

“Pope Francis has made reform of the Church a signature of his pontificate, and Rocco D’Ambrosio has provided adept institutional analysis to shed light on the momentum and challenges inherent in such a bold pursuit. All who care deeply about the outcome and want to understand the context, commitment, and countervailing forces at hand would do well to read this book.”

—Kerry Alys Robinson
Founding Executive Director and Global Ambassador
Leadership Roundtable

“Rocco D’Ambrosio argues persuasively that Pope Francis is offering more than just a new leadership style. D’Ambrosio’s background in sociology and institutional analysis presents fresh insights into the character of Francis’s reformist program and invites hope that this papacy may bring enduring and systemic change to the church.”

—Richard Gaillardetz
Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology
Boston College

“In order to understand Pope Francis’s pontificate we need theological analysis as well as an analysis of Francis’s approach to Church reform from an institutional-systemic point of view. This book by D’Ambrosio offers a very necessary insider look at the politics of Francis’s reform and, most important, of the opposition to Francis.”

—Dr. Massimo Faggioli
Professor of Historical Theology
Villanova University

“D’Ambrosio’s analysis, by exploring the insights of the human sciences, is enriched by angles of consideration that an exclusively theological vision would be unable to offer. The result is a sharp and coherent study that, like Francis’s own style, calls us to mercy but does not justify or tolerate unethical or harmful behavior. To this end, D’Ambrosio’s style is transparent and simple, rooted in the conviction that no change is possible without revealing the ugliness and its mechanisms hidden within the reality of the church.”

—Emilia Palladino
Civiltà Cattolica

“In this quick read of some one hundred pages, priest-sociologist Rocco D’Ambrosio prompts our discussion about the challenge of the church reform championed by the Pontificate of Pope Francis as it steers a new course, away from the Church’s traditional anchor points within Europe; new waters run deep and the cross-currents are hard to navigate. D’Ambrosio brings focus to Francis the person, Francis the reformer, and Francis the pope. The writer’s narrative then moves to appraise the general backdrop of the church’s institutional components—their rationale and foundation—against which Francis is now pitching his energies.”

—Jay Kettle-Williams
editor of diocesan magazine of Portsmouth (UK)

Will Pope Francis Pull It Off?

The Challenge of Church Reform

Rocco D'Ambrosio

Translated by
Barry Hudock



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September 10, 2016

Introduction

Since the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio as bishop of Rome on March 13, 2013, his pontificate has prompted many questions. Perhaps one of the most persistent is: *Will Pope Francis pull it off?*

It is a question asked by believers and nonbelievers alike, interested in understanding the challenges that this pope faces and the results of his response to them. Some observers—those who hope the pope will inspire within the Catholic Church the energy and wisdom necessary to address the challenges of our day—ask it with anxiety and concern. Others ask it through taut lips, with skepticism and opposition, as if to insist that nothing will change, *despite* Pope Francis's misguided efforts. The question is posed by many people, in many ways, and with many answers. Everyone's response is shaped by who they are, how they think, and what they do.

In this little book, I will consider the question and seek answers in light of my own research and professional expertise. I work in the field of institutional analysis, concentrating on the philosophical aspects of the topic. A summary of my thinking is found in two texts: *Come pensano e agiscono le istituzioni* [How Institutions Think and Act] (2011) and *Il potere e chi lo detiene* [Power and Those Who Hold It] (2008). Based on my studies, I propose to offer here an institutional analysis of the Catholic Church in the Bergoglio pontificate. This is not a simple task, but its scope is limited. The difficulty

increases when we recall that, as I will explain later, there is considerable resistance on the part of many to investigating and discussing the anthropological and institutional aspects of the life of the church.

Like all knowledge, the answer to our question cannot be reached in an individualistic and isolated manner. The question can (and must) respond to the concerns and perspectives of many: simple faithful, priests and bishops, nonbelievers, theologians, sociologists, psychologists, and more. Each response is worthwhile to the extent that it is the result of reflection and study and that it helps shed light on this complex phenomenon, as all modern phenomena are.

