prayers for peace in the Via Crucis from Ukrainians and from Russians, despite the strong criticism he receives from the Ukrainian church for doing so. Both sides are necessary to bring about peace.

It was on the Vigil of the Feast of Saint Francis in 2021 that Pope Francis signed his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (*Brothers and Sisters All*) at the tomb of the famous peacemaker whose writings gave rise to the name of the document. Together with the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, this first Jesuit pope in history has given the global church a very healthy dose of Franciscan spirituality: he highlights the interrelationship of all creation and the need to live as brothers and sisters, in fraternity with all humanity and indeed all of creation. Written in the midst of the global corona virus pandemic, in *Fratelli Tutti* (2021) Francis laments how humanity failed to come together to address that common threat and he urges humanity to start building the friendships and relationships that will be necessary to avoid the frequent resort to war and violence. Such collaboration will be critical for addressing the accelerating climate disaster. In a recent “addendum” to *Laudato Si* (2023) the pope expressed his outright frustration at how little has been done in relation to the great threat posed. Just as the human family and all creation are interrelated, so are all the issues that threaten human existence, human dignity and human life today. Climate change disproportionately affects the poorer countries of the world which consume less of the fossil fuels contributing to the warming. The loss of islands, the destruction of land and biodiversity, the unusual and brutal weather patterns all lead to greater migration, even as the wealthier nations close their doors to the suffering migrants trying to preserve their lives—all of this is a form of violence not always recognized as such.

To consider the common good, without rooting the common good in one’s own needs or advantage, requires the chief theological virtue of charity. We rarely consider charity as a political solution. Rather what government is not able or is unwilling to do for the disadvantaged is often left to private or institutional “charity.” Pope Francis invokes the classical meaning of disinterested love and suggests that charity unites the abstract and the institutional; it moves from the theoretical good to the desire to help which results from a direct encounter with a person in need. Any ideal world order in theory will also need to recognize the reality of human weakness and sin; systems cannot just be put in place nor can we think our way through every problem with a technological solution. He is certain that the marketplace will not resolve every problem.

Following a creative exegesis of the Good Samaritan parable, in *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis offers the vision of a more open world. This more open world is based on

human relationships, that, like the example of the Good Samaritan, transcend national and ethnic boundaries. He decries the result of the breakdown of such transcendent relationships, e.g. racism, which never goes away but periodically retreats [FT 97], anti-immigrant sentiment as well as the lack of attention to the “hidden exiles” in our midst such as the disabled or abandoned elderly. The common good requires a recognition of the great worth of each person [FT 107]. Solidarity, he teaches, is born of conversion [Ft 114] and is more than sporadic generosity [FT 116]. He re-introduces the concept of gratuitousness, not useful to the market, a concept that removes relationships and even politics from the realm of the utilitarian to one more responsive to the God who allows the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good and the bad alike. Not everything has to be limited to political favors even exchanges; in fact, the common good *requires* a certain gratuitousness, which is quite different from the “pay to play” system which is at work in our country and excludes so many.

“Dialogue and Friendship” are introduced in *Fratelli Tutti* as a part of the path to a more fraternal world. Pope Francis describes dialogue as “approaching, speaking, looking at, listening, coming to know, understanding, and finding common ground” [FT 198]. Dialogue is not the exchange of opinions, but a desire to come together. Selfish indifference or violent protest can undermine or end dialogue. [FT 199] Dialogue requires clear thinking, rational argument, a variety of perspectives, and the contribution of different fields of knowledge and points of view. [FT 211] It does not result in relativism [FT 206] but is rather a search for truth [FT 207]. Respect for the dignity of the other and the recognition that persons are more valuable than material things or ideas are necessary for a dialogue that contributes to the common good. This concept of dialogue is being taught and employed in the Synod, but Pope Francis sees its use as necessary even beyond the confines of the church.

As in his previous encyclical, *Laudato Si*, the pope took the name and inspiration of the letter from his namesake, Francis of Assisi. He describes the relationship between the two encyclicals: *Laudato Si* was rooted in the famous poem that expressed Francis of Assisi’s ability to view all of creation as brother and sister, all interrelated in its revelation of the Creator. Francis’ gentleness promoted the simple use of creation rather than the exploitation and individual ownership of the gifts of creation and recognized humanity as the crown of creation. The title *Fratelli Tutti* comes from a letter of Saint Francis to those who would follow his way of life. While never intending to start a movement or an order, Francis of Assisi lived his conversion freely and openly with such authenticity that people were drawn to the joy he radiated. Pope Francis had captured that joy born of an encounter with Christ in several of his Apostolic Exhortations which speak of joy. Pope Francis was also moved by the example of Saint Francis who was willing to create an encounter with the Sultan Al-

Malik in Egypt in the midst of the violent crusades, by going unarmed into the camp of the Muslims and greeting the Sultan as a brother. He was able to win the respect and appreciation of the Muslim leader by his own genuine regard for the Sultan as a fellow worshipper and son of God. It was an encounter without conversion of religion from either side, and it was an encounter without martyrdom on either side. It was an encounter of mutual respect and of fraternity. Pope Francis believes that such encounters are not only possible, but necessary for the future of humanity. He notes that Christians and Muslims together represent about 2/3 of the world's population. What a great gift it would be if these two large religions could draw on their best traditions of peacemaking and live with mutual respect of the other.

