Church communications highlights 2016

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ABSTRACT
Looking back, 2016 seems destined to be remembered as the ‘Year of the Surreal,’ a 12-month period in which conventional wisdom crumbled on multiple fronts and the previously unthinkable became the new normal. This essay surveys ten of the most important issues and events of the past year from the point of view of Catholic Church communications: Pope Francis’s February trip to Mexico; release of the pope’s landmark apostolic exhortation on the family, Amoris Laetitia; World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, in August; the global migrant and refugee crisis; the Brexit vote in the U.K.; the canonization of Mother Teresa in September; the U.S. presidential election; a consistory for the creation of new cardinals in November; the pontiff’s ecumenical and inter-faith outreach; and the formal close of the pope’s jubilee Holy Year of Mercy. Though the selections are subjective, they represent the developments over the past year that generated the most abundant media coverage, and, at times, public controversy.

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Introduction
At this point, it is impossible to say how much longer Pope Francis’s papacy may continue. Despite turning 80 in mid-December, the pontiff seems to be in good health and determined to continue. Nevertheless, however long it turns out to be, however, Francis himself at the end will likely believe that 2016 was his papacy’s most important moment, because this was his specially designated jubilee Year of Mercy.

For Francis, mercy is his spiritual lodestar, the Rosetta stone that unlocks every other element of his outlook and agenda. His teaching and conduct throughout 2016, therefore, was designed to express what he sees as the most important message the Church has to offer humanity at this moment of its history: The Gospel of God’s endless mercy.

It’s possible to understand virtually every key moment during the past year through the lens of the pope’s emphasis on mercy, from the content of
Amoris Laetitia and its implications for the Church’s approach to divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, to the kinds of cardinals Francis is creating; from the canonization of Mother Teresa, Catholicism’s premier twentieth century icon of mercy, to a World Youth Day festival in Poland under the shadow of St. Faustina Kowalska, who launched the Divine Mercy devotion, and St. Pope John Paul II, who enshrined it on the Church’s liturgical calendar.

Seen in that light, the following arguably represent the most significant storylines from the past 12 months in terms of how the Catholic Church is understood around the world, and also how Catholic themselves think about the life of the Church.

1. Pope Francis’s February trip to Mexico.
2. Release of the pope’s landmark apostolic exhortation on the family, Amoris Laetitia.
3. World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, in August.
4. The global migrant and refugee crisis.
5. The Brexit vote in the U.K.
6. Pope Francis’s ecumenical and interfaith outreach, including a historic summit with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill.
7. The canonization of Mother Teresa in September.
8. The U.S. presidential election.
9. A consistory for the creation of new cardinals in November.
10. The formal close of the pope’s jubilee Holy Year of Mercy.

There were, of course, other developments in 2016 worthy of note, including the pope’s ongoing efforts at reform of the Roman Curia in tandem with his ‘C9’ council of cardinal advisers, and the staggering scale of anti-Christian persecutions around the world. Those storylines, however, began well before 2016, and will continue to unfold long after the calendar turns on 2017.

For Church communicators, the ongoing reorganization of the Vatican’s media operation under the leadership of the Secretariat for Communications, as well as the appointment of American Greg Burke and Spaniard Paloma García Ovejero as director and vice-director of the Vatican Press Office, merit a special word. Burke and García Ovejero are both seasoned journalistic professionals who bring a deep understanding of media dynamics to their posts, and the Secretariat under Monsignor Dario Viganò has exhibited promise in terms of fostering greater coordination and economies of scale. In general, the Vatican appears to be moving in the direction of greater transparency and cooperation with journalists, and that can’t help but seem like good news in terms of getting the story right.

**Pope Francis’s February Trip to Mexico**

In all honesty, if one is seeking to understanding Pope Francis’s view of the world, there’s no need for a spokesman or a spin doctor – all one has to do is consult his travel agent. Francis is passionate about reaching out to the peripheries of the world, both existential and geographic, and he votes with his feet in terms of backing up that preferential option.
By itself, a visit to Mexico doesn’t necessarily signify the periphery, since it’s a Latin American powerhouse and the second largest Catholic country in the world in terms of population. However, the schedule for the six-day trip certainly did.

After the obligatory stop in the capital of Mexico City to visit the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Francis headed to the crime-ridden and impoverished neighborhood of Ecatepec; to San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas, with the highest concentration of indigenous persons in the country; Morelia, known as Mexico’s ‘murder capital,’ scarred by the grip of narco-terror gangs; and finally, Ciudad Juárez on the U.S./Mexico border to make a statement about the human dignity of immigrants.

In effect, the Feb. 12–18 trip functioned as a real-time catechism of the social teaching of the Catholic Church, refracted through the personal passions and priorities of history’s first pope from Latin America.

Over six days, Francis visited five cities that belong to what he calls ‘the outskirts of society,’ bringing attention to virtually every challenge facing Mexican society and, more broadly, the entire continent:

- The lack of job opportunities.
- A faulty educational system.
- Discrimination against indigenous communities.
- The seemingly unstoppable violence of the drug cartels.
- Immigration.
- Corruption.

