

Though the Francis Effect is not uniform and is only just beginning to take shape, this is a promising direction.

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What on Earth (or Heaven) Is the “Francis Effect”? A Response to James T. Bretzke, SJ

James Bretzke notes the ambiguity of the term “Francis Effect” and the difficulty of applying any measures to it. At the root of this difficulty is an ambiguity in the word *effect* itself. If by this term we mean that some things have transpired as a result of the election of Jorge Maria Bergoglio as the bishop of Rome, then this is trivially true. Had Bergoglio suffered cardiac arrest immediately upon selecting the name Francis (God forbid), even that would have yielded some Francis Effect. Of course, in the media and in Bretzke’s essay, the term refers to more than this. For the purposes of this response, I am borrowing three ecclesiastical terms to flesh out possible understandings of this “more”: *ordinary*, *extraordinary*, and *modal*. I take up each of these in turn.

The “Ordinary” Francis Effect

The Vatican I document *Pastor Aeternus* begins its vigorous defense of the papal office with a brief description of its purpose in the life of the church:

In order, then, that the episcopal office should be one and undivided and that, by the union of the clergy, the whole multitude of believers should be held together in the unity of faith and communion, [Christ] set blessed Peter over the rest of the apostles and instituted in him the permanent principle of both unities and their visible foundation.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ First Vatican Council, *First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ (Pastor Aeternus)*, prologue, in Norman P. Tanner, SJ, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2:812–13 (Latin-English).

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In order to foster such unity, the council goes on to insist, the bishop of Rome possesses primacy in governance of the church and the highest teaching authority. Hence, when this primacy and authority are exercised in the service of unity, I judge that a pope is generating an “ordinary effect”—ordinary in the sense that it belongs to the papal office. When a *Reichskonkordat* was signed with Hitler in 1933, ostensibly to protect the freedom of Catholic worship in Nazi Germany, this could be ascribed to the “Pius XI Effect.” So too, the creation of the Synod of Bishops belongs to the “Paul VI Effect,” and the plenary dispensation on the Extraordinary Form of the Latin Rite to the “Benedict XVI Effect.” Whether judged successes or failures, all of these were actions taken by a bishop of Rome, as the successor of Peter, to foster unity and build up the faith and communion of the Catholic Church.

In his survey of Francis’ pontificate, Bretzke focuses on “important ongoing developments in the *munus docendi et gubernandi* of the Church.” That is, he treats primarily what I am calling the “ordinary effect.” To be sure, Bretzke judges that Francis’ accomplishments on this score are, well, extraordinary! Nevertheless, they belong to the papal office as envisioned at Vatican I and reaffirmed at Vatican II. Reforming the Curia, approving the appointment of bishops, regulating disciplinary matters, proclaiming a jubilee year, convening a synod—these are things that the bishop of Rome can and indeed should do, by virtue of his office. So, to speak of a Francis Effect in this respect is simply another way of saying that Francis is shaping up to be an effective pope so far.

Generally, I share Bretzke’s enthusiasm on this score, with one important caveat: that the final judgment on this or any pope’s success will not be his “fundamental values” or “root paradigm,” but the unity in Christ of the bishops, clergy, and all the faithful. On this score, even the evidence presented in Bretzke’s article is decidedly mixed.

The “Extraordinary” Francis Effect

Though most if not all of the public actions detailed in Bretzke’s article belong to the teaching and governing ministry of the bishop of Rome, it is nevertheless true that many who speak of a Francis Effect seem to intend something beyond a mere judgment on his effectiveness as pope. In some circles, one senses a hope that, with Francis, we might witness a shift in the dominant narrative of decline that preoccupies many bishops and theologians in late modernity. If not a revolution, perhaps people might at least start coming

back to church!¹¹⁷ In his article, Bretzke plays with the image of the end of the world—meaning, in most apocalyptic literature, the end of the present order and the dawn of a new age. This is what I call the “extraordinary” Francis Effect, an aspiration for change beyond good governance, beyond merely cleaning house and shifting around a few chairs.

Even if we confine ourselves to the rather pedestrian but nevertheless significant question of Mass attendance, however, we face huge difficulties translating superficial correlations into clear causes, positive or negative. Indeed, the effects of broader societal forces nearly always eclipse the effects we may wish to attribute to particular actors or historical events. To offer just one example: several commentators have noted the sharp criticism recently directed by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and his collaborators against the fragmentation and weakening of Catholic identity that followed Vatican II.¹¹⁸ Yet, at the heart of their book *Young Catholic America*, one finds a compelling argument that declining Mass attendance cannot be traced to the postconciliar reforms (a favorite villain of conservatives) or the fallout of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (a favorite of progressives). Instead, such decline appears to follow a quite uniform pattern as far back as the 1920s.¹¹⁹ On as basic a question as showing up to Mass, the great upheavals of twentieth-century Catholicism may have had little if any measurable impact.

Perhaps it is reasonable to suppose, then, that even the most visionary leadership of Pope Francis will not fundamentally interrupt this narrative,

¹¹⁷ See David Gibson, “The ‘Pope Francis Effect’? Some Early Data Suggest It Could Be Real,” *Religion News Service*, March 25, 2015, <http://www.religionnews.com/2015/03/25/pope-francis-effect-early-data-suggest-real/>.

