



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pope Francis as Teacher

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Pope Francis should be understood as a teacher whose pedagogy is grounded less in academic credentials than in prophetic speech, symbolic action, and sustained attention to the poor and marginalized. Through close readings of major texts (including *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'*, *Misericordia et Misera*, and the 2018 revision on the death penalty) and emblematic appearances (Lampedusa, Holy Thursday foot-washing, the 2015 address to the US Congress), it shows how Francis educates the Church by re-centering mercy, the common good, and “going forth” to the peripheries. The article concludes with *Dilexi te* and Francis’s 2024 letter on Church history to seminarians, proposing a model of Jesuit and ecclesial leadership that learns from failure, privileges forgotten voices, and links doctrinal development to a pedagogy of solidarity.

Keywords:

Pope Francis; pedagogy; mercy; peripheries; poverty; Church history

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Introduction

No one would question that Pope Benedict XVI (r. 2005–13) was a teacher. After all, he held a doctorate and was a university professor—indeed, a professor of theology—before he moved to other contexts where he was also a teacher, including Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and eventually Bishop of Rome.

Pope Francis (r. 2013–25) had no doctorate; he was not a university professor; though a Jesuit, he was not an academic.¹ But both before he became pope, especially as a bishop in Argentina, and then as Pope, Francis often spoke with a strong prophetic voice, deploring especially sins of greed and selfishness, and calling people to lead lives of generous care of others, especially the poor and the marginalized.

In this article, I focus mainly on key documents from the papacy of Francis, including encyclicals and apostolic exhortations as well as lesser-known documents such as letters. I also consider how Pope Francis taught by example—perhaps most dramatically on Holy Thursdays in Rome, in washing and kissing the feet of prisoners, both women and men, Christians or not.

Homily of Holy Father Francis

Only a few months after his election, Pope Francis made a trip to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa,² there to pray for migrants who had lost their lives at sea. In his homily, he says that he felt he had to come “to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated.” The lack of concern or care for others is the main theme of this homily: Francis asks how many of us have lost that concern. Referring to migrants seeking a better life as our brothers and sisters, he deplores that they are at the mercy of traffickers. And yet, he notes, most people are indifferent to this, like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan who turned a blind eye to the victim of robbers. Francis says that the “globalization of indifference” has taken from us the ability to weep. Thus, we should ask the Lord “for the grace to

1 Jorge Bergoglio may have received some votes at the conclave of 2005, but his election in 2013 surprised many. See Anne Soupa, *François: La divine surprise, Ce pape va-t-il convertir l'Église?* (Mediaspaul, 2014).

2 Francis, Homily of Holy Father Francis at Lampedusa, July 8, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

weep over indifference, to weep over the cruelty of our world, of our own hearts. . . .”³

Evangelii Gaudium

Within his first year as Pope, Francis issued a very long Apostolic Exhortation,⁴ in which he teaches how to do certain things. It is very much a teaching document. In it, Pope Francis teaches clergy, religious, and the laity, but perhaps especially fellow priests, how to preach and how to act in a pastoral way, in a way that is appropriate for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such preaching is to be about God’s abundant love for us, a topic Francis approaches in a variety of ways.

I focus on the introduction and chapter one of this text, about the joy of the Gospel, a theme already announced by the title: *Evangelii Gaudium*. Like many papal documents, this one quotes texts from earlier popes: Pope Francis turns especially to Pope Paul VI (r. 1963–78), starting with his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete in Domino* (1975), in which he stresses that no one is excluded from the joy God gives us.⁵ He adds that God never tires of forgiving us, with a tenderness that never disappoints.⁶ Citing another Apostolic Exhortation of Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), Pope Francis insists that an evangelizer should take comfort in the joy of evangelizing; an evangelizer’s life should glow with fervor.⁷

Francis emphasizes that to evangelize means to go forth, to be a missionary, to go out from ourselves to the peripheries.⁸ He acknowledges that this requires change. He insists that the phrase “We have always done it this way” cannot be allowed to impede “bold and creative” ways of evangelization.⁹ Pastoral ministry must focus not on “a multitude of doctrines to be insisted upon” but on “the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing, and at the same time most necessary.”¹⁰ Thus it

3 Tears as a grace were something Ignatius of Loyola, Jesuit founder, valued highly. See for example Ignatius on tears as a gift from God in a 1548 letter to Francis Borgia, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans. Joseph Munitiz and Philip Endean (Penguin, 1996), 206.