The pontiff lectured the country’s political and commercial elites in unusually blunt terms.

‘Experience shows us that whenever we seek the path of privilege or the benefit of a few to the detriment of the common good,’ Francis said, ‘sooner or later life in society becomes a fertile ground for corruption, drug trafficking, exclusion of different cultures, violence, and even human trafficking, kidnapping, and death, causing suffering and hampering development.’

Seen through American eyes, the stop at the U.S./Mexico border was deeply significant, especially in light of a national election cycle in which immigration reform was destined to be a hot-burner issue. Francis made a point of blessing a group of some 500 people gathered on the American side of the border, a group which included a number of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

The political subtext of that gesture became even more explicit during the in-flight news conference Francis conducted on his return trip to Rome, when he took a question about then-Republican candidate Donald Trump and his well-known proposal to build a large wall across the U.S./Mexico border in an effort to stop illegal immigration, and also to deport large numbers of undocumented migrants already in the country.

During that Q&A, Francis was asked if a Catholic can vote for a candidate who makes proposals along those lines. Here was his response, as recorded in the official Vatican transcript:

‘A person who thinks only of building walls, wherever they may be, and not of building bridges, isn’t a Christian. This isn’t in the Gospel. Beyond that, what you said to me,
what I would advise, to vote or not to vote: I won’t get mixed up in that. I say only, if he says these things, this man isn’t a Christian. We have to see if he said these things, and I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt.’

Those remarks were immediately spun as a major anti-Trump broadside by the pontiff, eliciting a typically irascible response from Trump himself. Later, he softened his reaction by saying that upon examination, the pontiff’s words weren’t quite the direct personal attack some initial reporting had suggested.

Though there’s little direct evidence to suggest that the episode on the U.S./Mexico border in February had any direct influence on the November presidential election, including how the ‘Catholic vote’ broke in the Trump v. Clinton race, it nevertheless stands as a reminder on the issue of immigration, the short-term forecast is likely for a complicated relationship between the Trump White House and the Vatican under Francis.

Release of ‘Amoris Laetitia’

Although papacies are complex affairs, often there’s one watershed moment which, with the benefit of time, stands out as the critical turning point.

With St. Pope John XXIII, for instance, that moment was in January 1959 when he announced his decision to call the Second Vatican Council. With Blessed Pope Paul VI, it came in 1968 when he released his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, reaffirming the Church’s traditional teaching on artificial contraception. With St. Pope John Paul II, arguably that moment fell in 1979, when he made his first homecoming to Poland and laid down the challenge on human freedom that would ultimately help bring down Soviet communism.

Although it’s still early in the game, it now seems increasingly plausible that Pope Francis’s watershed moment came in April 2016, when he released his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, drawing conclusions from two tumultuous Synods of Bishops on the family in October 2014 and October 2015.

The document is 255 pages long, articulated in nine chapters, and is a comprehensive treatment of marriage and family life in the post-modern era. There’s a great deal of content that is immediately helpful in the context of both marriage preparation and also pastoral support of established families, and therefore it’s a serious category mistake to boil the entire document down to its treatment of one controversial question.

Yet it was clear almost from the beginning of the two synods that, to some extent, the exercise came down to a referendum on the question of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, and the so-called ‘Kasper proposal,’ named for German Cardinal Walter Kasper, to allow at least some of those Catholics to return to the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist after a process of discernment.

Perhaps frustrated with what he saw as excessive media focus on that question, Francis opted not to deal with it in the main body of the text in *Amoris Laetitia* but in a footnote. In the text, he wrote: ‘Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can
also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end.’

Then, in what may go down as the most famous footnote in the history of papal verbiage, he added in footnote 351: ‘In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments.’

That was widely taken as a cautious endorsement of the ‘Kasper proposal,’ triggering wide debate inside Catholicism. Immediately, some bishops began issuing guidelines insisting that nothing has changed in terms of Church law or teaching, and thus decreeing that in their dioceses, divorced and civilly remarried Catholics remain ineligible for the sacraments unless they live as ‘brother and sister,’ meaning refraining from sexual intimacy. Others took a more permissive line, including the bishops of Pope Francis’s own home archdiocese of Buenos Aires in Argentina, drawing a note of encouragement from the pontiff.

This tension culminated in the fall of 2016 with four cardinals, including American Cardinal Raymond Burke, submitting a set of questions to Pope Francis about the meaning of Amoris, technically known as dubia. Initially the request was private, but when Francis declined to respond, the cardinals made their questions public.

Burke went so far as to suggest that if Francis does not dispel what the cardinals described as ‘confusion’ and ‘disorientation’ resulting from Amoris, some sort of public correction or rebuke may be warranted.

Two things now seem clear about the aftermath of Amoris Laetitia.

First, it’s the most important and keenly debated internal Catholic development of the last decade, marking, in the eyes of some, a definitive option for a more merciful and pastoral application of traditional doctrine, and, in the view of others, a dubious rupture with the demands of the Gospel and Church teaching.

