

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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The Pope of Surprises

Praising and problem-conscious words from a friend

(Bonn, 22.04.2025) In the following, the obituary on Pope Francis by Archbishop Thomas Paul Schirmmacher is reproduced:

I have dealt with Pope Francis in official functions of very different kinds, both for the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and for the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR). I accompanied him on three state visits. At the same time, I often visited him privately in Santa Marta, often for his birthday. In recent years, I have also been involved in interfaith dialog with Islamic states, where I was often present. The most unusual thing was certainly that during the purely private meetings in Santa Marta, we started to speak to each other in German and prayed together. The fact that the end was near was recently expressed by the Pope in his inimitable humorous way when he joked, barely audibly, “Today, no coffee break with the Pope”. He had commented on my book with the same name in the German version, the English version was only published on the Internet.



Thomas Schirmmacher and Pope Francis in 2013 © Thomas Schirmmacher

Not only has a decade passed since my 2016 book ‘Coffee Breaks with the Pope’, but Pope Francis’ pontificate has also taken a slightly different direction since then. The focus has shifted from interconfessional dialog to dialog with (state) Islam and from evangelization to a broader call for all people to be respectful of one another.

His life until the papal election

Jorge Mario Bergoglio SJ was born on December 17, 1936 in Buenos Aires as the eldest of five children, four years after his father immigrated from Italy. He trained as a chemical

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technician, joined the Jesuits in 1958 and was ordained a priest in 1969. From 1980 to 1986, Bergoglio was Rector of the Theological Faculty of San Miguel.

In 1986, he went to the Sankt Georgen School of Philosophy and Theology in Frankfurt am Main, which is run by the Jesuit order, to complete his doctorate. His dissertation on Romano Guardini's main philosophical work 'The Contradiction' remained unfinished because he was ordered to return to Argentina—probably as a disciplinary measure—and the Pope mourned the work until the end. He lived in Rothenburg ob der Tauber from August to October 1986, attending a German course at the Goethe Institute. Since then, the Pope has spoken some German as well as Spanish and Italian, which means nothing other than that he has kept the language warm for decades.

Bergoglio had now somehow become persona non grata with the Jesuits and, for his part, was ill-disposed towards them. He had been dismissed as head of the large Jesuit university near Buenos Aires for reasons that have hardly been investigated to date and was finally sent into Jesuit exile in Cordoba in 1990–1992, including a ban on celebrating public masses. If the Archbishop of Buenos Aires had not unexpectedly consecrated him as an auxiliary bishop in 1992, he would probably have remained there for the rest of his life according to the Jesuits' wishes.

In 1997, he became Archbishop Coadjutor of Buenos Aires, i.e. deputy to the Archbishop, who automatically succeeds him in the event of resignation or death. The fact that Archbishop and Cardinal Antonio Quarracino died suddenly just nine months later was unexpected, and so Bergoglio became Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998. He was appointed cardinal in 2001.

At the 2005 conclave that elected Pope Benedict, he already had the second most votes, but then did not run in the next round of elections, so that Ratzinger was able to obtain a two-thirds majority.

After the resignation of Pope Benedict, he was therefore elected Pope quite quickly and easily on March 13, 2013 and took the name Francis in honor of the Catholic Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226), unusual because for centuries newly elected popes have chosen and combined the names of their predecessors.

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Thomas Schirmacher in conversation with Pope Francis 2015 © Thomas Schirmacher

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In my opinion, it was and is an exaggeration to declare him the first purely Latin American and non-European pope, even if the Latin American temperament is of course palpable in his public appearances, his writings and in his personal dealings. He speaks Italian as well as Spanish and, in my opinion, would hardly have been elected if he had not been of Italian descent. His father's family fled from fascism in Italy to Argentina in 1929. His mother also came from an Italian family. Even as a Jesuit, he initially lived in an Italian-influenced structure that was tightly managed from Rome, but which eventually pushed him to the margins.

