

## Review Article

### **Pope Francis: His Impact and Relevance for the Church and Society**

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**P**ope Francis has become the conscience of the world. No wonder then, he is the most talked about person in the world today. Wherever he goes he draws a large crowd of people who recognize in him a spiritual leader who epitomizes in his life, and articulates in his words to a great extent, Jesus' vision of being a human in this world. He believes that human beings can experience the true meaning of human existence, and be joyful witnesses of the gospel values of love, justice, freedom, compassion, equality, reconciliation in a society that discriminates between humans on the basis of religion, class, caste, gender and nationality. He pleads with all people of good will to embrace a life of compassion and care for one another, and nature, trusting in a God who embraces everyone with infinite love and compassion. This book, which celebrates five years of his papacy, is a significant Indian contribution to the Universal Church.

The world recognizes Pope Francis as a man of God and a religious leader with great authority to inspire, challenge, and exhort everyone to live a life worthy of their human vocation, and

to demand justice and fairness from governments and political leaders. Considering his advocacy for the poor, the marginalized, the refugee and the migrant, what impact has he on the Church? Certainly, his pastoral approach to vexing problems in the Church is recognized and appreciated by a majority of Church members. His encyclicals, apostolic letters and exhortations breathe a fresh air of pastoral concern, simplicity and intelligibility, that ordinary Christians and people of other religions easily comprehend. His universally acclaimed and widely discussed encyclical *Laudato Si'* is the best example of his clear and lucid articulation of the right relationship of humans with nature, and the responsibility each human being has in caring for the earth. In matters of faith and morals, Pope Francis seems to have adopted a style of articulating his teaching that use easily comprehensible theological terminologies, and avoid theological jargon in-so-far as possible.

He is trying hard to liberate the Church from an ecclesiastical Nestorianism

– a point of view that sees the Church dichotomized as an institution and as a spiritual reality. Simultaneously, Pope Francis is also at-

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tempting to rescue the modern Church from an ecclesiastical Monophysitism which considers the Church only a spiritual reality. The Second Vatican Council's openness of the Church to the modern world, and post-Vatican II struggles to make the Church relevant to that same world have found road-blocks as resistance from those who were alarmed with changes hardened. In fact, those who resist any reform are said to be those who directly benefit from the existing system that they desire to preserve. It is very clear that those who would resist any structural changes in the Vatican curia are probably not moved by any spiritual considerations, but by fear of their own loss of power. Those who resist

liturgical reforms, ecumenical efforts toward unity in doctrinal and sacramental matters or inter-religious dialogue, are the very same who fear a loss of security and identity in exclusivism, arrogant absolutism, and static understandings of tradition. They resist maturing from their infantile faith to an adult faith. Those groups include priests, bishops and even cardinals who resist the intentions of Pope Francis to reform the Church as envisioned by the Vatican II Council. Resistance to reform is understandable as some are afraid to let go of a past Church in which they found security and certainty; despite the reality that this past Church no longer has significance.

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Pope Francis' training in the school of Ignatian spirituality makes it very important for him to use discernment of the spirits in every decision that affects the universal life of the Church. The objective criteria of discernment are the Christological and ecclesiological congruity of decisions that affect whether and how Church members become more identified with Jesus Christ, and make Her grow in communion. While concerned about safe-guarding and teaching the living tradition of the Church, he exemplifies the human Jesus in his attitude, lifestyle and relationships. He recaptures and reaffirms the early Church's Christian identity as 'a community of believers with one heart and one soul' whose life witness reveals that Jesus is still alive.

The overwhelmingly positive impact of Pope Francis on the Church's life is seen in his promotion of inclusivity, openness to dialogue with all humans of good will, compassionate pastoral approach to those who are marginalized within the Church and in society, and willingness to listen to all including those who oppose his views. The Holy Father has made clear that the Church is a true home for all who seek meaning in their lives. He has the courage and conviction to authoritatively speak to leaders

of nations, reminding them of their duty to care for the poor, the needy, the refugee and migrant, and for nature. He walks the talk and makes the prophetic mission of Jesus alive - even to virulent critics of the Church who view it only as an institution with enormous power, riches and world-wide influence. Pope Francis reveals the human face of a Church in which one can discover the human face of Christ.

The present volume focuses on the life of Pope Francis and the impact of his papacy on both Church and world. No other global leadership is as frequently discussed as the papal leadership of Pope Francis. With him the world has been once again awakened to look at the Church positively as a community that promotes life and humanizing values.

Our first section is a historical overview. A profile of Pope Francis is first sketched, followed by an article discussing the impact of Pope Francis from reports of the global reception of Pope Francis and his views on the life and mission of the Church in the world of today. This is followed by a second article, which looks at the Pope's role as a "Supreme Bridge-Builder" in engaging other Christians and the larger world.

The next section reflects on his pastoral approach and draws mainly from *Amoris Laetitia*; the apostolic exhortation that has made great impact. These contributions highlight relevance and significant evolutionary changes in Pope Francis' moral and pastoral outlook, and relate how he challenges widespread attitudes that problems are solved by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations in the absence of sufficient reflection and grounding. His "open ear and generous heart" come out forcefully in this exhortation.