Second, unless and until there is a definitive magisterial clarification from Francis, what Catholicism now has is an option for local control on the divorced and civilly remarried. In some dioceses they will be able to receive Communion after a process of discernment, and in others they won’t.

Whether that’s a step towards the ‘healthy decentralization’ to which Pope Francis has referred, or an option for doctrinal chaos, is perhaps in the eye of the beholder, but in any event it seems to capture the situation.

**World Youth Day**

Sometimes names get attached to things that don’t really capture what they’re about, and in Catholicism there’s no better example than calling the week-long festival of Catholic youth from around the world launched under Pope John Paul II ‘World Youth Day,’ since, in reality, the experience spans far more than 24 hours.

One soundbite fashion of capturing the phenomenon would be, ‘The day so big it needs an entire week!’

Initiated by Pope John Paul II in 1985, World Youth Day has become more or less the Olympic Games of the Catholic Church, by far the largest regular event staged by Catholicism anywhere in the world. In now occurs on a cycle of once every two or three years, with the next edition set for Panama in 2019.
In an age in which it’s fashionable to refer to the decline of institutional religion, World Youth Day is a regular refutation of that hypothesis, a reminder that the Catholic faith is still capable of galvanizing hordes of enthusiastic young believers willing to devote their lives to the highest spiritual ideals.

The 2016 version of World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, was distinctive for two different reasons.

First, the media narrative surrounding Pope Francis often emphasizes his discontinuity with previous popes, especially John Paul II. Yet the pontiff’s decision to come to Krakow, the spiritual center of John Paul’s legacy, at the peak of his year of mercy, was a choice that screamed ‘continuity.’

The two co-patrons of this World Youth Day were St. Faustina Kowalska, the early 20th century Polish nun whose revelations regarding mercy has such an impact on the young Karol Wojtyla, the future John Paul II; and John Paul II himself, whose 1980 encyclical, Dives in Misericordia, helped set the stage for Francis’s jubilee year.

Second, Francis himself made clear that he was travelling to Krakow as an ambassador of mercy, a point that became especially clear on Friday, July 29, when he visited the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. During his stop, Francis offered the world a powerful lesson in ‘man’s humanity to man’ by meeting 25 ‘Righteous Among the Nations.’

At the very end of World Youth Day, Pope Francis told a crowd in excess of two million people gathered on a field outside Krakow to not to be deterred by those who want to present the image of an insensitive God, and to believe in the power of God’s mercy.

‘People will try to block you, to make you think that God is distant, rigid and insensitive, good to the good, and bad to the bad. Instead, our heavenly father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,”’ Francis said.

The pope was addressing a vast crowd gathered on the Campus Misericordiae, the ‘Field of Mercy,’ an area set up for the occasion in the outskirts of Krakow.

Most of the pilgrims had spent the previous night in the field, some nine miles outside the city. Hundreds of thousands arrived throughout Saturday afternoon, carrying backpacks and sleeping bags, after a hot trek.

They remained there all night, following a prayer vigil led by Francis in which he urged them not to be ‘couch potatoes’ but to instead wake up and take ownership of their own life. If not, he warned, other people – ‘not necessarily better’ – would make decisions for them.

‘People may laugh at you because you believe in the gentle and unassuming power of mercy. But do not be afraid,’ Francis said, using an iconic phrase associated with St. John Paul II.

‘People may judge you to be dreamers, because you believe in a new humanity, one that rejects hatred between peoples, one that refuses to see borders as barriers and can cherish its own traditions without being self-centered or small-minded,’ Francis warned.

He went on to insist on the call to be merciful to those in need, highlighting the suffering of migrants and refugees.

WYD caused the idea of reinforcing borders to dissolve in the mix of pilgrims from Syria and Iraq, brothers and sisters in the faith at one with Poles
and Hungarians. For one week, liberal, conservative and traditionalist Catholics put differences aside to share liturgies and prayers in harmonious coexistence.

For one week, the streets of Krakow, a deeply Catholic city, with over 300 churches, became a mirror of the Universal Church. A glimpse of a united Christianity was visible, too, as Russian Orthodox and Pentecostal pilgrims joined Catholics in the festivities.

Mexican and American pilgrims shared boat rides along Krakow’s river, Argentines and Brazilians shared pep-rallies, and nuns and priests twirled together. The ‘Mercy Field’ spectacularly illustrated that togetherness. Like a medieval battlefield, it was a sunlit sea of national flags under a clear sky, yet here the people were at peace with each other. Perhaps nothing symbolized this more than to see Israeli and Palestinian flags mixed in with each other.

That, in a nutshell, is why no story of 2016 was perhaps more emblematic of the best of Catholicism than World Youth Day in Krakow.

**The global migrant and refugee crisis**

Since the very beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has been perhaps the most passionate and outspoken champion of the human rights of migrants and refugees on the global stage.

His first trip outside of Rome after his election came 8 July 2013, when the pontiff made a day trip to the southern Italian island of Lampedusa, which is technically part of Sicily even though physically it’s closer to the northern African nation of Tunisia.