4 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

5 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §3.

6 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §3.

7 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §10. Through his use of air travel, Paul III became the first pope to personally make evangelization global.

8 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §20.

9 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §33.

10 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §35.

is a mistake to “speak more about law than about grace, more about the Church than about Christ, more about the Pope than about God’s word.”¹¹

For Francis, evangelization and pastoral ministry, to succeed, must be about grace and mercy. Thus, a priest should not turn the confessional into a torture chamber but rather make it a place of encounter with the Lord’s mercy.¹² For the Church to “go forth,” it must always open doors to all sorts of people. So too the Eucharist is “not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”¹³ The Church is to be “the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone with all their problems.”¹⁴ For this reason, Pope Francis rules out, as it were, the campaigns of some to police the communion line in order to bar certain sinners access. Rather, the Church must “go forth to everyone without exception,” including the “usually despised and overlooked.”¹⁵

Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2014

This address was made to the cardinals and bishops of the Roman Curia.¹⁶ Though the title and time of year (three days before Christmas) suggests a warm and friendly discourse, it is in fact also a rather severe critique of the members of the Curia. Francis states that there are many “diseases” and temptations which weaken the curia’s service. He lists at least fifteen of this kind.

There is the disease of those that think of themselves as indispensable. Pope Francis recommends that they visit a cemetery to see the many names of those who thought they were indispensable.¹⁷ He also singles out those who give excessive time to their work, leaving no room for anything else such as family or times of “spiritual and physical recharging.”¹⁸

Francis is especially concerned with those whose heart has turned to stone, those who have lost the ability to “weep with those who weep and

11 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §38.

12 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §43.

13 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §47.

14 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §47.

15 Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §48. If communion was not a prize for the perfect, then voices seeking to police the communion line lost any credibility they may have had.

16 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” December 22, 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/december/documents/papa-francesco_20141222_curia-romana.html.

17 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings,” §1.

18 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings,” §2.

rejoice with those who rejoice.” Hearts that grow hard are incapable of loving God or one’s neighbor.¹⁹

Among the most strongly worded of his identifications of “diseases” by Francis are rivalry and vainglory. Here, Francis, a member of a religious order that shuns clerical seeking of higher office, rejects the clinging to titles, honors, and certain clothing. Those who “court” their superiors in hopes of promotion to higher offices, “think only of what they can get and not of what they should give.”²⁰

The Francis who takes delight in the “joy” of the Gospel and of evangelization points toward a joy quite unlike that found among some of those he criticizes. They have a “lugubrious” face and are “dour”; the apostle, however, is to be “serene, enthusiastic and joyful, a person who transmits joy wherever he goes. A heart filled with God is a happy heart which radiates an infectious joy. . . .”²¹ This kind of happy heart Francis contrasts with “the disease of worldly profit, of forms of self-exhibition.”²²

Though Pope Francis gave this address to the Roman curia, in his concluding paragraphs he states that the diseases and temptations he has identified may concern every Christian in some ways, so he teaches that we must all be open to the Holy Spirit, for it is he who can sustain our efforts at conversion.

Laudato Si’

Pope Francis began *Laudato si’*²³ by referring to Francis of Assisi, for whom the earth was our common home, for whom the earth was “like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.”²⁴ Pope Francis adds that the earth “cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.”²⁵ Thus from the very outset of this encyclical letter, Francis lays the blame for climate change and environmental destruction very clearly on human beings. Hardly the first pope

19 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings,” §3.

20 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings,” §§7, 10. Pope Francis, a Jesuit, showed no sympathy whatsoever for clerical careerism, with its titles and promotions, pursued by diocesan clergy.

21 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings,” §12.

22 Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings,” §15.

23 Francis, *Laudato si’*, Encyclical Letter, May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. By “common good,” Francis consistently meant global common good and global common home.

