11 December 2019, The Tablet

**Francis’ rocky road to Rome**

by [John Crowley](https://www.thetablet.co.uk/author/533/john-crowley)

**Pope Francis, who will be 83 on 17 December, may be concerned at the scale of the opposition he is facing as he charts a new pathway for the Church. But a former auxiliary of Westminster and Bishop of Middlesbrough is sure that bitterness and hostility will not deflect him from his course**

 ***“I wouldn’t say that I’ve learnt from all my mistakes: no, I think I didn’t learn from some of them because I’m stubborn, and it isn’t easy to learn. But I have learned from many mistakes, and that did me good, it did me good.”***

***“We must never tire of going to ask for forgiveness. You may feel ashamed to tell your sins, but as our mothers and grandmothers used to say, it is better to be red once than yellow a thousand times. We blush once but then our sins are forgiven and we go forward.”***

***“I always give this advice to newly weds: ‘Argue as much as you like. If the plates fly, let them. But never end the day without making peace. Never.’”***

No prizes for guessing the provenance of these quotations. They all have the unmistakable earthiness and directness that identify them as coming from Pope Francis. Has this kind of plain speaking been common in papal ranks? The honest answer is surely a resounding: No.

Pope Francis has now been among us for six-and-a-half years. He will be 83 on 17 December and his health is what you would expect of a man of his age. We can probably expect only a few more years in which to enjoy his life-­enhancing ministry, either because of his death, or, perhaps more likely, his resignation, after the admirable pattern of his predecessor. This growing realisation nudges many of us into acute awareness of the gift from God we have been given in this unprecedented papacy.

Francis’ first words to us on the night of his election were buona sera (“good evening”): the kind of cheerful, informal greeting you might more usually expect to exchange with a ­neighbour. And he concluded those words of introduction with: “Please pray for me” – a familiar request from one person of faith to another, but much less common on the lips of a new Pope.

These days, Francis sometimes adds wryly: “Ah, but do you pray for me or against me?” Why is it that this son of Argentina, who came to Rome from “a far-off country”, is encountering increasingly fierce opposition – and often from within the Church? Answering this question needs careful discernment. It is not that Francis is a liberal in matters of doctrine or teaching. Neither could he be claimed by the more conservative wing of the Church. Francis is radical, in the strict sense; he is determined to follow Christ not just in his teaching (orthodoxy), but also in his lifestyle (orthopraxy).

He gave us a clue at the very beginning of his papacy. “I have chosen the papal name of Francis,” he told us – not, he emphasised, Francis Xavier, for whom as a Jesuit he has the deepest reverence, but Francis of Assisi, the twelfth-­century saint from Umbria who embraced poverty and simplicity to follow faithfully in the way of the poor man of Nazareth.

Other signs of the new Pope’s radical commitment to simplicity of life were not long in coming. He vacated the traditional papal apartments in order to live in the Vatican guest house of St Martha. He spoke and wrote in a natural and accessible way. Other dramatic gestures quickly followed, sacred signs so to speak: for example, his journey to the tiny Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, which had become the first point of entry into Europe for many ­desperate refugees. Francis was determined to focus international attention on the unfolding ­catastrophe.

“The Lord,” Francis reminded us, “is close to the brokenhearted. Those whose spirit is crushed he will save” (Psalm 33). And last month he swept away any possible ambiguity as to where the Church stands on nuclear weapons: “The use of atomic energy for the purposes of war is immoral, as is the possession of nuclear weapons,” he said, speaking close to the spot where the atomic bomb detonated over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. “We will be judged on this,” he added. Here is a prophetic voice of great moral authority, speaking “with eye undimmed, his vigour unimpaired” (Deuteronomy 34:7, describing Moses in his old age).

During these past six-and-a-half years, there has been a steady stream of letters addressed to the Church and to a wider audience, beginning with Evangelii gaudium, on proclaiming the Gospel in today’s world, and culminating in Laudato si’, his strongly worded encyclical employing the rawest of language to highlight the wasteland to which so much of our natural environment has been reduced by human blindness and greed.