Lampedusa is a primary point of arrival for refugees from Africa and the Middle East attempting to reach Europe, and Francis went there to lay a wreath in the sea in memory of the roughly 20,000 people who have died over just the last two decades attempting to make the crossing, driven by poverty and war.

It was also on the occasion that Pope Francis rolled out for the first time what has since become one of the standard rhetorical tropes of his papacy: The distinction between a ‘throw-away culture,’ in which whole categories of humanity are regarded as essentially disposable, and genuine ‘culture of encounter’ in which people are welcomed and valued as individuals.

In 2016, there were multiple moments when the pope’s passion for migrants and refugees was especially palpable, but none more so than his brief day trip to the Greek island of Lesbos on 16 April 2016.

‘Refugees are not numbers, they are people who have faces, names, stories, and need to be treated as such.’

This Tweet, sent out by @Pontifex as Pope Francis was leaving Rome for Lesbos, was, in a nutshell, his entire message on the foray, which brought him to a detention camp for refugees attempting to make their way into Europe.

A guest of Greek Orthodox Archbishop Ieronymos, and accompanied by Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Francis told the refugees he’d gone to Greece to ‘be with you and to hear your stories.’

‘We have come to call the attention of the world to this grave humanitarian crisis and to plead for resolution,’ he said as he visited the Moria refugee camp turned
detention center after the European Union and Turkey brokered a deal to deport refugees arriving on the Greek islands in rubber dinghies back to Turkey.

‘As people of faith, we wish to join our voices to speak out on your behalf,’ he added, appealing for the world to ‘heed these scenes of tragic and indeed desperate need, and respond in a way worthy of our common humanity.’

As he was going through the refugee camp in the morning, a girl handed him a drawing. After praising her work, he handed it to one of the members of his security team asking him not to fold it.

‘I want to put it on my desk,’ Francis said.

To drive the point home, Francis brought twelve of those refugees back to Rome with him aboard the papal plane, all of them Muslims. A Vatican statement indicated that the three families returning with the pope, made up of twelve people in total including six children, were already residing in a camp on the Greek island of Lesbos prior to a recent deal between the European Union and Turkey to begin deporting new arrivals.

The Vatican said that two of the families come from Damascus and one from Deir Azzor, in a zone of Syria under ISIS control, and that their homes had been bombed.

In June, nine Syrian refugees were flown to Rome by the Vatican at the pope’s invitation, including two Christians, who flew from Greece where they were living in the Kara Tepe refugee camp in the island of Lesbos.

On his way back from Lesbos, asked if his gesture was not really so small as to be insignificant, Pope Francis told reporters that people used to tell Blessed Teresa of Calcutta that what she was doing was meaningless when there was an ocean of need in the world.

‘She responded, ‘It’s a drop in the ocean, but after this drop, the ocean won’t be the same,’” the pope said. ‘I’ll respond the same way. It’s a little gesture. But all of us, men and women, must make these little gestures in order to extend a hand to those in need.’

Put simply, that seemed to be the spirit of the pope’s outreach in 2016.

The Brexit vote

Though it was by no means the last political earthquake of 2016, the June 23 Brexit vote in the U.K. was a stunner, the first indication of a gathering populist and anti-establishment tide that would utterly upend conventional political logic throughout the year.

Though Pope Francis carefully stayed out of the Brexit debate, emphasizing the importance of respecting the ‘sovereignty’ of each nation, the result was nonetheless seen as something of a setback for a pontiff who has emphasized building bridges rather than walls, and who in May had received the prestigious Charlemagne Prize for his contributions to European unity.

It was also seen as a defeat generally for European Catholicism, which has long been an agent in favor of continental unity, and which is presently seeking beatification for one of the founders of the European Union, German statesman Robert Schuman.
On a return flight to Rome from a trip to Armenia in late June, Pope Francis appeared to diagnose the challenge facing the European Union in the wake of Great Britain’s historic decision to pull out.

‘Give more independence, give greater freedom to the countries of the Union. Think of another form of union, be creative,’ the pope told journalists, adding that ‘something is not working in this massive union.’

The crisis in the EU, he said, did not mean ‘we throw out the baby with the bath water.’ But he pointed to the rise of secessionist movements across the continent as symptomatic of a deeper malaise that must urgently be addressed.

It was a crisis to which Francis had already pointed.

In a 2014 address in Strasbourg to the European Parliament, the pontiff said, ‘In recent years, as the European Union has expanded, there has been growing mistrust on the part of citizens towards institutions considered to be aloof, engaged in laying down rules perceived as insensitive to individual peoples, if not downright harmful.’

‘Men and women risk being reduced to mere cogs in a machine that treats them as items of consumption to be exploited,’ said Francis in Strasbourg, ‘with the result that – as is so tragically apparent – whenever a human life no longer proves useful for that machine, it is discarded with few qualms.’

In his Charlemagne speech on May 6, Francis spoke of the need to create economic models that do not just serve the few but ordinary people as a whole, moving from ‘a liquid economy to a social economy’ that invests in job creation and training.

He went on to speak of the just distribution of wealth and work, of the need to create ‘dignified and well-paying jobs, especially for our young people.’

