



POPE FRANCIS AT FOUR YEARS

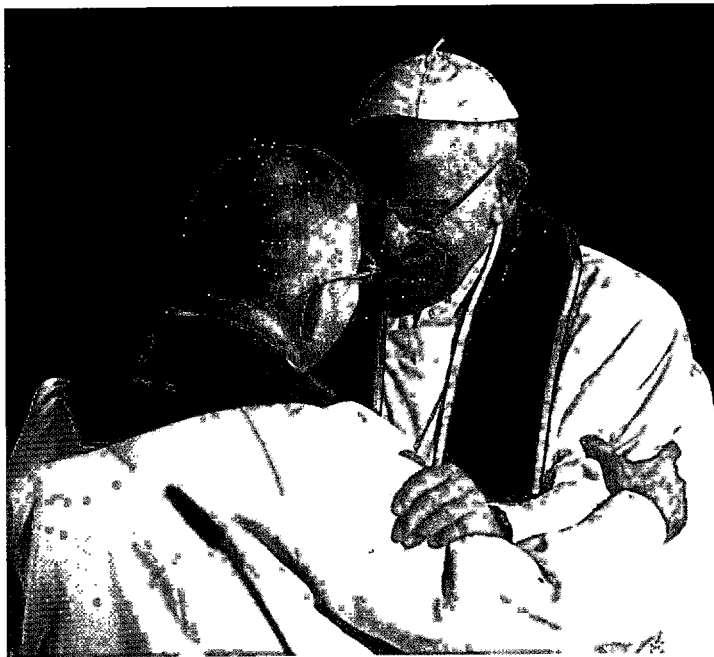
"IT'S HARD TO DENY THE PROBLEMATIC ASPECTS OF THIS PAPACY"

■ BY THOMAS STORCK

I remember hearing Jorge Bergoglio's election as Pope announced on the radio. I had never heard of him, but was far from displeased at the selection of a Pope from Latin America, whose rich past is often ignored or patronizingly treated as just another part of the "global south." But four years into his reign, it saddens one to have to put on paper an evaluation of this papacy so far. Not that everything is bad: those "conservative" Catholics who want to damn Francis' criticisms of capitalism or his statements on care of the environment only reveal their own lack of knowledge of Church teaching and previous papal utterances. Like the "liberal" Catholics who delight in nearly everything Francis says and does, their judgments are based primarily on political criteria.

But judging based on the criteria of doctrine, on the Church's settled and perennial teachings, things are bad enough. Francis has, sometimes openly, sometimes coyly, authored, promoted, fostered, permitted and protected what appear to be serious attacks on Catholic doctrine, especially on the doctrine of marriage and sexual morality in general. It is astounding, and it should force Catholics to hold more tightly to Christ's promise to be with and protect his Church, while at the same time realizing that it is not up to us to tell our Lord exactly how he must accomplish that end. If he chooses to guide his Church with what appears to be a slack rein, we must not, on that account, cease to trust in Him.

But to return to Francis. It is true that the Church since the Council has not been noted for the faithfulness to doctrinal norms on the part of theologians or even some prelates. But never before have we had such a barrage of assaults, open or by insinuation, from diverse quarters, against doctrines of the Faith. In the beginning one could hope



that these were the unintended results of the off-the-cuff and undisciplined manner of Francis' thinking and speaking. But, sad to say, I do not think that such an explanation is tenable anymore. *Amoris Laetitia*, of course, puts things down in black and white, and whatever ambiguities may exist in the infamous chapter 8 of that document, I do not see how we can avoid concluding that, we have a Pope who does not really champion important aspects of the Faith.

Moreover, his occasional blasts against "rigid" priests, against those who insist on seeing things as black or white, can hardly be perceived as other than confusing the clear boundaries of Catholic moral theology. Gray areas do exist in human moral conduct, but the Catholic theological tradition has addressed such gray areas for centuries, and hardly needs a dose of relativism to deal both justly and compassionately with the ambiguities of human sin.

One more item: although starting with Paul VI, Popes have often, in my opinion, expressed themselves with an unhappy lack of clarity in matters ecumenical, none seems to have gone so far in such statements as has Francis, for example,

with regard to Martin Luther. Catholic participation in the ecumenical venture, as I see it, has done immense damage, and Francis certainly shows no signs of slowing it down.

As I noted above, not everything about this pontificate is negative. But even in those areas, such as social doctrine, where Francis' statements are in line with the teachings of his predecessors, his failure to buttress his statements by citing the teachings of his predecessors, tends to discredit the good things that he says. If, for example, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis had empha-

sized the continuity of his teachings by a few choice quotations from Leo XIII or Pius XI or Pius XII, he would have made it much more difficult to simply dismiss him as some kind of crypto-Marxist. He might have forced "conservative" Catholics to confront their own selective adherence to Catholic doctrine. But by making his criticisms of capitalist market economies simply his own, he lost his best chance for actually helping Catholics recover an awareness of the Church's authentic social doctrine.

Similarly with *Laudato Si'*, an encyclical solidly based on the best kind of Catholic moral thinking and with genuine insights into our use and understanding of technology, those with the greatest need to learn from it will be able to dismiss it as the utterances of a "dissenter."

Thomas Storck, a convert to the Catholic faith, is a social and cultural philosopher and historian who has written widely concerning the intersection of Catholic faith and culture. His latest book, From Christendom to Americanism and Beyond, is available at Angelicpress.com. ○

