

Walking with Pope Francis

The Official Documents in Everyday Language

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Introduction

Pope Francis, chosen as the 266th pope of the Catholic Church in 2013, was the first pontiff to ever take the name of Francis, honoring the famous saint from Assisi. He is now in his tenth year of service to the Church and the wider world. During this decade, he has enriched the Church with numerous insights on a broad range of topics, including climate change, refugees and migrants, interfaith dialogue, mercy and compassion, the liturgy, and the rediscovery of the wisdom of the Second Vatican Council. His corpus of teaching, pastoral guidance, and spiritual reflection is a marvelous treasure.

The insights of Pope Francis must not remain a “hidden treasure!” Yet it may validly be asked how one can discover these multiple gems. The pathway chosen for this book is to do a popularized synthesis of ten pivotal documents, recognizing that most people will not read the original writings, due to their length and sometimes daunting language. These condensed presentations of Francis’ thought seek to make his material easily accessible; they aim to faithfully capture the central insights of the papal documents and communicate them in ordinary language.

Ten items are chosen, spanning the years from 2013 to 2022. They include three encyclicals, five apostolic exhortations, and two apostolic letters. The length of the summary popularizations is only about 10 percent of the originals. Admittedly, some of the nuances of Francis’ pivotal thought may get lost; readers can return to the full documents if further depth and clarity are desired. One may validly assert that Francis has served us a fine banquet or smorgasbord;

these presentations are only the appetizers. A brief, paragraph-long overview of the ten “Francis delicacies” now follows.

- *The Light of Faith (Lumen Fidei)* [2013] is Francis’ first encyclical, though he admits that much of the text was composed by his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI. Numerous rich insights into the dynamics of faith are found here. Readers are encouraged to make their personal journey of faith within their individual and communal state of life (single, married, poor, migrant, elderly, etc.). All can look to the great panorama of Christian examples (e.g., Saint Paul, Damien the Leper, Mother Teresa, Virgin Mary) as icons of faith, guiding us all in our ongoing faith journey.

- Francis’ first apostolic exhortation is the lengthy *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* [2013]; it reaches over 50,000 words. The document presents a full panorama of Francis’ theology, spirituality, and vision of pastoral-missionary ministry. Many of the seminal insights found here receive further elaboration in the pope’s later writings. A clear missionary tone marks the presentation; here is the origin of the widely used term that all Christians are “missionary disciples.” Francis comments on the numerous contemporary challenges facing the proclamation of the Gospel today, yet he emphatically asserts, “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigor” (EG 109).

- *The Face of Mercy (Misericordiae Vultus)* [2015] is a papal “bull,” a kind of official letter or message. Here Francis is declaring an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). He believes that the Church has an urgent duty to keep the Council alive, a theme he repeatedly emphasizes on numerous occasions. With the Council the Church entered “a new phase of her history” (MV 4); it is marked by an emphasis on mercy and compassion in all of her apostolic endeavors. Personally, Francis has incorporated the theme of mercy into his papal motto, *Miserando atque eligendo* (Chosen through mercy).

- Possibly the most widely read and quoted document of Pope Francis is his *Laudato Si' (On Care for Our Common Home)* [2015]. This lengthy encyclical focuses entirely on the environment. For Francis, an ecological commitment is a moral and spiritual concern, moving beyond ordinary matters of science, economics, and politics. Francis wishes to engage in a “dialogue with all people about our common home” (LS 3); he emphasizes the urgent need for an “integral ecology.” Humanity has much to learn from the vision of Jesus and Francis of Assisi; we must consider how environmental degradation particularly impacts the world’s most vulnerable people. Urgent action is required; the world needs a renewed relationship with God, ourselves, one another, and all creation.