The only other influence outside Latin America and Italy came from Germany, the country of his predecessor, in terms of literature and through his stay for a dissertation, and was therefore also European.

His encyclicals and books

Pope Francis has written *three encyclicals*:

- *Lumen fidei—The Light of Faith* (2013), is based on a draft by Pope Benedict and is the first encyclical to deal with the faith as a whole.
- *Laudato si'—Praise Be to You* (2015), is the so-called environmental encyclical.
- *Fratelli tutti—All Brothers: On fraternity and social friendship* (2020).

There is a clear development here from biblical works that can almost be called Protestant to encyclicals that are addressed to all people of good will and therefore argue less and less from a biblical-theological perspective. 'Fratelli tutti' (2020), for example, even claims to have learned most of it from the rector of the most important Islamic university, Al-Ahzar in Cairo, Grand Sheikh Ahmad Mohamed al-Tayyip.

A similar development can be seen in the 'Apostolic Exhortations', whose status is not quite as high, of which there are quite a few and some of which also deal with questions of the organization of the Vatican, regulate the removal from office due to sexual abuse (2016, 2023) or, for example, the meaning of the nativity scene (2019) or the veneration of St. Theresa of the child Jesus (2023). Of interest to Protestants and Evangelicals are the early Apostolic Exhortations 'Evangelii gaudium—The Joy of the Gospel' (2013) on evangelization and 'Aperuit illis' on the introduction of the Sunday of the Word of God (2019). As with the encyclicals, the more biblical and inner-theological letters were written in the first half of his term of office.

In addition, there are the many volumes of 'Interviews and Conversations' that are quite atypical for a pope, the first of which were published before he became pope. In some of them, he made statements that have become famous, which lie outside official Catholic doctrine and which the Vatican authorities then had to laboriously capture and explain. The same applies to his notorious answers in conversations and interviews with journalists on airplanes.

Even his autobiography from 2024 ('Life: My Story Through History') as well as its predecessor from 2010 are a mixture of interviews and explanations by the interviewers.

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The more undogmatic approach had advantages and disadvantages

By taking a more theologically undogmatic stance, the Pope has, on the one hand, initiated developments that Evangelicals have very much welcomed, and on the other hand, initiated developments that have caused them great concern.

This is in the nature of things with him, because the sometimes loose approach concerned both Christian truths and values that are “sacred” to Catholics (and where Protestants were then happy to see changes) and those that are “sacred” to conservative Protestants and Evangelicals, which then shocked them. In addition, of course, there is the aforementioned development that the Pope strongly approached Protestants in the first half of his term of office, but then replaced this in the second term of office with the relationship to (state) Islam, or to put it in the words of Michael Meier: “Thaw with Islam, alienation with Protestants” (157).

The Pope has also made many theological and far-reaching changes without altering the written and dogmatic content of the Catholic Church itself. Now, the Catholic Church never changes the old version of its tradition either way, but it has often replaced outdated views with new ones without further ado, for example when the Second Vatican Council elevated religious freedom to church doctrine, which the Catholic Church had fiercely fought against for two centuries.

If his successor adopts such changes in practice, they will become permanent in the church, but if the successor does not support these changes, he can also drop them sight unseen.

A typical example is the shift or banishment of most of the Pope’s sovereign titles, which still appeared in large print on the title page of the ‘Pontifical Yearbook’ under Benedict, to the back of the yearbook at the bottom in small print. The use of titles in the yearbook has long been in line with the Pope’s everyday practice, who only ever refers to himself as “Bishop of Rome” and never actually uses the other titles, so that they only appear, if at all, in official documents. This does not mean that the Pope’s claim has disappeared, but the Pope goes back 1000 years in history, so to speak.