24 Francis, *Laudato si’*, §1.

25 Francis, *Laudato si’*, §2.

to do so, Francis cites Paul VI in 1971 and speaks at length on the consequences of “ill-considered exploitation of nature.”²⁶

Pope Francis identifies the victims of such exploitation as, above all, the poor, vulnerable to pollution and other harms. For example, on climate he insists that it is “a common good, belonging to all and meant for all,”²⁷ but it is the poor who suffer the most from (global) warming, often with nowhere to go to escape it.²⁸ So too, though safe drinking water is a “universal human right,” it is often unavailable to the poor, who suffer from dysentery, cholera, and other water-borne diseases.²⁹

Nature or the natural world seen as but a source of profit for the powerful Pope Francis condemned. He states that a policy of “might is right” is one that “engenders immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity. . . . Completely at odds with this model are the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace as proposed by Jesus.”³⁰ A model of human work that glorifies individual greed and hoarding he rejected again and again; citing several passages in Leviticus, he states that those who “tilled and kept the land were obliged to share its fruits especially with the poor, with widows, orphans and foreigners in their midst.”³¹ If American culture has at times emphasized rugged individualism, Pope Francis taught that we “creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.”³²

Francis lauded a “sense of fraternity” that “excludes nothing and no one.”³³ Thus the earth is a “shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.”³⁴ Citing a 1993 document from the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, Pope Francis asserts that “our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.”³⁵

26 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §4; Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, Apostolic Letter, May 14, 1971, §21, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html.

27 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §23.

28 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §25.

29 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §§29–30.

30 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §82.

31 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §71.

32 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §86. Unlike the American preference for so-called rugged individualism, Pope Francis clearly and consistently promoted the common good and care for one other.

33 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §92.

34 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §93.

35 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §116.

Careful not to appear anti-business, Pope Francis states: “Business is a noble vocation directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good.”³⁶ Service to the common good, not merely to further enrichment of the already rich, clearly makes a huge difference.

Indeed, the common good is again and again the central theme of this encyclical. Addressing the deprivation of many, Francis declares: “In the present condition of global society where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”³⁷

Moving forward, Francis explains, requires interdependence, and interdependence requires dialogue. Francis identifies as a central obstacle to fruitful dialogue the “countries which place their national interests above the global common good.”³⁸ Francis here places himself in a long line of popes who have been critics of nationalism in various ways, and of its many negative consequences.³⁹

Francis calls for educators to help people “grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.”⁴⁰ Environmental education he sees as including a “critique of the ‘myths’ of modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market).”⁴¹ The “ecological conversion” that is needed involves gratitude for God’s gifts and a generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.⁴² Such a conversion includes freedom from the obsession with consumption.⁴³

Reception of this encyclical was varied, ranging from enthusiastic implementation to hostile rejection. The Sisters of Mercy in the United

36 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §129. On how business and Jesuit spirituality may work together, See Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* (Loyola Press, 2005).

37 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §158.

38 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §169.

39 See Thomas Worcester, S.J., “Popes and Jesuits vs. Nationalism (ca.1846–1978),” in *The Jesuits and the Church in History*, ed. Claude Pavur, S.J., Barton Geger, S.J., and Robert Gerlich, S.J., special issue, *International Symposia on Jesuit Studies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.51238/IS.J.S.2022.13>.

40 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §210.

41 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §210.

42 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §220.

43 Francis, *Laudato si'*, §222.

States offer a good example of enthusiastic reception. In Vermont, they established an eco-spirituality center as a response “to the call for healing in our relationship with God our neighbors and the earth itself.”⁴⁴

Address of the Holy Father to the Joint Session of the United States Congress

Throughout most of US history an address to Congress by the Pope would have been unthinkable. But the unthinkable happened during the visit of Pope Francis to the United States in September 2015.⁴⁵

Making clear that he meant to address not only Congress but also the people of the United States, Pope Francis devoted a large part of what he had to say to four exemplary Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton. One woman and three men, two Protestants and two Catholics (indeed, two converts to Catholicism) were included.

Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) Francis identified as a guardian of liberty and the common good. The greatest common good, Francis insisted, is a “community which sacrifices particular interests in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life.”⁴⁶ In Martin Luther King (1929–68), Francis found an American who pursued a dream of full civil and political rights for African Americans. Francis celebrated the importance and effectiveness of dreams of this kind, for they “awaken what is deepest and truest in the life of a people.”⁴⁷

At this point in his address, Francis appeals to Americans to “treat others with the same passion and compassion with which [they] want to be treated”⁴⁸—for Francis, migrants and refugees and prisoners condemned to death. He strongly urges the abolition of the death penalty by affirming that every life is sacred, and that if a just punishment may be necessary, it must never exclude “the dimension of hope and the goal of rehabilitation.”

In Dorothy Day (1897–1980), Pope Francis found a Servant of God whose “social activism, passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the

44 See Mercy Ecospirituality Center of Mercy Ecology, Inc., <https://mercyecology.org>.

45 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress: Address of the Holy Father,” United States Capitol, Washington, DC, September 25, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.

46 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session.”

47 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session.”

48 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session.”

saints.”⁴⁹ She understood that a fight against poverty and hunger “must be fought constantly and on many fronts. . . .”⁵⁰

For the Pope, Thomas Merton (1915–68) was “a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between people and religions.”⁵¹ Francis praises dialogue as important for building bridges, a task he describes as his duty to build bridges that help to end conflicts.

A bit oddly, perhaps, John Boehner, Speaker of the US House of Representatives and a Catholic, resigned from his position the day after Francis’s address,⁵² an address that had brought the Speaker to tears. Tears of joy? Or tears of repentance? Or some other kind of tears? We do not know.

Senator Bernie Sanders, Independent from Vermont, was effusive in his praise of the Pope’s address: “Pope Francis is clearly one of the important religious and moral leaders not only in the world today but in modern history. He forces us to address some of the major issues facing humanity: war, income and wealth inequality, poverty, unemployment, greed, the death penalty and other issues that too many prefer to ignore.”⁵³

Sanders was hardly the only voice in Vermont to praise the Pope and his address to Congress. Another was the Bishop of Burlington, Christopher Coyne, who praised a “great speech, one that came from the heart. . . .”⁵⁴

Misericordia et Misera

With an extraordinary year of mercy, Pope Francis made very clear how central mercy is to a correct understanding of what Christianity is about,⁵⁵

49 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session.”

50 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session.”

51 Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session.”

52 See *National Catholic Register*, “How the Visit from Pope Francis Prompted House Speaker Boehner to Resign,” April 27, 2021, www.ncregister.com/news/how-the-visit-from-pope-francis-prompted-house-speaker-boehner-to-resign.

53 “Sanders Applauds Pope’s Remarks,” Bernie Sanders press release, September 24, 2015, accessed March 1, 2026, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/sanders-applauds-popes-remarks/>.

54 Cori Fugere Urban, “Pope Addresses Congress, Encourages Dialogue,” *Vermont Catholic* 7, no. 4 (October 2015): 7, <https://mydigitalpublication.com/publication/?i=274814>.

55 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, Apostolic Letter, November 20, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20161120_misericordia-et-misera.html.

and thus what his papacy is about.⁵⁶ For him mercy was not, and could not be, merely one theme among many others in a list of Christian beliefs or concepts. Rather, it was related to other themes central to the teaching of Pope Francis: mercy leads to joy “because our hearts are opened to the hope of a new life.”⁵⁷ Francis states that mercy “cannot become a mere parenthesis in the life of the Church; it constitutes her very existence. . . .”⁵⁸ Mercy also reveals to us much about God: “Nothing of what a sinner places before God’s mercy can be excluded from the embrace of his forgiveness.”⁵⁹ God’s mercy is not something to be merited or earned: “[It] is always a gratuitous act of our heavenly Father, an unconditional and unmerited act of love.”⁶⁰ Describing the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer as a hymn to God’s mercy, Francis says that the Eucharistic liturgy is in various ways a place where mercy is “truly received and experienced.”⁶¹