The next four articles analyse his "bridge building" capacity and practice of reaching out to the modern world, laity, and

religious. The paper, “Gazing at Our World with God’s Eyes of Mercy: Pope Francis’ Theological Vision” discusses the theological vision of Pope Francis. The author finds striking similarities with St. Francis of Assisi’s love of poverty, enthusiasm to renew the Church, love for nature, and a willingness to dialogue with Muslims; it is Trinitarian both in its origin and end. The article “Embracing the Laity: Te Vision of Pope Francis” describes a new vision for the Church, as projected by Pope Francis through signs and symbols, and words and actions, as expounded in his *Evangeliu Gaudium*. Against the background of that vision, the laity’s role is spelled out by a study of Francis’ writings, interviews, homilies, messages, and discourses.

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The fourth section, “Dialogue as Way of Life” features Pope Francis’ dialogue with other religions and the

sciences. It talks about the dialogical model of living and believing that is essential for the survival of contemporary humanity. Pope Francis has been at the forefront in dialogue with other religions and disciplines, including both social and natural sciences. Te articles in this section discuss Pope Francis’ involvement with the world of science to show how he is open to learn from the empirical disciplines and at the same time challenges science when it falls short of its commitment to the total welfare of humanity and nature.

The paper also discusses some of the insights from his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, underscoring the need for responsibility in protecting nature, and the urgent need for integrating Science and Faith.

The next section discusses another aspect very close to Pope Francis’ heart: the poor, marginalised, refugees and ostracised. His concern for a just world order, free from exploitation

and violence, clarifies his unambiguous stand for the poor.

This alone makes him a prophet for our times. One criticism, whether he has communist tendencies, is also addressed in the last chapter of this section. Here we show that far from communist leanings, Pope Francis is an ardent Christian, who tries to practice the primary Christian commitment to God and to our neighbour.

The three articles in the sixth section deal with his ecological concerns and are based on his earth-moving encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. The article, "The Trinitarian and Christological Dimensions of Ecology in *Laudato Si'*" explains how Pope Francis develops his theological vision on the essential relationship of humans with God and other humans and its implications for human's relationship with nature based on the Trinitarian and Christic experience of God. The following articles discuss the indirect influence of thinkers like Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger and Max Scheler on the encyclical *Laudato Si'* through Romano Guardini. The foundational philosophical vision of *Laudato Si'* is influenced by the critique of Martin Heidegger on Heidegger's "machinational" interpretation of beings that subjugates humans and commodifies nature, as well as his philosophical insights into a way of overcoming it.

Following the discussion of philosophical influences, we present a description of Francis' leadership style, which is life-affirming and merciful.

### ***Pope Francis: Making a New History of Church Leadership***

"Pope Francis: Making a New History of Church Leadership"

explains how Pope Francis' leadership is different from that of his predecessors and how it makes the Church credible in our times. By 'reading the signs of the times' his paradigm shifting exercise of Papal ministry expresses the spirit and vision of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. One article also points out the significance of rationality in his understanding of leadership. The last article

talks of Pope Francis as a game changer, whose communitarian approach to leadership fosters a down-up method of decision making.

The final section talks about the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of his impact and focusses on his mass media attraction. Pope Francis’ influence in both the Church and the world during his five-year period has been enormous. In the midst of numerous crises faced by the recent Church, God has raised up Pope Francis, a prophet for our times, to make the Church a credible witness to the compassionate love of God. His life-style and theological vision, his pastoral heart for those who feel abandoned by the Church because of its laws and regulations, his openness to all things human, and his challenge to the entire Church to make itself the home for the marginalized, make him an authentic Vicar of Christ. Pope Francis’ ministers with a leadership and true authority that challenges and devalues all forms of power and power structures that enslave and dehumanize. His life is his mission and is the reflection of incredible witness to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom values. We believe that the Holy Father would agree that his impact is due primarily to his message. That clarion message of joy, peace, forgiveness and mercy, drawn deeply from Jesus’ experience of a merciful God, is highly relevant for our times! We have titled this book “Pope Francis: His Impact on and Relevance for the Church & Society,” These sentiments form the basic persona and practice of Pope Francis: Compassion for the poor based on our experience of God, Commitment to God’s people and His Kingdom, and Collaboration with ALL people of good will – from theist to atheist, from artist to scientist. It is our firm conviction that only by collectively committing ourselves to all people in compassion (or mercy) and collaborating with each other, can we make this world, “Our Common Home,” a heaven on earth, a place of joy, an abode of hope and freedom!

On the whole, this book is both academic and relevant.

It is scholarly and creative. The book is highly recommended for anyone interested in the contemporary Church and papacy.



## “Mercy Has a Youthful Face”

“Knowing your enthusiasm for mission, I repeat: mercy always has a youthful face! Because a merciful heart is motivated to move beyond its comfort zone. A merciful heart can go out and meet others; it is ready to embrace everyone. A merciful heart is able to be a place of refuge for those who are without a home or have lost their home; it is able to build a home and a family for those forced to emigrate; it knows the meaning of tenderness and compassion. A merciful heart can share its bread with the hungry and welcome refugees and migrants. To say the word ‘mercy’ along with you is to speak of opportunity, future, commitment, trust, openness, hospitality, compassion and dreams. But are you able to dream? When the heart is open and able to dream, there is room for mercy, there is room to caress those who suffer, there is room to draw close to those who have no peace of heart or who do not have the bare necessities to live, or who do not have the most beautiful thing of all: the faith. Mercy. Let us together repeat this word: mercy. All of you! And once more, so the whole world can hear you!” -- Address to young people at World Youth Day, Blonia Park, Krakow, Poland, July 29, 2016