

How much will Pope Francis change the Church?

Pope Francis has declared that he is "convinced of the urgency of offering spaces for women in the Church" and that he wants a "more widespread and incisive female presence".



Was it, as Madeleine Teahan of the Catholic Herald told this weekend's Sunday programme on BBC Radio 4, "a brave attempt to start a long-overdue conversation", or an indication that the Church is "flailing around" on the issue, as Joanna Moorhead, a columnist on the Catholic weekly the Tablet, would have it?

Ever since he appeared on the balcony of St Peter's on 13 March 2013, Francis has been dogged by the question of whether he can push through real reform.

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Start Quote

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As the second anniversary of his election approaches we have the evidence to answer that question.

Through the dust of battle thrown up by the frantic pace of his pontificate - and his unsettling habit of firing off ad lib sound bites - it is possible to discern a pattern.

The charge that Francis is "all mouth and no trousers" (or perhaps that should be "no cassock") simply does not stand up to scrutiny.

It is true that his reform campaigns usually begin with a good slogan.

Poor a priority

His first, "a poor church for the poor", goes right back to the audience he gave on the Saturday after his election.

He had invited the journalists who had gathered in Rome for the conclave to attend - a smart PR move - and we wondered afterwards whether he planned to flog off the treasures of the Vatican Museum.

Instead he has taken less flashy but more enduring steps towards a "church for the poor".

Six months later he published what is known as an Apostolic Exhortation which attacked "the invisible hand of the market".

The document seemed so radical that one American "shock jock" called it "pure Marxism".

The paper's social justice case was leant added force by the humble lifestyle Francis himself had chosen; he rejected the papal apartments where his predecessors had lived, and still sleeps and works in a Vatican hostel.

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Start Quote

Francis is ensuring that the developing world will have a significant voice in the election of his successor”

The Vatican Bank had become notorious, so he is reforming it.

It is properly known as the Istituto per le Opere di Religione, or Institute for Religious Works, and it was set up to help Catholic organisations spend money on good causes.

The reform process now under way - under the formidable Cardinal Pell - is intended to ensure that the Bank returns to that original purpose.

After Francis' example it would be very difficult for any future pope to return to splendours of the papal apartments, but he has also tried to secure his vision of "a poor church for a poor" through his appointments.

Gay ethics

He has recently announced the creation of 15 new cardinals, and two-thirds of them are from outside Europe.

The main function of the College of Cardinals is to choose a new pope, so Francis is ensuring that the developing world will have a significant voice in the election of his successor.

There is a similar story to tell of his approach to the way the Church talks about sexual ethics.

Pope Francis receives cardinal Burke

Cardinal Burke was moved to a largely ceremonial job

Francis' most quoted aphorism is probably his comment to journalists after his trip to Brazil in 2013: "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?"

It set the tone for last year's Synod on the Family, which wrestled with the Church's attitude to gay people and its approach to Catholic divorcees who remarried.

The Synod first published a startlingly radical draft document which suggested a revolution in church thinking - especially about the issue of homosexuality.

It then reversed itself because the draft could not command the necessary two-thirds majority among the bishops.

The traditionalist movement at the Synod was led by Cardinal Raymond Burke, an American and a very senior member of the Curia, the Vatican civil service.

A couple of months after the Synod, the cardinal was fired and given a largely ceremonial job as the patron of the Knights of Malta - a reminder that Francis can be ruthless when he needs to be.

The Synod will reconvene in the autumn of this year, and it seems likely that the outcome will be much closer to the Pope's vision.

Women priests

Last week's events in Rome, however, underline that there are some things he will not even try to change.

Francis made his comments about the role of women at the end of a week-long discussion on the subject at the Pontifical Council of Culture (a Vatican version of our own Department for Media, Culture and Sport, but without the sport).

Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II ruled against women bishops

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of what he said, but he had himself already ruled out one area of leadership for women; in 2013, he said the "door is closed" to the possibility of women priests.

Female ordination is difficult for the Roman Catholic Church because it challenges the institution's understanding of itself as the interpreter of God's will.

Priestly celibacy is simply a church discipline, and the Pope could change it - in this country Anglican priests who convert have, of course, been allowed to remain married.

But the male priesthood is regarded as God's law, and 20 years ago John Paul II issued the instruction that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women" and that "this judgement is to be definitively held by all the faithful".

Francis is hardly likely to question the authority of a predecessor he has canonised.

The question of birth control is tied up with the idea of Church authority in a similar way.

The pope will be 80 next year, he has a weak heart and he has himself said that he may not have long in the job.

But it is already clear that the Church will look and sound very different when he leaves it.

That rhetorical question, "Who am I to judge", does, however, have an answer: "You are the Pope."

There are some things popes just do not do, not even this one.

Ed Stourton - BBC Presenter