However, it is also typical of Francis how he approaches the whole thing, on the one hand in such a way that it looks as if he only sees the titles as historical reminiscences, and on the other hand in such a way that he can pretend to his conservative critics that it is only a matter of a new visual presentation. On the one hand, Francis creates facts; on the other hand, the Catholic Church never officially revokes what it once decided as truth, even if it decides the opposite, and this has not changed with Francis.

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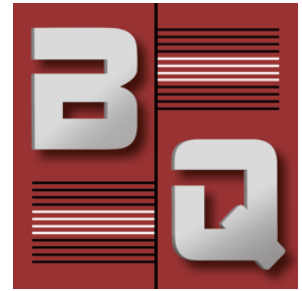


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Francis therefore doubts whether he is really the *Vicarius Iesu Christi*, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, when he speaks of the whole Church and everyone who proclaims the Gospel representing Jesus Christ. The dogmatic constitution ‘Lumen Gentium’ of the Second Vatican Council applies this title both to the Pope with regard to the whole Church (LG 18,2) and to the individual bishop with regard to the particular Church entrusted to him (LG 27,1). In contrast, the Codex Iuris Canonici of 1983 uses the title exclusively for the Pope, which was typical of John Paul II, but is not covered dogmatically. Canon law can be changed by the Pope at any time, but Francis chooses the more conspicuous route via the Yearbook.



Selfie with the Pope at the handover of the 2017 yearbooks on religious freedom and the persecution of Christians © BQ/Martin Warncke

As in many other questions, Protestants must therefore make a decision: Do you see the Catholic Church through the lens of its historical magisterial decisions that have never been revoked, especially in the 16th and 19th/20th centuries, or do you see it through the lens of the (respective) reigning Pope? Both views are justified, both contradict each other at the same time, because the Catholic Church itself is caught in a contradiction here. Millions of Catholics solve the problem by ignoring history and only seeing the “modern” Pope, millions of Catholics solve the problem by saying that the historical documents are valid and therefore Pope Francis is actually betraying the papacy.

At his inauguration in St. Peter’s Square, the Pope spoke differently from the officially issued text program, which, according to the Second Vatican Council, listed Protestants only among “ecclesial communities”, in that the Pope greeted the Protestant church leaders present together with the others as leaders of the “other churches”, which he later repeated more frequently, and which was also expressed in the equal treatment of Orthodox and Evangelical leaders, for example—but he did not change the dogmatic position.

The example of “justification by faith alone”

The Pope was a “fan” of the 1998 ‘Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification’ between the Lutheran World Federation and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity.

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The joint declaration of justification was considered a huge step forward worldwide. However, the then Prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, declared that the Declaration could never overturn any previous Council decision—such as that of the Council of Trent. Nevertheless, and this seems to me to be the decisive factor, he did not question the correctness of the Declaration’s definition of justification.

Francis simply skips over the question of what this all means for the Council of Trent, and links to the fact that there is a common description of what is seen as the biblical doctrine of justification.

“In every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God, who has called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit.” (EG 12)

“Through her evangelizing activity, she cooperates as an instrument of that divine grace which works unceasingly and inscrutably. Benedict XVI put it nicely at the beginning of the Synod’s reflections: ‘It is important always to know that the first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only begging for this divine initiative, shall we too be able to become—with him and in him—evangelizers’.” (EG 112)—direct continuation:

“This principle of the *primacy of grace* must be a beacon which constantly illuminates our reflections on evangelization.” (EG 112) Remember: in Catholic language, “primacy” is actually a description of the supremacy of the Pope!

In his speech in a Pentecostal community in Caserta on July 28, 2014, Pope Francis said: “However, the most beautiful greatest mystery is that, when we find Jesus we realize that He was seeking us first, that He found us first, because He arrives before us! In Spanish I like to say that the Lord firsts us.”