In *Misericordia et Misera*, Francis emphasizes the importance of the sacrament of penance and the importance of preaching in making God’s mercy known. Confessors are to welcome all to the sacrament of penance, to be “witnesses of fatherly tenderness whatever the gravity of the sin involved.”⁶² Francis cautions against an emphasis on enforcing rules: “Even in the most complex cases where there is a temptation to apply a form of justice derived from rules alone, we must believe in the power flowing from divine grace.”⁶³ For “there is no sin that God’s mercy cannot reach and wipe away when it finds a repentant heart seeking to be reconciled with the Father.”⁶⁴

Francis concludes this Apostolic Letter by stating that mercy “renews and redeems because it is the meeting of two hearts: the heart of God who comes to meet the human heart. The latter is warmed and healed by the former. Our hearts of stone become hearts of flesh.”⁶⁵

56 German cardinal Walter Kasper described mercy as “the key word of his [Francis] pontificate” in *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, trans. William Madges (Paulist Press, 2015), v.

57 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §3.

58 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §1.

59 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §2.

60 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §2.

61 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §5.

62 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §10.

63 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §11.

64 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §12.

65 Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, §16. For a recent theological interpretation of Francis on mercy, see Gill Goulding, *Pope Francis and Mercy: A Dynamic Theological Hermeneutic* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2025).

Letter to the Bishops on the Death Penalty

Cardinal Luis Ladaria, S.J., prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, sent a letter, formally approved by Pope Francis in an audience with Ladaria on June 28, 2018, to the world's bishops regarding the death penalty.⁶⁶ Ladaria's focus was on the "development of doctrine" that had taken place.⁶⁷

Ladaria demonstrates how, since the papacy of John Paul II (r. 1978–2005), papal teaching has expressed a growing demand for an end to the death penalty throughout the world.⁶⁸ Pope Benedict said that abolishing capital punishment conformed to respect for the dignity of all human beings.⁶⁹ Pope Francis asked that the Catechism of the Catholic Church be revised to affirm that "no matter how serious the crime that has been committed, the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability of the dignity of the person."⁷⁰

Ladaria insists that the revised text in the Catechism "expresses an authentic development of doctrine that is not in contradiction with the prior teachings of the Magisterium."⁷¹ The Cardinal Prefect also states that the Gospel calls us all to embrace the "mercy and patience" of the Lord, giving each person time to convert. This may need to be a very long time, Ladaria implies, that may not be available to those on death row.

Gaudete et exsultate

In *Gaudete et exsultate*,⁷² Pope Francis builds on Vatican II in arguing that holiness or sanctity is something to which all Christians are called.⁷³ By publishing it on March 19, Pope Francis alluded to his understanding of the centrality of Saint Joseph as an exemplary saint.

Francis also points to many other saints as examples to follow, including women saints such as Hildegard of Bingen, Catherina of Siena, and

66 Luis Ladaria, S.J., "Letter to the Bishops Regarding the New Revision of Number 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Death Penalty," Office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, August 1, 2018, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/02/180802b.html>.

67 Ladaria, "Letter to the Bishops," §1.

68 Ladaria, "Letter to the Bishops," §4.

69 Ladaria, "Letter to the Bishops," §5.

70 Ladaria, "Letter to the Bishops," §6. In the United States, Sister Helen Prejean has had a great deal of influence in urging abolition of the death penalty.

71 Ladaria, "Letter to the Bishops," §8.

72 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation, March 19, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

73 See *Lumen gentium*, §11; Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §10.

Teresa of Avila.⁷⁴ Holiness, Francis adds, may “entail reproducing in our own lives various aspects of Jesus’ earthly life: his hidden life, his life in community, his closeness to the outcast, his poverty, and other ways in which he showed his self-sacrificing love.”⁷⁵ Yet “anything done out of anxiety, pride or the need to impress others,” Pope Francis cautions, “will not lead to holiness.”⁷⁶

Though Francis certainly does not deny a cost to discipleship and holiness, he affirms most strongly that holiness “will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self.”⁷⁷ He also highlights the centrality of grace in sainthood: the saints do not put their trust in their works; they live in “joyful gratitude” for an unmerited gift.⁷⁸ Perhaps to the annoyance of some clergy and laity, Francis continues: “Once we believe that everything depends on human effort as channeled by ecclesial rules and structures, we unconsciously complicate the gospel and become enslaved to a blueprint that leaves few openings for the working of grace.”⁷⁹