¹¹⁸ Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill, and Kari Christoffersen, *Young Catholic America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See especially Thomas Baker, “Young Catholic America,” *Commonweal*, October 9, 2014, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/book-reviews/young-catholic-america>; and the exchange in *NCR*: Kaya Oakes, “Going, Going, Gone: Books Study Exodus from Religion,” *National Catholic Reporter*, August 27, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/books/2014/08/going-going-gone-books-study-exodus-religion>; William D’Antonio, James Davidson, and Katherine Meyer, “Assumptions on Study of Young Catholics Lead to Unnecessarily Grim Outlook,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 6, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/people/assumptions-study-young-catholics-lead-unnecessarily-grim-outlook>; Christian Smith, “The Situation with US Catholic Youth Actually Is Grim,” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 13, 2015, <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/situation-us-catholic-youth-actually-grim>.

¹¹⁹ Smith et al., *Young Catholic America*, 51–59. The research team works with data gathered since the 1970s, but they conclude from that data that Mass attendance rates remain uniform for most Catholics throughout their adulthood—which allows them to draw conclusions as far back as the life spans of the persons involved in the studies.

just as the pontificates of Benedict XV, Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI had no extraordinary effect, and just as Vatican II had no extraordinary effect. The causes of the crisis—if it is a crisis—might simply lie elsewhere.

I am of the opinion that the deepest insight into the current situation is still that offered by Cardinal Ratzinger prior to his election as pope, in his deployment of Toynbee's notion of the "creative minority" to describe the place of the church in a de-Christianized Europe.¹²⁰ The point, it seems to me, is not to seek an extraordinary renewal or restoration of any particular ancien régime, but to serve an enduringly marginal, yet sanctifying role in our preaching, teaching, and lives of faith. Final clarity into the "whys" of this situation, much less the broader transformations of church and society it heralds, may well remain hidden in the mystery of God until Christ's glorious return.

The "Modal" Francis Effect

If any comprehensive understanding of *why* the Catholic Church—and indeed the Christian churches more generally—has been consigned to the role of a creative minority in twenty-first-century North America eludes our grasp, we are still left with the question of *how* to be truly creative, how to serve this sanctifying role. This is where we find the heart of Bretzke's thesis and perhaps the most authentic meaning of the "Francis Effect." I call this the "modal" effect, because it pertains not to the nature of the papal office, but to the *modus* or style of its exercise.

One of the ways that Bretzke explores what I am calling the "modal" effect of Pope Francis is by recourse to the notion of "root paradigms," drawn from modern anthropology. He contrasts a vision of the church as a "bulwark of truth" against Francis' focus on the "gospel itself" and, in particular, the church's ministry of healing. I admit that I am at best half-convinced by this schema. First, I think it underestimates the centrality of healing and mercy in the teaching of John Paul II: John Paul devoted his second, programmatic encyclical to the topic, and it was he who instituted Divine Mercy Sunday. Second, Bretzke's account on this score depends upon assumptions about culture advanced by modern theorists such as Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, and Clifford Geertz—assumptions that their

¹²⁰ See the discussions in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Peter Seewald, *Salt of the Earth: Christianity and the Catholic Church at the End of the Millennium*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

postmodern disciples have subjected to a searing critique. Above all, this includes an assumption that human cultures are constituted by shared material (ideas, values, practices), when they may be more credibly analyzed in terms of shared use or even shared patterns of conflict. In *Theories of Culture*, for example, Kathryn Tanner draws on postmodern anthropology to suggest that Christian identity may be seen less as a product of consensus on core values than as a shared task, style, and mode of engagement.¹²¹ “While Christians cannot do everything that non-Christians do...,” she writes, “Christian practices are always the practices of others made odd.”¹²²

I would suggest that if there is a distinctive “modal effect” of Francis’ pontificate, it will be found not in a distinctive set of core values, but in his distinctive *use* of shared values—his appropriation of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and the long tradition of the church, “made odd.”¹²³ Bretzke gets at this with his use of John O’Malley and the “epideictic genre,” and there is very little I would challenge in this analysis. However, because I have spent time with the work of another fellow Jesuit, Walter J. Ong (1912–2003), I am also struck by Francis’ repeated emphasis on “listening” rather than “seeing,” the frequency of interviews as a form of teaching, and the appeals for frank speech—that is, what seems to be a fundamentally oral-aural disposition toward truth, rather than a literate or visualist one.¹²⁴ As Ong noted, in oral-aural cultures, objectivity typically consists not simply in apprehension of an object, but in the knower’s own commitment to impartiality, fairness, and a willingness to give friend and enemy alike their due.¹²⁵ Stated another way, truth comes to light through personal engagement, and it is inseparable from character.¹²⁶

If this analysis has any merit, then the Francis Effect may have more to do with broadening the style of engagement than with settling disputed questions in one direction or another. “The word moves toward peace,” wrote Ong, “because the word mediates between person and person.... So long as two persons keep talking, despite themselves, they are not totally

¹²¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), esp. 120–55.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 113.

¹²³ I would contend that this is exactly what one witnesses in the frequent, creative use of the teaching of Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI in Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*.

¹²⁴ See Walter J. Ong, SJ, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for a Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967; Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, 2000); Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).

¹²⁵ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 222–23.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 243–46.

hostile.”¹²⁷ The enduring purpose of the Francis Effect may indeed be to seek the unity of the church not by resolving arguments, but by intensifying them, in a shared project of mutual purification.

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¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.