‘The true strength of our democracies – understood as expressions of the political will of the people – must not be allowed to collapse under the pressure of multinational interests which are not universal, which weaken them and turn them into uniform systems of economic power at the service of unseen empires. This is one of the challenges which history sets before you today,’ he said.

Famously, none of those things happened, and the result was the disruptive outcome of the Brexit referendum.

Going forward, many observers believe that only by beginning to take the pope’s vision of social cohesion seriously can unity be rebuilt, either on the national or the continental level.

In early July, Francis released a video warning that Europe today seems to be building ‘walls of political and economic selfishness, without respect for the life and dignity of every person. Without ever mentioning Brexit, the pontiff said that a spirit of unity in Europe today is ‘more than ever necessary.’

Speaking about the continent’s future, at a time when countries such as Germany and France fear a domino effect after the UK’s decision, Francis said that for Europe to be a ‘family of peoples’ it needs to put the human person ‘back at the center.’

‘It should be an open and welcoming continent, and continue to establish ways of working together that are not only economic but also social and cultural,’ he said.

Towards the end of the message, Francis asks: ‘Together for Europe? Today this is more than ever necessary.’
It remains to be seen whether the Europe of the early 21st century will be up to the challenge.

**Ecumenical and interfaith outreach**

While Pope Francis pursued multiple objectives with his six overseas trips in 2016, arguably none was more consistent or pervasive than his desire to foster ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, with pride of place going to his outreach to Eastern Orthodoxy.

The spilt between East and West in Christianity, conventionally dated to 1054, represents the primordial Christian schism, and thus it’s only logical that the pope’s effort to put the divided Christian family back together would be focused there.

The campaign began with a historic breakthrough: A first-ever summit between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, by far the largest player on the Eastern Orthodox landscape, in the Havana airport on February 12 just ahead of his arrival in Mexico.

The two men issued a joint declaration pledging their churches to be ‘walking together.’

’We spoke as brothers, we have the same baptism, we are both bishops,’ Francis said.

’We talked about our churches, agreeing that unity is built by walking together.’

’[We met] for our churches, our people of believers, the future of Christianity and the future of human civilization,’ Kirill said. ’The results let me assure [you] that the two churches can cooperate to defend Christians around the world, and, with full responsibility, work together.’

On the day of the meeting, Francis also tweeted that ‘today is a day of grace,’ describing the meeting with Kirill as ‘a gift from God.’

Later in the year, Francis returned to the press for tighter bonds among Christians. His June trip to Armenia, his late September and early October outing to Georgia and Azerbaijan, and his later October and early November trip to Sweden all had a largely ecumenical focus.

In Armenia, the ecumenical overtones of the visit were overwhelming. Francis stayed in the Apostolic Palace of Karekin II, the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of six Oriental Orthodox churches, and the two men did absolutely everything together.

’We have met, we have embraced as brothers, we have prayed together and shared the gifts, hopes and concerns of the Church of Christ,’ Francis told Karekin on Sunday, after taking part in an Orthodox Divine Liturgy staged at the headquarters of the Apostolic Church in Etchmiadzin.

’We have felt as one her beating heart, and we believe and experience that the Church is one,’ he said.

Watching Francis’s body language throughout the trip, it seemed clear he was moved by the experience.

In his last address in Georgia, speaking at a Georgian Orthodox Cathedral traditionally known as the burial site of the seamless garment Christ wore on the Cross,
Pope Francis on Saturday delivered a powerful plea for unity between Catholics and Orthodox.

The pontiff said the historical divisions among Christians today are ‘the real lacerations’ that wound the body of Jesus.

‘The Lord’s tender and compassionate closeness is especially represented here in the sign of the sacred tunic,’ Francis said, quoting the passage from the Gospel of John which says that the tunic was ‘without seam, woven from top to bottom.’

The pope’s stop in Sweden was in some ways the ecumenical apex of the year, a special outing intended to join the world’s Protestant community in marking the 500th anniversary of the great Reformation triggered by Martin Luther.

Upon the pontiff’s arrival, a solo performance of Gerry & The Pacemakers’ hit ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ greeted him as he arrived at Malmö stadium, in the company of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) president, Bishop Munib Younan, and general-secretary, the Rev. Dr. Martin Junge, as well as the president of the Vatican’s Christian Unity council, Cardinal Kurt Koch.

‘We have agreed to leave conflict behind us, and to move forward by embracing God’s call for us to enter into unity,’ Junge told the crowd, who added that it was right that the commemoration moved from the cathedral out into ‘the pains and the sufferings, but also the joys and hopes of people in this world.’

In his address, Pope Francis gave thanks for the joint commemoration and for the ‘new atmosphere of understanding’ between the LWF and the Catholic Church.

On the whole, these trips have not only demonstrated Francis’s resolve when it comes to Christian unity, but also his model for how it’s to be achieved: In the here-and-now, not through exacting theological dialogue over matters such as soteriology and Biblical exegesis, but rather through common effort on shared social, political and cultural values, such as defense of the environment and defense of the poor.