Will Pope Francis pull it off? I shall articulate my response starting with Francis himself and his arrival on the global ecclesial scene, bringing with him a project of reform that is inspired strongly by Vatican II. Then I will address the institutional aspects of the Christian community, its drift into a simplistic ideology, the question of power and corruption, and the appearance of certain scandals. Finally, I will close by considering the prospects of the ongoing reform.

Chapter 1

Papal Politics

Aristotle taught that the person who draws others to form a political community is the greatest of benefactors, because he is able to bring people to build a virtuous and happy life together.¹ Extending this Aristotelian principle, we might say that not only the founder of the community but also the one who reforms and renews it, helping it to grow in goodness, is a great benefactor of the people.

There is no institutional reform project, neither in the church nor in the world, that is not in some way bound to the person who conceives of it, introduces it, and carries it out. Certainly, reform is never the task of a single individual. But the physical, emotional, and intellectual burdens that reform demands of a particular leader are always significant. In the Catholic Church today, that leader is Pope Francis, whose persona, like those of all authentic leaders of reform, plays a considerable part in the project.

It is universally acknowledged that Pope Francis is one of the most highly respected figures in the world today, not only within the Catholic Church, but also outside it. Herein lies the first trap: the reputation and charisma of the leader

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, book 1, section 1253. Available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0058>.

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may be overshadowing the message he wishes to transmit and the work he is undertaking.

By way of analogy, it is not unlike the dynamic we sometimes see among adolescents, in which being the fan of a particular musician is more related to the singer's personality than to the songs she sings. You remember little of the songs but carry deep and precise memories of the singer and the emotions she aroused in you. Emotional data has completely dominated and absorbed cognitive data.

Wisdom tells us that emotions and ideas should always be integrated and governed. In Christian terms, they should be subject to discernment.

Pope Francis seems to be well aware of the risk involved in his personal popularity. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, just a year after his election, he said, "Sigmund Freud said, if I'm not mistaken, that in all idealization there is an aggression. To paint the Pope as if he is a sort of Superman, a sort of star, I find offensive. The Pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps peacefully and has friends like everyone else. He is a normal person."² In another interview, with the Vatican correspondent Andrea Tornielli, Francis has identified himself as, first of all, "a man who needs the mercy of God."³

The pope's comments point to the most obvious mistakes of some of his strongest supporters: mythologizing him; boundless confidence in his reform; excessive expectations from his pontificate; superficial simplifications of ecclesial processes, often expressed with a banal "Francis is here now, he'll do the thinking for us" sort of approach; and a lack of objectivity and

²"English Translation of Pope Francis' *Corriere della Sera* Interview," Zenit, March 5, 2014: <https://zenit.org/articles/english-translation-of-pope-francis-corriere-della-sera-interview/>.

³Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, trans. Oonagh Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016), 41.

detachment when assessing his words and actions. Leaders, Francis insisted in an address to the Roman Curia, are not to be “deified.” Such idolization can disguise a very real syndrome:

This is the disease of those who court their superiors in the hope of gaining their favour. They are victims of careerism and opportunism; they honour persons and not God (cf. *Mt* 23:8-12). They serve thinking only of what they can get and not of what they should give.⁴

Francis’s references to himself, then, are usually invitations to look at his gestures and to listen to his teaching with much more balance, avoiding fanaticism and harmful mythologization.

Will Pope Francis pull it off? He will to the extent that we can avoid fanaticism and mythologizing. This means in practical terms to focus more on what he says and does and less on who he is.

On the opposite side, there are those who refuse to accept him and often denigrate him. At the beginning of the pontificate, these critics seemed to voice their objections quietly, but they have more recently come confidently into the open. A quick review of a few websites immediately reveals an array of fierce criticism. We find frequent use of expressions like communist, pauperist, doctrinally weak, destroyer of the Church, heretic, ecologist, betrayer of tradition, contrary to Catholic moral teaching on family, inappropriate wardrobe, exaggerated gestures, a Jesuit who wants to be Franciscan, too unfiltered and blunt, reckless, simplistic, undiplomatic, and more.