His approach to indulgences also belongs here. On the one hand, he placed indulgences at the center of the Holy Jubilee Years he proclaimed—we are currently still in the latest one. However, even in the first ‘Bull of Annunciation’ of the Extraordinary Jubilee Mercy, indulgences are only mentioned in passing, namely in § 22 of 24 paragraphs. This is all the more astonishing given that the Jubilee Year was invented as a year of indulgences over 600 years ago. After many pages on mercy, on the other hand, it says almost apologetically: “A Jubilee also entails the granting of *indulgences*. This practice will acquire an even more important meaning in the Holy Year of Mercy.” But what is then described as an indulgence is only remotely related to classical Catholic indulgence theology (“nevertheless, negative traces remain”). After all, the Father grants mercy and forgiveness “through the Church”. Moreover, Francis is not far from simply granting indulgences to all believers. After all, it is an age-old controversial question as to why the Pope, if he has the power to grant indulgences to all, does not simply do so. In the brochure of the German Bishops’ Conference, which presents “The Holy Year”, indulgences are simply not mentioned at all.

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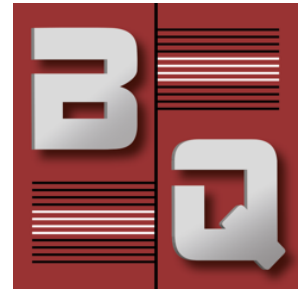
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What I consider to be the positive aspects of his work

It seems presumptuous to make a list of the Pope's positive and negative effects. Nevertheless, this is a more detailed appreciation than most obituaries, which only pick out a few elements. In addition, the enormous range of the Pope's impact becomes clear.

- He fought corruption in the Vatican and cooperation with the mafia on a massive scale, sometimes at the risk of his own life.
- He has continued the denationalization of the Vatican and its equivalent under international law, the Holy See, which his predecessor had begun, for example by no longer allowing the Vatican to vote at the UN or by giving the Italian police a monopoly on the use of force throughout the Vatican, so that the Swiss Guard operates without firearms. This is despite the fact that he was also very active in day-to-day politics and acted as a massive political world conscience.
- He has relaxed the relationship with non-Christian religions. This applies in particular to Judaism (as a religion, less so to Israel as a state) and Islam (but see my criticism below). The price for the human and political relaxation, however, was theological ambiguity, for example when religions were described as different paths to God, just as there are several languages, even though Francis has continued to emphasize the need for evangelization and only recently placed the Dicastery for Evangelization in the hierarchy of papal institutions before the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, which is responsible for dogma and morals.
- He has eased the relationship between the global Catholic Church and Evangelicals and Pentecostals, even if he increasingly lost interest in the topic the more he turned to interreligious dialog. In many Catholic-majority countries, the easing of tensions has led to an easing of pressure on Protestant minorities, and the Catholic Church now often works with Evangelicals against governments instead of working with the government against them.
- He very often referred to the catastrophe of the persecution of Christians, even if he never institutionalized the issue anywhere in the Vatican or in the Catholic Church. He repeatedly emphasized the need for the churches to work together, as all their martyrs together form the cloud of witnesses in heaven. The "ecumenism of the martyrs" became a memorable catchphrase.
- Centuries ago, the Vatican was the inventor of ambassadorial diplomacy, which is why in many countries the nuncio, the ambassador of the Holy See, still holds the honorary chair of all diplomats. Diplomacy, which is still very secretive, is perhaps the Catholic Church's most powerful weapon and achieves a great deal of good. Consider, for example, that the Vatican facilitated the resumption of diplomatic relations between the USA under President Obama and Cuba under President Raul Castro. In the first half of his term of office, Vatican diplomacy also increasingly stood up for non-Catholic Christians, which I can tell you a thing or two about.