‘I share your concern about the abuses harming our planet, our common home, and causing grave effects on the climate,’ he told the Lutherans in Sweden, adding that ‘the greatest impact is on those who are most vulnerable and needy.’

In a nutshell, the pope’s model seems to be that if we pool resources on things we care about right now, then we’ll grow in friendship and our historical theological divides will become more manageable.

The Canonization of Mother Teresa

If one were to compile a short list of the most celebrated Catholic personalities of the second half of the 20th century, probably only three names would make the cut: St. Pope John XXIII, ‘Good Pope John,’ who called the Second Vatican Council; St. Pope John Paul II, he of ‘Be Not Afraid!’ who helped bring down the communist empire; and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the legendary ‘apostle of the poor.’

Not to be missed, of course, is that John XXIII and John Paul II were propelled to prominence in part by the office they held. Had Angelo Roncalli remained the Patriarch of Venice, or Karol Wojtyla the Archbishop of Krakow, it’s not at all clear they would have had the same impact on their times.
Mother Teresa, however, achieved renown entirely on her own, not due to any ecclesiastical office to which she was elected, but rather on the basis of her own transparent holiness and radical commitment to the poor and marginalized.

In that sense, the Sept. 4 canonization of Mother Teresa, marking the moment when Pope Francis formally declared her a saint, was the ultimate confirmation that ‘power’ in Catholicism isn’t ultimately about what role one holds, but how compelling a life one leads.

There are at least three reasons why her canonization was significant as a highlight of the pope’s Year of Mercy.

First, mercy is at its core a spiritual virtue, but Pope Francis has been at pains through this Holy Year to insist that for it to be sincere, it must be given tangible expression in concrete actions of service. In Christian tradition, one time-honored set of examples comes in the corporal works of mercy, which include feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, and so on.

Few Catholic figures ever, and probably none in her own time, better illustrate that drive to make mercy concrete than Mother Teresa, from her AIDS hospices and soup kitchens to her homes for lost children and refugees. There was virtually no source of human suffering for which she didn’t offer a practical, hands-on response.

In that sense, St. Teresa of Calcutta will stand forever as a ‘how-to manual for mercy’ in flesh and blood, a sort of human user’s guide to what mercy looks like in practice. From here on out, Francis doesn’t have to offer any detailed explanation of what he wants people to do - all he has to do is point at St. Teresa of Calcutta and say, ‘Try to be like her.’

Second, Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles, one of the savviest figures on the American Catholic landscape when it comes to making a case for faith in secular culture, recently said he believes one of the most effective ‘evangelists’ of the last several decades was Christopher Hitchens, whose feisty case for atheism inspired a generation of young and determined disciples.

Yet Hitchens clearly lost at least one major argument, which was his famous 1995 attempt to rob Mother Teresa of her halo-in-the-making with his polemical book The Missionary Position.

Hitchens accused Mother Teresa of a variety of morally dubious practices, from taking money from dictators to running substandard medical facilities. His overall objection was Mother Teresa wasn’t really interested in serving the poor, but in propagating her obscurantist Catholic beliefs.

Yet in the court of popular opinion, Hitchens flopped. In December 1999, at the end of the 20th century, Gallup asked Americans which person they most admired from the last 100 years. Mother Teresa came out on top, and it wasn’t even close - 49 percent named her, with the next closest being Martin Luther King Jr. at 34 percent.

Ironically, Mother Teresa prevailed without ever offering a word by way of refutation – the most she would ever say of Hitchens was, ‘I’ll pray for him.’ In truth, of course, she didn’t need to say anything, because people saw her whole life as a refutation of Hitchens’s critique.

Third, Catholic officialdom can say as much as it wants about ‘complementarity’ and the priesthood as service, but there are some people, including some inside the
Church, who will never believe women in Catholicism are anything other than second-class citizens as long as they’re excluded from the ranks of the ordained.

What Mother Teresa obviously illustrates, however, is that one hardly needs a Roman collar or a pectoral cross to wield influence in the Catholic Church.

This is a woman, after all, who had no qualms telling bishops and priests what to do, and over the years most of them actually did it – not because of the chain of command, but because they were inspired, often even awed, by the spiritual power she exuded.

If anyone was a role model of a successful Catholic leader, it was Mother Teresa. As the Church’s newest saint, she’ll doubtless continue to lead in a whole new way.

**The U.S. Presidential Election**

The 2016 presidential election in the United States between Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton was one of the most acrimonious and divisive political cycles in the history of the country, and it also resulted in a stunning surprise: Defying last-minute polling, on November 8 Trump prevailed.

As now seems clear, with the benefit of hindsight, religious voters generally and Catholic voters in particular helped make Trump’s upset victory possible.

In the run-up to the election, only the IBD-TIPP poll consistently pointed to a Trump win among Catholics. Almost all the others suggested a significant margin of victory for Clinton. Once the voting was over, however, results indicated that Trump decisively won a majority of those self-identifying as Catholics, by 52 to 45 percent.

By contrast, President Barack Obama won Catholics narrowly, by a margin of 50 to 48 percent, in 2012. Protestant Evangelicals flocked to Trump in far more overwhelming numbers, by a massive 81 to 16 percent.