There is so much more in the writings and the example of Pope Francis which illustrates his vision for the church and the world, but it is important to leave some room for the voice of the pope's critics. It was not long after the first appearance of Pope Francis that some began to manifest their displeasure with his rather casual attitude toward protocol; they were even bothered by his use of colloquial Italian. To this day, he ends his Sunday Angelus address with "buon pranzo" or have a nice lunch. His papal inauguration occurred shortly before Holy Week, and in his first Holy Thursday, he did not celebrate the mass at Saint John Lateran as was customary, but in a detention facility- where he washed the feet of Muslims and even women. That created a stir. Every departure from practices of previous pontiffs, even if relatively recent in origin, generated further critique.

The introduction of a special Holy Year called the Year of Mercy in 2016 also provided many occasions for criticism of Francis in the early years of his pontificate. "Mercy" could also be a contender for the word most associated with the Francis papacy, and many critics would claim that he uses that word far too easily, or is guilty of offering mercy before repentance or penance. He even has the word "mercying" (not actually a word in English!) in his papal motto, *miserando atque eligendo*, inspired by a phrase about the call of the Apostle Matthew whom the Lord had mercy upon.

It was the actual application of mercy that really stirred up an opposition. There has been hardly anything that has incited more criticism of Pope Francis than a footnote in his apostolic exhortation that followed upon two synodal sessions on marriage and the family. Footnote #351 in *Amoris Laetitia* hints at the possibility of divorced and remarried persons being admitted to the sacraments and also admonishes priests to not use the confessional as a torture chamber. This was met with allegations that the pope was committing heresy, was confusing the faithful, and more.

Also early in his pontificate, Pope Francis chose to engage the media more transparently than any of his predecessors, often it seems without a filter. A comment

that made global headlines was in response to a question about a gay priest, the pope said “who am I to judge?” and many people felt entitled to judge him. The pope’s support of popular movements, especially in the global south, has opened him up to criticism, as has his teachings on economics as found in many homilies, and in the encyclicals on creation and human fraternity.

His pronounced critique on clericalism has cost him friends in the ranks of the clergy, and his annual Christmas address to the Roman Curia has been like an end of the year examination of conscience for those engaged in the central offices of the universal church but has been received as if delivered by the Grinch himself. His offhand comments about rigid seminarians and their preference for outdated clerical attire have resulted in American seminaries having officially designated “Francis-free zones” where such calls for embracing the noble simplicity espoused in the liturgy from Vatican II are routinely ridiculed.

Each synod convoked has provided material for the critics of the pope. His encouragement for vaccination during the Covid epidemic was also a source of opposition to some who considered it a betrayal of the pro-life cause. The frequent mention of countries having responsibilities to welcome and integrate migrants and refugees has aroused fierce resistance. The acknowledgement of the human causes of climate change, already acknowledged by his immediate predecessor Benedict XVI, upset many who are in denial about even the existence of climate change. Declaring the death penalty inadmissible in our day and age was also a source of consternation among some theologians.

The Synod itself has created a backlash among those who suspect the pope has already drawn up the conclusions and all of the listening sessions throughout the world are just theater. Some cite “confusion” among the faithful or giving misleading hope that practices in the church could change and some teachings might need to be adapted in the light of new knowledge and new situations in the world.

Sadly, it must be noted that the US Catholic Conference of Bishops has only formally engaged the first of Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortations, the Joy of the Gospel. But there have been no national initiatives from the conference to promote the teachings contained in the encyclicals or to address the pastoral initiatives called for in *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) which require discernment and accompaniment of couples in what the church declares “irregular circumstances”. There has been no movement on the opening of the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte to women, nor any development on the ministry of catechist which the pope has called for. There was even a formal vote in the conference **not** to include a paragraph from the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* in the bishops’ quadrennial document on voting; a

paragraph that situates the church's opposition to abortion within a larger context of the sacredness of human life and dignity. And it would be quite generous to call the US Bishops' engagement in the synod on synodality lukewarm.

Overall, it can be said that the cardinals who elected Jorge Bergoglio to reform the Roman Curia and remind the church of her missionary nature probably got more than they bargained for! Like another smiling pope of the last century, elected in his post-retirement years, Pope Francis has taken his role as universal shepherd very seriously and has brought his own personality and history, the culture of his people and the experience of the Latin American church to the Chair of Peter, the center of the Church. This pope of firsts has been a pope of surprises throughout his pontificate and I would be surprised if he doesn't call us to an even more full embrace of the gospel and a deeper encounter with Christ- leaving behind that which gets in the way, no matter how time-honored it may be.

To sum up the vision of Pope Francis for the church is to recapture the creative imagination of the Spirit's work at the Second Vatican Council. It is to understand the Church as the pilgrim people of God on the way to the Kingdom, a community of missionary disciples entrusted with the Good News of Jesus Christ and empowered to share it with a broken and hurting world. A church which must go out of itself to be faithful, and must invite the world to recognize that we are all sisters and brothers and we are all interrelated with all of God's creation. We can only survive and thrive together.