- Drawing on the 2014 and 2015 worldwide bishops’ synods on the family, *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)* [2016] focuses on the concrete realities of families today, since Francis believes that “the welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church” (AL 31). Running to over 250 pages, this apostolic exhortation explores a vast range of topics, including the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family, people in irregular situations, and homosexuality. One is struck by Francis’ pastoral tone of love, tenderness, and compassion for married people and their families. In all situations and contexts, “the Church is commissioned to proclaim the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel” (AL 309).

- *Gaudete et Exsultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)* [2018] is the third apostolic exhortation issued by Pope Francis. This medium-length document is a call to holiness of life; it clearly echoes the same summons found in *Lumen Gentium* (39–42), the document on the Church from Vatican II. Since there are many pathways and forms of holiness, each person is invited to discover one’s unique road of sanctity, following Jesus’ life and teaching, especially the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12). One seeks to integrate the spiritual attitudes of perseverance, patience, joy, boldness, passion, and a healthy sense of humor. While we can draw inspiration from the saints and Mary,

the journey is uniquely personal. We take courage from Jesus' advice to his disciples (Mt 5:12) to "rejoice and be glad"—in the midst of life's trials and challenges, its joys and blessings.

- The October 2018 Synod of Bishops explored the theme "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment"; it provided resource material for Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* (*Christ Lives*) [2019]. This profound document has a clear emphasis on Christ; Francis boldly asserts, "Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive" (CV 1). Written with Francis' characteristic tone of frankness, simplicity, tenderness, and warmth, one senses a distinct invitation for the Church, particularly in her youth and pastoral ministry, to become a loving and serving community. All are invited to personally "encounter each day your best friend, the friend who is Jesus" (CV 151). Francis speaks from his heart to our hearts, inviting us to become "open-hearted" missionary-disciples.

- *Querida Amazonia* (*Beloved Amazon*) [2020] emerges from a unique bishops' synod, one that focused on a distinct ecological territory, rather than on a particular thematic topic. Amazonia covers nine countries, with 34 million inhabitants, including 3 million indigenous people from nearly 400 ethnic groups. Francis structures his presentation around his "four dreams" for Amazonia; they are social, cultural, ecological, and ecclesial. In an artistic and literary manner, Francis often employs original indigenous poetry to express his thoughts and dreams. One senses Francis' passion for environmental and ecological stewardship, not only for Amazonia, but for the entire world. All have a God-given mission: "the protection of our common home" (QA 19).

- The third encyclical of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (*On Fraternity and Social Friendship*) [2020], draws its title from the writings of Francis of Assisi, who declared that we are "brothers and sisters all" (FT 8), *fratelli tutti*. This lengthy document (43,000 words) treats several key themes; among them are renewed human

relationships, peace and reconciliation, care for the earth as humanity's common home, and world religions at the service of human solidarity. Here one finds several common themes related to Pope Francis' second encyclical, *Laudato Si*. As one continues absorbing the pope's engaging thought and insights, a deeper appreciation of Francis as a "pastoral theologian" grows. All can read Francis with a genuinely grateful heart.

- On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29, Pope Francis issued a medium-length apostolic letter with the title *Desiderio Desideravi* (*The Liturgical Formation of the People of God*) [2022]. The letter opens with a quote from Jesus' words at the Last Supper (Lk 22:15), expressing his desire to share the Paschal meal with his disciples. One finds three dominant themes in this pastoral instruction: the foundations of the Church's liturgy, the urgent need for deeper liturgical formation throughout the Church, and a focus on the art of celebrating the liturgy. In his conclusion, Francis strongly emphasizes a renewed understanding and acceptance of the entire corpus of teaching found in the sixteen documents of Vatican II, all as a deeper listening to the Holy Spirit serving unity and communion within the Church.

Friends, these brief glimpses into the ten popularized documents of Pope Francis chosen for this presentation seek to whet your appetite to delve into the enriching thought of our Holy Father. Be assured that your efforts to engage with Pope Francis will bring numerous rewards in your individual journey of faith. Your personal invitation has gone out to join a pilgrimage, to engage by "walking with Pope Francis." Please respond; *répondez s'il vous plait!* RSVP.