Trump also outperformed expectations – and the 2012 precedent – among Hispanic and African American voters, while Clinton under-performed with both groups. In fact, with Hispanics, Trump bested Romney’s 2012 performance by two points, while Clinton dropped six points compared to Obama’s 2012 showing.

Both Hispanic and African-American voting patterns are often heavily influenced by religious beliefs.

Out of sight of most media reports, religious concerns also seem to have played an important role in Trump’s win. Whether religious voters were embracing Trump or blocking Clinton, there seems to be a clear political message in the result, which is that people of faith cannot be ignored, disparaged or taken for granted.

Coming on the heels of an administration known for court battles with faith-based businesses, the U.S. bishops and other religious leaders over policies such as the HHS contraception mandate, which includes sterilization procedures and drugs critics regard as abortion-inducing, revelations seen as indicative of team Clinton’s hostility to aspects of evangelical Protestantism and the Catholic faith certainly didn’t help Clinton’s religious outreach.

Nor did a Catholic on the bottom half of her ticket who took public policy positions at odds with the teaching of his Church on issues including abortion, the death penalty and marriage. Nor did leaked emails from her campaign manager discussing using political operatives to change Catholic doctrine from within the Church.
Exactly how to read Trump’s victory in terms of the forecast for church/state relations in the United States over the next four years remains a matter of debate. On the one hand, Trump clearly understands he owes a debt to religious voters, and in some matters appears poised to pay off. It seems reasonable to believer, for instance, that he will either remand or at least amend the contraception mandates in a fashion acceptable to American Catholic bishops, and will generally purpose policies perceived as more pro-life than a Clinton administration would have been likely to do.

On the other hand, there are also seem likely to be a host of issues where both the Catholic bishops of the United States and the Vatican under Pope Francis are destined to have differences with a Trump White House, beginning with immigration policy, and extending to the environment, the defense of the poor, the use of American military and economic power abroad, and any number of other matters.

Just ten days after the Trump v. Clinton election, the American bishops gathered in Baltimore, Maryland, in part to elect their own leadership team for the next three years. While the election of Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston was more or less foreordained, the choice of Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, a Mexico-born naturalized U.S. citizen and immigrant, was deeply symbolic.

It suggested the Catholic bishops of the country wanted to send the new administration a shot across the bow, warning that they plan to remain stalwart in defense of immigrant rights.

However, one interprets the Trump phenomenon, it clearly represents a break with the establishment American politics of the past. It also represents a break in the relationship American presidents have typically had with the country’s Catholic leadership, and with the Holy See.

In effect, it’s a step towards the unknown, which will make the US/Vatican relationship over the next four years both fluid and also fascinating.

Consistory for New Cardinals

Despite its outsized image as a global religious colossus, Catholicism as its core is a remarkably small enterprise. The total workforce in the Vatican, for instance, is slightly in excess of 5000 people, which implies a ratio of one bureaucrat for every 231,000 Catholics in the world, as opposed to one per 106 citizens in the United States.

As a result, personnel is crucially important in Catholicism. Bishops have wide latitude to govern, and Vatican officials have equally vast latitude to administer Church affairs in the name of pope.

If there’s one thing most people, even those not well versed in Catholic affairs, have typically been able to figure out about the Church, it’s the difference between a cardinal and everyone else. Cardinals are almost universally understood to be the Princes of the Church, the most important points of reference in Catholicism short of the pope, and thus any pope’s choice of new cardinals has vast consequences.

In November 2016, Pope Francis created 17 new cardinals, 13 of whom are under 80 and thus eligible to vote for the next pope, and the specific choices he made spoke volumes about the kind of church he wants to lead.
First, Francis is famously a pope of the peripheries, and nowhere is that drive to lift up previously ignored or marginalized places more clear than in how this pontiff awards red hats.

This time around, there were new cardinals from Papua New Guinea, the Central African Republic, Bangladesh and Mauritius. The last two, Bangladesh and Mauritius, have a combined Catholic population that doesn’t quite get to 700,000, making them essentially large parishes by the standards of many other places.

The November consistory built on the previous two held by Pope Francis, in 2014 and 2015, in which he created cardinals from Nicaragua, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Capo Verde, and the Pacific island of Tonga. (By the time Francis is done, it seems plausible there won’t be an island nation left on earth without its own cardinal.)

Second, Francis for the first time created new American cardinals: Blase Cupich in Chicago, Joseph Tobin in Newark (formerly of Indianapolis), and Kevin Farrell, head of his new department for family, laity and life (formerly of Dallas.)

All three would be seen as center-left figures in some ways reflecting the spirit of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, an approach to church life that appeared to recede in influence during the years of St. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Just in the days around today’s consistory, Tobin was issuing warnings about the church facing difficult years ahead fighting the Trump administration over immigration and refugees, and Farrell was chastising Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia over the restrictive guidelines Chaput issued to implement Francis’s document on the family, *Amoris Laetitia*.