Francis points to the “indifference” of which Saint Ignatius of Loyola spoke as part of what it means to be holy. For Ignatius, the holy ones, the saints, have an interior freedom that accepts good health or bad, riches or poverty, honor or dishonor, a long life or a short one.⁸⁰

Francis identifies the beatitudes as offering insight into the nature of sanctity. Mercy ranks very high in his consideration of various beatitudes: “Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness.”⁸¹ He gives a concrete example: “If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse

74 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §12. Since the papacy of John Paul II, Popes have beatified and canonized what is historically a very large number of blessed and saints. Also, historians are devoting more and more time to the history of saint making; for example, see Birgit Emich, Daniel Sidler, Samuel Weber, and Christian Windler, eds., *Making Saints in a “Glocal” Religion: Practices of Holiness in Early Modern Catholicism* (Böhlau, 2024).

75 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §20.

76 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §28.

77 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §31.

78 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §54. See the centrality of grace in the first vow formula for Jesuits in John Padberg, S.J., *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), §540.

79 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §59.

80 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §69.

81 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §82.

cluttering a public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see in this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father. . . .”⁸²

In the teaching of Pope Francis, forgiveness often comes with mercy. The blessed are not those who plot revenge against their perceived enemies; the blessed, that is, the merciful, forgive seventy times seven.⁸³

But are the holy ones dull and dreary? Pope Francis insists that although we may be, they are not. “The saints surprise us, they confound us, because by their lives they urge us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity.”⁸⁴ To put it another way, Francis imagines holiness as anything but a tedious culture nurtured by outdated and unattractive plaster statues.

Fratelli Tutti

Published in the midst of the COVID pandemic, in *Fratelli Tutti*,⁸⁵ Pope Francis returns to one of his most beloved themes, that of care for one another. Describing Francis of Assisi as the saint of “fraternal love, simplicity, and joy,” the Pope recalls that Saint Francis “sowed the seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters.”⁸⁶ Francis singles out the elderly as often relegated to a sad and lonely existence, as “cruelly abandoned” in a heat wave or a pandemic.⁸⁷ Against such cruelty, he responds by defending “the inalienable dignity of each human person, regardless of origin, race, or religion.”⁸⁸

But Francis did not deny or marginalize the importance of hope. In the recent pandemic, he says, there were those who, put “their lives on the line,” such as “doctors, nurses, pharmacists, storekeepers and supermarket workers, cleaning personnel, caretakers, transport workers, men and women working to provide essential services and public safety, volunteers, priests and religious. . . .”⁸⁹

The parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10:25–37, is a Scripture passage to which Francis gives much attention in this encyclical. Francis does not simply deplore the actions, or lack of action, of two in the para-

82 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §§98.

83 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §§82.

84 Francis, *Gaudete et exsultate*, §§138.

85 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter, October 3, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

86 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §§2–3.

87 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §19.

88 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §39.

89 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §54.

ble who neglect altogether an beaten, injured man; rather, he insists that we “need to acknowledge that we are constantly tempted to ignore others, especially the weak.”⁹⁰ “Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders.”⁹¹ We have to ask ourselves these questions: “Will we bend down to touch and heal the wounds of others? Will we bend down and help another to get up?”⁹²

For Pope Francis, we have a stark choice: On the one hand, we may “express our innate sense of fraternity, to be good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment.”⁹³ Or we may “find ourselves succumbing to the mentality of the violent, the blindly ambitious, those who spread mistrust and lies.”⁹⁴

Francis asks how people would react to the parable of the Good Samaritan today? “How would it affect those who organize themselves in a way that prevents any foreign presence that might threaten their identity and their closed and self-referential structures?”⁹⁵

Solidarity is a term that Pope Francis used frequently in his twelve-year papacy, including in this encyclical. Solidarity “finds concrete expression in service which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means caring for . . . the vulnerable. . . .”⁹⁶ Solidarity takes precedence over national divisions or distinctions. “If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbor was born in my country or elsewhere.”⁹⁷ The proper response to the arrival of migrants should be “welcome, protect, promote, and integrate.”⁹⁸ Only a culture that “welcomes others will have a future.”⁹⁹

90 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §64.