There is no shortage of books, newspaper articles, and interviews with clergy and lay faithful who criticize various

⁴Francis, Presentation of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2014: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html.

statements of the pope that they consider unfaithful to Catholic doctrine. In these comments, two aspects are particularly surprising. First, much of this fierce criticism comes from people who have been, with past popes, emphatic about their loyalty to the Supreme Pontiff; their much-heralded fidelity and obedience now seems to have waned. Second, their mind-set resembles those who support ideological regimes: the doctrine/tradition is untouchable; anyone who questions it—let alone attempts philosophical or theological research into it—is a heretic; and the task of pastors and teachers is only to repeat it and defend it, always and everywhere. As far as one can tell from press reports, the last gathering of the Synod of Bishops demonstrated to what extent these two factors can stand in the way of Francis's efforts.

There is also a third group, which could be described as *neither for nor against* Francis. They seem to be favorable to the conciliar nature of the pope's thinking, though they are careful not to say it too publicly; indeed, they say as little as possible about Pope Francis. They like some things about the pope but are annoyed by other things, like his undiplomatic style and frankness, his exaggerated concern for social issues and poverty, and so on. In short, they like the pope, but not enough to say it publicly, and not enough to get involved in his project of reform. Here we encounter subtle sorts of ambiguity and hypocrisy. In a sense, this group is more "dangerous" than the one more openly opposed to the papal reforms.

These groups exist. It would be an exaggeration to regard them as full-fledged "parties," structured and organized, or as schools of thought, able to develop theories distinct from the more formal and prominent ones. They should be considered more as anthropological and ethical *tendencies*, like those present in all institutions, reflecting mostly the thinking of individual members who, in some cases, gather to share their thoughts. In other words, they're a loosely organized group that rarely exists for long, for lack of leadership or vision.

Insofar as these groups contribute to institutional debates in healthy, grounded, and constructive ways, they are positive and helpful phenomena. But when they operate covertly, rejecting any form of dialogue, they become a liability.

To the existence of such factions and intra-ecclesial opposition, Francis responds by insisting on the importance of dialogue, so that the diversity will become a source of enrichment and never a cause for division. His frequent calls for dialogue seem inspired by *Ecclesiam Suam*, Paul VI's programmatic first encyclical released during and itself inspired by the Second Vatican Council. In that document, Pope Paul VI proposed to all Catholics the practice of listening humbly to the world, based on "consideration and esteem for others . . . understanding and . . . kindness" and in a way that rejects "bigotry and prejudice, malicious and indiscriminate hostility, and empty, boastful speech." Such listening seeks always the good of the other party, out of a "desire to respect a man's freedom and dignity," with the aim of "a fuller sharing of ideas and convictions."⁵

Because this kind of dialogue is so demanding and difficult, it is too often easier to approach others—especially those who think differently than us—assertively and closed-mindedly, as modern-day crusaders and ideologists unwilling to meet anyone halfway. The rejection of dialogue is found at almost all levels of the church and just as surely outside the Catholic community, among various Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities, not to mention among nonbelievers and others whose ethical, cultural, political, and economic positions are different from ours.

⁵Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (On the Church), August 6, 1964, n. 79: http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html.

In his homily for the feast of Epiphany in 2016, Francis said,

The Magi mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew are a living witness to the fact that the seeds of truth are present everywhere, for they are the gift of the Creator, who calls all people to acknowledge him as good and faithful Father. The Magi represent the men and women throughout the world who are welcomed into the house of God. Before Jesus, all divisions of race, language and culture disappear: in that Child, all humanity discovers its unity. The Church has the task of seeing and showing ever more clearly the desire for God which is present in the heart of every man and woman.⁶

The task Francis was pointing to is one that, more often than not, remains incomplete.

⁶Francis, Holy Mass on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, January 6, 2016: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160106_omelia-epifania.html.