Granted, the mere fact these three figures are now cardinals – two residential, one based in the Vatican – doesn’t automatically alter the landscape within the U.S. bishops’ conference. In fact, a face-value reading of the recent elections within the conference, in which DiNardo was chosen president and Gomez vice-president, would be that the center-right camp is still the governing majority.

Inevitably, however, Cupich, Tobin and Farrell will now have greater influence in American church affairs, including grooming other bishops who could, over time, recalibrate the outlook and priorities of the conference.

Third, Pope Francis has now created 44 of the cardinals who will elect his successor, of whom only six are Vatican officials. In this most recent crop, Farrell is the only one with a Vatican post, assuming one doesn’t include the pope’s ambassador in Syria, Mario Zenari, who’s part of the Vatican’s diplomatic corps.

For those keeping score, that means that only 13 percent of Francis’s picks so far have gone to Vatican officials, whereas traditionally Vatican prelates have counted for over a quarter of the College of Cardinals, a share that was boosted under emeritus Pope Benedict XVI.

Obviously, the net effect of these selections over time will be to reduce the influence of Vatican officials, not merely in the governance of the Church but also in the selection of the next pope.

For all those reasons, Francis has made the College of Cardinals a more difficult body to handicap in terms of its politics and outlook, and thus a more intriguing electoral college the next time a pope has to be selected.
The Year of Mercy

Although the Holy Year was officially launched in Rome on 8 December 2015, Francis opened the first Holy Door a week earlier, during his visit to the Central African Republic, where violence between rival Christian and Muslim militias has left at least 6000 people dead.

This was the first holy door ever to be opened outside of Rome, and it was an especially apt way for the year to kick off.

Over 10,000 more holy doors were opened throughout the world, because the pope’s goal was for the Jubilee Year to be celebrated locally, not just in Rome. According to the pope’s document Misericordiae Vultus, calling for the Holy Year, particular churches had to open their own doors as a visible sign of the Church’s universal communion.

Hence there were holy doors opened in a modest tent at a refugee center in Erbil, Iraq, in China where the faithful called the fact that not one of the 10,000 pilgrims who gathered for the opening last December was arrested a ‘miracle,’ and in prison chapels.

In the Italian regions hit by a series of earthquakes last August, local bishops put up makeshift ‘holy doors’ in the tent camps that sprung up to house people who had been displaced.

Mostly in Rome, but not exclusively, once a month on Fridays, the pope made a point to live one of the ‘works of mercy’ the Catholic Church teaches about, trying to urge the faithful – and the hierarchy – to follow suit.

All these visits had a strong pastoral meaning, but at least in some cases, there was more to the pictures of each event than Francis’s intention to accompany these people in their suffering.

For instance, in a recent interview with Italian network TV2000, the pope himself spoke about two moments that moved him: meeting women rescued from a situation of modern day slavery, including forced prostitution, and a hospital ward for prema-
ture babies.

He wasn’t just bringing comfort to the women who needed it, he was making an international appeal to end human trafficking, the world’s third most profitable illegal industry.

When visiting the hospital, the pontiff was particularly touched by the tears of an inconsolable woman who’d given birth to three babies, one of whom hadn’t survived. On that occasion, the pope didn’t just visit the sick, he was also making a strong appeal to end the ‘horrendous crime’ and ‘very grave sin’ of abortion.

On the last two weekends before the closing of the Holy Year, the attention was focused on two groups that represent what Francis has often described as ‘the outskirts of society’ and the ‘throw-away culture.’

On the weekend of 4–6 November, over a thousand inmates from around the world, including about 50 from the United States, accompanied by family members and prison workers, traveled to Rome to participate in the jubilee for prisoners.

The event had a clear spiritual message, with Francis reminding those present that God’s mercy knows no jail bars. Yet it also had a political undertone, with the pontiff calling for improvements in the conditions of prisons so that ‘the human dignity of the detainees is fully respected.’
A week later, thousands of homeless men and women from around Europe came to Rome, in what organizers hope will become an annual pilgrimage to the Eternal City.

Their jubilee, formally described as the one for Socially Excluded People, included an audience with Francis on Friday, prayer vigils around Rome that same day, participating in the monthly Saturday jubilee audience with the pope, titled ‘Mercy and Inclusion,’ and a Sunday Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica, presided over by the pontiff.

‘I apologize in the name of Christians who don’t read the Gospel finding poverty in the center,’ he told them during the weekend.

Time and time again, Pope Francis called for the Year of Mercy to be lived not as a pilgrimage to Rome but as a local event, in churches, prisons, schools and hospitals.

‘As a reminder, a ‘monument’ let’s say, to this Year of Mercy, how beautiful it would be if in every diocese there were a structural work of mercy: a hospital, a home for the aged or abandoned children, a school where there isn’t one, a home for recovering drug addicts – so many things could be done,’ he said.

Noting that the Holy Year had taken place 50 years after the end of the Second Vatican Council, Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, said that that this year ‘has been received as water in the desert for global churches sadly lacking mercy, and must be offered as the way of living to a world which sees mercy only in terms of exchange, and never as the excess of abundant love.’

**Disclosure statement**

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.