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Bonner Querschnitte Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

Text & Technology:

Titus Vogt (ViSdP)
Vorderer Kamp 52a, 25479 Ellerau
Tel.: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 06
Fax: +49 / 4106 / 80 48 07
E-Mail: info@bonn-profiles.net



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What I consider to be rather problematic aspects of his work

- While Pope Benedict clearly positioned himself at the Republican end of the political spectrum in the USA, for example by maintaining a personal relationship with President George W. Bush and even visiting him privately in the USA for his birthday, Pope Francis positioned himself at the other end and was clearly, even at times brusquely, in favor of the Democrats and against the Republicans during his trip to the USA and spoke out in favor of the presidential candidate and President Biden, although the Catholic Bishops' Conference thought completely differently here and wanted to excommunicate Biden. It was therefore astonishing that he granted the last political audience of his life to the American Vice President J. D. Vance.
- No wonder he was perceived as a left-wing Pope in the field of politics and economics. Unlike his two predecessors, he never really criticized communism and socialism, but he did criticize capitalism ("this economy kills"), economic liberalism and consumerism. His exclusive statements in favour of all refugees and asylum seekers and their right to immigrate everywhere, or in favour of a total commitment against climate change, to be paid for by the industrialized countries, were often so political that the specifically Christian or Catholic aspect behind them was hardly recognizable. VaticanNews publishes a dozen statements a day on almost every major political event in the world, which can be seen as both a valuable commitment and a complete debasement of one of the world's most media-savvy ministries, especially since almost all the commentary was predictable and overwhelmingly "politically correct"—except perhaps on the issue of abortion and less clearly on the issue of sexuality.

Traditionally, Popes have been considered politically conservative and "right-wing". In his encyclical on the environment and many other texts, speeches and appearances, Francis has called for and promoted a political agenda that is seen more as "left-wing", to the point where the direct link to a theological basis was difficult to recognize. In his encyclical 'Fratelli tutti', he then argues largely untheologically and repeatedly cites the head of Al-Ahzar University in Cairo, Al-Tayyib, as his key witness, although he has not spoken publicly on the issues at all. It is the least theological encyclical that a Pope has ever written. Of course, the fact that the Pope is standing up for peace and defending the dignity of the person against harassment and worse on the internet is to be welcomed in principle. But much of it is just "politically correct" and hardly differs from good essays in a daily newspaper

- His deal with China should also be mentioned in this context. The contract between the Holy See and China is still secret, but amounts to China deciding who becomes a bishop and the Vatican automatically agreeing after a short waiting period, while at the same time Catholic bishops are in prison and the part of the Catholic Church that does not comply is severely harassed without the Vatican intervening. This is all the more unusual as the Vatican has always, but especially from around 1800, fought for the appointment of a bishop by the

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Pope to take precedence over all decisions by states, and even over local electoral traditions within the Catholic Church.

- The dialog with Islam increasingly overshadowed the dialog within Christianity as well as the dialog with other religions. The dialogue takes place exclusively with representatives of a state Islam. There is no dialogue with imams who come from countries such as Germany, where Islam is not organized by the state, nor with Islamic movements that are condemned by Islamic states, such as the Ahmadiyya. This makes it clear that the Pope does not primarily follow the line of religious freedom and supports all religious minorities. Al-Tayyib, quoted by the Pope in 'Fratelli tutti' as a key witness, whom the Pope often met—I was close to him several times—is above all a “state cleric”.
- The Pope’s attempt to maintain his role as a possible mediator between Russia and Ukraine came at the cost of neither attacking the unspeakable talk of holy war by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church nor accusing Russia of a war of aggression. If one compares the fierce criticism of Israel with that of Russia, for example, one is surprised at the imbalance.
- In the case of Israel, the Pope was not quite as one-sidedly pro-Palestinian as the Vatican has been in its history, but a condemnation of the murders of October 7, 2023 as an act of terrorism did not cross his lips. In view of his criticism of Israel, the Pope made an effort to assure the Jews of his appreciation, which some Jews greatly appreciated, while others saw as whitewashing.

The Pope has promised a lot on many topics and then delivered little on some of them

Now this is not meant to be a cheap criticism, even a Pope cannot achieve everything he wants in twelve years, especially not when he sets such a broad reform agenda that covers practically everything that concerns the Vatican and the Catholic Church.