91 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §69.

92 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §70. A personal note: in early 2025 I tripped and fell on an uneven sidewalk near Fordham University in the Bronx. I could tell right away that my right arm was badly hurt; indeed, it turned out to be broken. For a few moments, no one walking by helped me up, though most of them were white, as I am. But then two men of another race did help me up and asked me if I needed more help of any kind. I was struck by their generosity and kindness. I thanked them and said that I was able to walk and that I was not too far from home. I am not likely to ever forget their generosity, as they stood out as very much like the Good Samaritan.

93 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §77.

94 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §77.

95 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §102.

96 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §115.

97 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §125.

98 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §129.

99 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §141.

And yet we see that “various forms of fundamentalist intolerance are damaging relationships between individuals, groups and peoples. . . .”¹⁰⁰

Pope Francis appeals for a tender love of others, because “every person is immensely holy and deserves our love.”¹⁰¹ He is aware, however, that the digital world in which we now live can “bring out the worst in people,”¹⁰² and so much needs to be done to promote his vision of human relations.

Laudate Deum

A kind of evaluation of reception and implementation of *Laudato si'*, some eight years after publication of that encyclical, *Laudate Deum*¹⁰³ is largely an expression of disappointment and growing concern with refusal of many to face up to the reality of climate change. Though evidence of climate change grows, “some have chosen to deride these facts.”¹⁰⁴ Climate change, Pope Francis insists, is a “global reality.”¹⁰⁵

Nationalism Pope Francis identifies as one the obstacles to an effective response to climate change, an obstacle deplored in *Laudato si'*: “International negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good.”¹⁰⁶

Yet Francis concludes on a hopeful note, calling “everyone to accompany” what he calls a “pilgrimage of hope with the world that is our home. . . .”¹⁰⁷

Letter of the Holy Father on the Renewal of the Study of Church History

In this letter,¹⁰⁸ Pope Francis engages in a pedagogical discourse aimed mainly at students preparing for the priesthood. He especially highlights

100 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §191.

101 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §194–95.

102 Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, §205. Francis quotes the bishops of Australia here; see note 200 in *Fratelli Tutti*.

103 Francis, *Laudate Deum*, Apostolic Exhortation, October 4, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html.

104 Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §§5–6.

105 Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §8.

106 Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §52, 169.

107 Francis, *Laudate Deum*, §68. Pope Leo seamlessly continued to celebrate Jubilee 2025 and its pilgrimage of hope, which Pope Francis had begun.

108 Francis, *Letter of the Holy Father on the Renewal of the Study of Church History*, Saint John Lateran, Rome, November 21, 2024, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/11/21/241121e.html>.

the great value of church history for them. Francis states that they will not “truly know their deepest identity, or what they wish to be in the future, without attending to the bonds that linked them to preceding generations.”¹⁰⁹ For Francis, church history ought not be approached as but a narrative of victories or triumphs or success stories. Rather, the history of the Church can help “us to see the real church and to love the church as she truly exists and love what she has learned and continues to learn from her mistakes and failures.”¹¹⁰ Thus history “can serve as a corrective to the misguided approach that would view reality only from a triumphalist defense of our function or role.”¹¹¹

Pope Francis wants church history taught as it really was, warts and all. A past must not be invented, he insists, in order to suit “the requirements of dominant ideologies.”¹¹²

Warning against treating history as but a “secondary” topic within theology, Francis calls on historians to “do” Church history “with passion and engagement,” in part by reconstruction of “those whose voices were not able to make themselves heard over the centuries.”¹¹³ The Church historian has the “privilege” of bringing to light the faces of those deemed least important.

