

The windows Pope Francis has opened

By [Randall Balmer](#)

December 18, 2013

Tis the season of Jesus, Santa and Pope Francis. It's too early to place Francis in the pantheon of church reformers alongside Gregory VII or Adrian VI—or even next to John XXIII, who memorably announced the Second Vatican Council by saying that it was time to “open the windows and let some fresh air in.” But the early returns on the first Latin American pontiff suggest that his will be anything but a caretaker papacy.

First, Jorge Mario Bergoglio selected the name Francis, to honor Francis of Assisi's concern for the poor. Then he spurned the papal car and accompanied the cardinals—who had just selected him to lead the church—back to their hotel so he could retrieve his luggage and settle his bill. He has chosen to live not in the Vatican's papal residence but in a more modest apartment, where he regularly receives visitors. On Holy Thursday, Francis washed the feet of ten men and two women from a juvenile detention center. Two of the offenders were Muslim.

To some degree, the pope has mixed substance with style. He has undertaken reform of the curia and the troubled Vatican Bank; he redirected the traditional annual bonuses for trustees of the bank to help the poor. He released his first “apostolic exhortation,” calling on the church to be “bold and creative” in addressing social ills, including the excesses of unbridled capitalism.

The pope's comments on human sexuality, however, have drawn the most scrutiny. During a long flight in July, Francis talked with reporters about a variety of topics. Asked about homosexuality, the pontiff struck a much more conciliatory tone than his predecessors. “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord,” he said, “who am I to judge?” As for the church's emphasis on contraception, abortion and gay marriage in recent years, the pope suggested that “it is not necessary to talk about these things all the time.”

Francis has asked bishops throughout the world to canvas the faithful for their views on birth control, divorce and gay marriage in advance of a major gathering of church

leaders next fall. All this suggests some departure from traditional church understanding that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” and Benedict’s declaration that homosexuality is an “intrinsic moral evil.”

Those who want to peg the pope as either “liberal” or “conservative,” however, miss the point. Liberals want to claim him because of his statements on sexuality and his evident compassion. Conservatives will note that the pope has issued no new doctrines.

Conservatives can also cite the appointment of Leonard Blair as bishop of Hartford. The inveterate culture warrior led the charge last year against the Leadership Council of Women Religious, an association of nuns that has challenged church doctrine. Indeed, Francis has said little to give women hope for a more expansive role in church leadership, although he has acknowledged that too often the church has allowed women to slip “from service to servitude.”

If the tired dualism of liberal-conservative doesn’t suffice, how should we understand the pope instead? Francis at the very least has elevated the theology of compassion to equal status with the rhetoric of condemnation. The departure so far lies not so much in ideology as in inflection. Francis has repeatedly invoked Jesus’ teachings about the supremacy of love, and he has chided bishops for being “obsessed” with sexual sins.

There is some symmetry to the pope reaching out to disaffected Catholics on matters of sexuality, because it was a teaching on sexuality that began the long estrangement between the Vatican and many ordinary Catholics. In the course of Vatican II, John XXIII formed a commission—which included laity, theologians, physicians and women—to study contraception. Since the 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, the church had opposed artificial contraception. But the introduction of oral contraceptives in 1960 had triggered the sexual revolution, and the Vatican was uncertain how to respond.

Traditional doctrine held that the two goods of marriage—unitive and procreative—must never be separated, that every sexual act between man and wife must be open to the possibility of procreation. The 72-member panel, however, recommended overwhelmingly that the teaching be modified to permit the use of artificial means of birth control.

John's successor Paul VI, however, countermanded that recommendation. His 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* banned all artificial means of birth control. For the church, the consequences were disastrous—especially among American Catholics. As the late Andrew Greeley's work has shown, the encyclical's effect was to discredit the papacy in the eyes of ordinary Catholics. If the pope could be so out of touch on matters of sexuality, they reasoned, his guidance on other matters might not be relevant. For the first time, Catholics came to believe that they could disobey the pope and still consider themselves good Catholics.

There's little chance that Francis will rescind *Humanae Vitae* anytime soon. Papal encyclicals, like Supreme Court decisions, carry the weight of precedent. But Francis has at least opened the conversation, and he has declared that "the proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives."

Statements like that make many people uncomfortable. As the Cold War taught us, the surest way to engender unity is to define ourselves by who we are not. For nearly half a century, many Catholics have defined themselves largely by their opposition to contraception, abortion and homosexuality. Under Francis, however, those familiar verities of opposition may no longer apply.

Francis may not be able effect change on the scale of the Gregorian Reforms of the 11th century; the Roman curia, after all, makes the U.S. Congress look like a model of efficiency. But the new pope has opened a few windows. Perhaps some fresh air will follow.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).*