- The best example is the Amazon Synod, for which the Pope himself raised far-reaching expectations, above all the abolition of celibacy for the region. Although he even received the required two-thirds majority at the synod for all his wishes, the final document drafted by the Pope does not mention any of the demands, let alone that any significant changes were made. (It should be noted that in the Oriental Catholic parts of the Catholic Church, such as in the Middle East or Ukraine, married priests are permitted.)
- In the case of the so-called diaconate of women, which the Catholic Church has known for centuries and which the Orthodox Churches have revived on the basis of tradition, the Pope has always announced new commissions, but none of them has yet even described the way forward. Observers thought at the beginning that the Pope would introduce the diaconate for women quite quickly, but in the end it did not look as if there would be any movement here. Michael Meier speaks of an “endless loop”.

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- In the case of homosexuality, all those who had hoped for far-reaching changes have been disappointed, they have all been disliked. At the same time, however, the Pope has made so many sideways remarks on the subject or misleading decisions (such as allowing same-sex couples to be blessed, but only for a few seconds and not as a couple) that all those who welcome the fact that there are no changes whatsoever are nevertheless annoyed.
- The balance around the issue of sexual abuse by clergy and the action taken against both perpetrators and church leaders who covered up for these perpetrators or did nothing to do justice to the victims is mixed. On the one hand, Francis has worked tirelessly on the issue and achieved tremendous things. For the first time, he has shown no consideration for the rank of the perpetrators and those who have acted against them, even the highest-ranking cardinals had to resign—for the first time in 2018—or were extradited, and living and even deceased founders and leaders of spiritual movements were cleaned up and their leadership structures were completely redesigned.



Pope Francis in his home on his birthday in 2023
© Thomas Schirmmacher

On the other hand, the final step was often missing, such as the obligation to involve the state even if this is not the law in a country, or to give in to the demand of victims' associations to appoint professional laypeople to bodies in order to—as Francis often said—“put an end to clericalism”. In addition, there is a feeling that the question of the systematic causes of the enormous scale was not asked, for example when eleven incumbent and emeritus bishops, including two cardinals, were rightly accused in France. Closely linked to this is the fact that it is part of the structure of the Catholic Church that the Pope himself cannot be accused, but has held his hand protectively over clerics when he could not even imagine that they were perpetrators. In almost all cases, the Pope has made a clear public apology, but most recently he forgave the Slovenian priest and gifted artist with church windows all over the world—and therefore the Pope's favourite artist—Marko Ivan Rupnik, who had been

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expelled from the Jesuit order and laicized by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, a few weeks later and reinstated him as a priest.

- The Pope has de facto increased centralism. “The pope is one of the most authoritarian we have had in a long time.” (Robert Spaeman in Herder Korrespondenz). Now the far-reaching changes he has made or announced, as well as anti-corruption measures, can only be implemented with a strong central hand, but de facto the individual Pope in the Vatican today has much more effective and juridical power than any of his predecessors had. A good example of this is the increasing number of women in Vatican leadership positions, which were actually reserved for ordained persons in the highest decisions. To get around this, the Pope decided without further ado that none of the Vatican institutions could act independently, but that everything had to be signed off by him. As a result, it is now no problem to appoint women to most of the top posts, but the price is an intra-Vatican concentration that was unknown to the two predecessors.

Downloads and links:

- **Photo 1:** Thomas Schirmmacher and Pope Francis in 2013 © Thomas Schirmmacher
- **Photo 2:** Thomas Schirmmacher in conversation with Pope Francis in 2015 © Thomas Schirmmacher
- **Photo 3:** Selfie with the Pope at the handover of the 2017 yearbooks on religious freedom and the persecution of Christians © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- **Photo 4:** Pope Francis in his home on his birthday in 2023 © Thomas Schirmmacher

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