

With Francis, 11 Years “on the High Seas”

March 13, 2024

On March 13, 2013, the conclave of cardinals gathered for the election of a new Pope, elected Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then-Cardinal of Buenos Aires, Argentina, who chose FRANCIS as the name for his pontificate, in homage to the saint of Assisi, the “poverello” (the poor little one). It is a name that has helped shape his profile and the course of his life and teachings during these years of his Petrine ministry.

During these days, we now celebrate the eleven years since Francis became the first Jesuit and Latin American pope to direct the destiny of the Church, guide Catholics in their Christian faith, and the Vatican as its head of state.

These have not been easy years for the Church or the world. Francis has served his pontificate amidst a difficult world panorama that has been marked by armed conflicts, such as those in South Sudan and Yemen, violence in Nigeria, the conflict in Syria and the Islamic State Caliphate, in addition to the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and, more recently, the Israeli-Palestinian war with the tragic consequences and humanitarian crises that all wars generate.

Along with these conflicts, Peter’s boat, helmed by Francis, has had to navigate the instability and tensions in the European Union, the threats of nuclear tests from North Korea, the trade power struggle between the United States and China, the social demands of the “Me Too” movement along with those of other movements of “minority” social groups demanding civil rights. These have come against the backdrop of challenges emerging from technological advances, especially in the field of telecommunications, which have been rapidly changing and transforming the lifestyle of human beings and our social coexistence.

As if that were not enough, during this past decade, we have also witnessed major health crises, such as the Ebola outbreaks in Africa and the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, with nearly six million deaths since its first diagnosis in the city of Wuhan. Add to this panorama the serious migration crises of large masses of the African population fleeing to Europe, that of the Rohingya population trying to flee from Myanmar to Bangladesh, and the hundreds of thousands trying to cross the border between Mexico and the United States, always seeking better living conditions and always with an immense trail of suffering and humiliation among those who are forced to abandon their homelands and

loved ones. Add to this the very serious natural disasters that we have witnessed, such as the earthquake in Ecuador or the hurricane in Haiti.

To all these conflicts and human tragedies, Francis has had to take on other serious problems during his pontificate, some within the Church itself, such as the crisis created by the resignation of his predecessor Benedict XVI, sexual abuse by the clergy, the fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the persecution of Christians in the Middle East by the so-called Islamic State, and the attacks by feminists and other ideologies against the Church.

As if that were not enough, as in the Gospel itself, Francis has not lacked the Iscariots, the traitors to the causes of the Gospel opposing and denying his pontificate and magisterium. These denials and betrayals, in the very heart of the Church, on the part of those “*who dip their hands into the dish with me*” (Mt 26:23), hurt more and do more harm because of the scandal they cause against the unity demanded by the Gospel.

But these persecutions suffered by Francis are—for the disciples—a sign of evangelical authenticity. They come from those who follow the logic of the world contrary to that of the Gospel. Because those who want to follow Christ “*must bear the cross*” (Mt 16:24) which is born of persecution, which itself is born of the clash between the Gospel and the criteria of the world.

If there is one thing that has characterized Francis, from the first moment of his pontificate, it has been his attachment to Jesus and his Gospel, so that he has become a light and a “*sign that will be contradicted*” (Lk 2:34-35) for the Church and the world. From this attachment to the Gospel comes his authority, which is absolute coherence between his deeds and words, his words, and gestures.

But how has Francis responded to humanity’s urgency? What has Pope Francis done to win over opponents within the Church itself? What have been Francis’ main pastoral and evangelizing themes during his Petrine ministry?

Pope Francis has promoted initiatives for the reform of the Roman Curia and the Vatican administration, especially in the fields of economics and finance. He has insisted on the need for coherence between the evangelizing mission of the Church in the world and the lifestyle of its evangelizing agents, religious leaders, bishops, and priests. He has tightened the rules that help protect minors and has led the defense for the rights of migrants.

But, in addition, Francis exhorts us, in season and out of season, in all his documents, addresses, and homilies, to the renewal of Christian life and the Church, to the missionary vocation, and to care for “*our common home*.”

In his countless travels, in his meetings with communities or world leaders, in World Youth Days, in his writings, in all his interventions, in the symbolism of his prophetic and evangelical gestures and, especially, in his three Encyclical Letters: *Lumen Fidei* (on faith as a light to be shared) *Laudato Si* (on care for our common home), *Fratelli Tutti* (on universal fraternity), Francis has emerged as the Pope of mercy, synodality, and ecumenism.

Congratulations! To paraphrase Alberto Cortez, Catholics, and men and women of goodwill, we congratulate ourselves on the presence and guidance of Pope Francis and sing because this “*fragile ship... has at its helm, as captain and helmsman*,” a great man, a true Christian, a good shepherd. May Francis be with us for many more years!