Holy Thursday

Those often deemed unimportant were the focus for Pope Francis each year on Holy Thursday. His actions or gestures became more significant than words or texts. Breaking with certain traditions, he chose not to wash the feet of clergy and not to wash feet in Saint Peter’s or another church; instead he chose to go out to prisons and the like and there wash and kiss the feet of some of the most marginalized people, not only men but women, not only Catholics but others. In this way, Francis taught by his actions, offering an example to priests, bishops, cardinals, of a new way of celebrating the ritual of foot washing on Holy Thursday. Photographers accompanied the Pope on these occasions, and some of the images are very moving indeed: women weeping as the Pope washed and kissed their feet; Pope Francis doing this even when his physical infirmities meant that he could only do so from a wheelchair.¹¹⁴

109 Francis, *Letter on the Renewal of the Study of Church History*.

110 Francis, *Letter on the Renewal of the Study of Church History*.

111 Francis, *Letter on the Renewal of the Study of Church History*.

112 Francis, *Letter on the Renewal of the Study of Church History*.

113 Francis, *Letter on the Renewal of the Study of Church History*.

114 I am most grateful to Abin Mathew, S.J., for help in obtaining images of Pope Francis washing and kissing feet on Holy Thursday.

Popes since Paul VI have made global travel a part of their Petrine ministry. But Pope Francis was especially concerned to go the peripheries and/or to people treated as peripheral, marginal, of little consequence, or even of little value. His 2013 visit to Lampedusa was very much that; his 2015 visit to Cuba had elements of reaching out to a periphery.¹¹⁵ For his trip to Canada in 2022, his main purpose was to apologize to indigenous peoples for the poor treatment that they had received from the Catholic Church.¹¹⁶ Thus in global travels, Pope Francis taught other bishops and other church leaders the importance of those often imagined as not valuable.

Dilexi te

This document was begun by Pope Francis but completed by Pope Leo.¹¹⁷ For those who may be looking or hoping for discontinuities between Francis and Leo, this document offers little or nothing. But for those open to understanding the centrality of service of and love for the poor in the lives of authentic Christians, it is of great significance. In the first section of *Dilexi te*, Pope Leo states that he is happy to add some “reflections” to this work by Pope Francis and to publish it, “since I share the desire of my beloved predecessor that all Christians come to appreciate the close connection between Christ’s love and his summons to care for the poor.”¹¹⁸

Because Pope Leo added to and published this work, I refer to Leo as its author, though from the footnotes it is clear that the writings and ideas of Pope Francis are central.

God, asserts Pope Leo, “asks us, his Church, to make a decisive and radical choice in favor of the weakest.”¹¹⁹ Love for the poor is not merely optional: “One cannot love God without extending one’s love to the poor.”¹²⁰ Citing Saint John Chrysostom, Leo insists that “not giving to the poor is stealing from them, defrauding them of their lives, because what we have

115 For the Pope in Cuba, see Francis, *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Cuba, the United States of America and Visit to the United Nations Organization Headquarters*, The Holy See, September 19–20, 2015, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2015/outside/documents/papa-francesco-cuba-usa-onu-2015.html>.

116 For the Pope in Canada, see Francis, *Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Canada*, The Holy See, July 24–30, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2022/outside/documents/canada-2022.html>.

117 Leo XIV, *Dilexi te*, Apostolic Exhortation, October 4, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20251004-dilexi-te.html.

118 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §3.

119 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §16.

120 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §26.


belongs to them.”¹²¹ Saint Augustine “saw caring for the poor as concrete proof of the sincerity of faith. Anyone who says they love God and has no compassion for the needy is lying.”¹²²

For Pope Leo, providing some charity for the poor is not enough. “We need to be increasingly committed to resolving the structural causes of poverty.”¹²³ And we need to be sensitive to how the poor and the frail teach us: “the poor have much to teach us about the Gospel and its demands,” while the elderly, “by their physical frailty remind us of our own frailty even as we attempt to conceal it behind our apparent prosperity and outward appearance.”¹²⁴

Conclusion

Pope Francis as teacher has had much influence on many, Pope Leo very clearly among them. Francis, I think it fair to conclude, was a pope at ease with a consistent and often very moving prophetic voice. Was this perhaps how he was at his best as a teacher? Indeed, does not his very simple tomb, in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, continue to teach us, especially about the value of humility?¹²⁵

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121 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §42.

122 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §45.

123 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §94.

124 Leo, *Dilexi te*, §109.

125 I was very happy for the opportunity to visit the tomb of Pope Francis in November 2025. Rather plain, the tomb stands in some contrast with other parts of Santa Maria Maggiore, such as an especially grandiose sculpture of Pius IX (r. 1846–78).