In so many ways this Pope has shown by word and by personal example his determination to recall the Church to a closer conformity to Christ’s own way of modelling an authentic God-centred life. His repeated desire is that the Church should be “a Poor Church for the Poor”. The recent Pan-Amazon synod in Rome synthesised two of Francis’ priorities: a passionate concern to halt the degradation of the natural world, and a fervent desire to bring the outer fringes of the Church – the “peripheries” – into the centre. New cardinals are now much more likely than ever before to be selected from the Churches of the peripheries.

One change above all has discomfited his increasingly loud opponents. Francis has brought a pastoral approach to some of the most sensitive issues the Church is wrestling with: the ordination of married men, LGBT relationships, the new questions constantly being thrown up in sexual and medical ethics, and the whole painfully disputed area of who is and who is not eligible to receive Holy Communion. His critics want clarity about what is right and what is wrong. Anything less, they argue, leads to confusion, to watering down the teaching of the Church and even to heresy.

Pope Francis takes a different starting point, one he feels is more faithful to the mind and heart of Christ and the tradition of the Church. For him, the Church’s teaching, the commandments, shape and guide how we are to live our Christian life, but they do so within the particular circumstances of each individual, with all their opportunities, limitations and constraints. Francis wants to start with the unique history and life situation of the person, meeting each human being where he or she is, recognising that each person has their own struggle, and then, in the light of Church teaching, walking with them along the pathway of further prayer-guided discernment.

Given the sharp differences between the two approaches, it is not hard to understand why there is sometimes such bitter hostility to Francis from those for whom the rules of the Church must be clear and unchanging. Is Pope Francis deeply concerned about the scale of opposition to the course he is charting for the Church? I would guess the answer to that must be: Yes. But will he be shaken from the conviction that his approach is faithful to the Gospel? I am quite sure that he will not be. Francis draws from a deep Ignatian well of inner freedom, rooted in long hours of prayer and reflection. He will not be deflected from his course by opposition and hostility.

Speaking as a bishop, I am full of gratitude and admiration for the life-enhancing, graced leadership our Holy Father is giving us. He is constantly encouraging us to use our episcopal ministry with greater inner freedom and boldness in the service of the Church to the wider world. In his wonderful apostolic exhortation on the call to holiness in today’s world, Gaudete et exsultate (“Rejoice and be glad”), Francis ­singles out pastoral boldness or parrhesia as a special sign of holiness: “Boldness, enthusiasm, the freedom to speak out, apostolic fervour, all these are included in the word parrhesia”.

On countless occasions during the course of his ministry, Francis has urged the people of God, and notably priests and bishops, to be ­willing to take risks in the service of the Gospel. Such pastoral risk-taking, even when it leads to mistakes, is preferable, he insists, to remaining aloof within a suffocating legalism: “To allow us to [exercise pastoral boldness] Jesus himself comes and tells us once more serenely yet firmly, ‘Do not be afraid’ (Mark 6:50), ‘I am with you always, to the end of the world’ (Matthew 28:20)” (Gaudete et exsultate). What a missed opportunity it would be if those of us charged with leadership ministry as priests and bishops were not to respond with generosity and a ­similar inner freedom to this inspirational leadership.

A final thought. If Pope Francis were to stumble across an article such as this, he would, I am sure, plead that the writer point out his limitations too, the mistakes he makes, the bad judgement calls that are part of our human nature, whether we are a layperson, a bishop or the occupier of the chair of St Peter. To be ­presented as a kind of perfect role model would be a heavy burden for anyone to carry, and perhaps especially for this Christ-centred, humble man.

And of course Pope Francis is not perfect. But our contemporary Church, which is at the centre of what I hope and pray will be a humbling and cleansing firestorm of criticism over its failures to deal with the blasphemy of the abuse of ­children by priests, is blessed to have at the helm a compassionate but resolute pastor, leading us on with such evident Gospel joy and helping to draw us more closely to Our Lord.

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