

## When an Epoch Changes – On the Spiritual Legacy of Pope Francis for the Global Church

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### Riassunto

Questo articolo esamina l'eredità spirituale di papa Francesco attraverso la categoria del "cambiamento d'epoca", una nozione frequentemente richiamata dal defunto Pontefice. Dopo aver collocato storicamente la svolta epocale francescana nel contesto successivo al Concilio Vaticano II e del conseguente rinnovamento della teologia cattolica, il concetto di stile viene presentato come uno strumento metodologico adeguato per comprendere il pontificato di Francesco. L'articolo mostra quindi come la stilistica teologica permetta di cogliere il significato profondo del cambiamento d'epoca promosso da Francesco per una Chiesa in via di globalizzazione e per il nuovo stile di riflessione teologica richiesto all'indomani della secolarizzazione. In sintesi, papa Francesco ha dato un impulso spirituale senza precedenti a un pensiero teologico che cerca di rimanere profondamente radicato nella tradizione cattolica e, al contempo, di avanzare con mente aperta e creativa.

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### Abstract

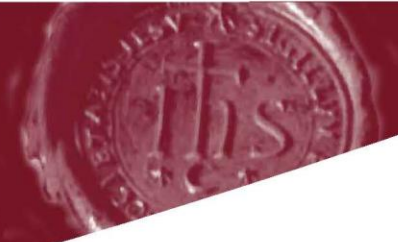
This article examines the spiritual legacy of pope Francis through the category of "change of epoch," a notion frequently invoked by the late Pontiff. After situating the Franciscan epochal shift historically in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the consequent renewal of Catholic theology, the concept of style is presented as an appropriate methodological tool to consider Francis's papacy. The article then demonstrates how theological stylistics sheds light on the profound significance of the Franciscan change of epoch for the globalizing Church and the new style of theological reflection required in the wake of secularization. In sum, pope Francis gave unprecedented spiritual impetus to a theological thinking that seeks both to remain deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and to move forward with an open and creative mind.

### Parole chiave

Cambiamento d'epoca, Cattolicesimo globale, papa Francesco, Karl Rahner, Secolarizzazione, Spiritualità, Stile, Sinodalità, Christoph Theobald, Concilio Vaticano II.

### Keywords

Change of epoch, Global Catholicism, pope Francis, Karl Rahner, Secularization, Spirituality, Style, Synodality, Christoph Theobald, Vatican II.



## Introduction: A Change of Epoch?

In the 2020s, a growing global awareness has emerged that global humanity is living through an epochal shift.<sup>1</sup> What is meant by the category of a “change of epoch” depends crucially (like every utterance in human language) on the context in which it is used. Most often it is understood in an international political key, referring to the crisis of the old rule-based world order that the US-led West had been strenuously building since the Second World War but that now Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022, as well as the turn inwards of the current US government itself, have put into question.<sup>2</sup> Whether contemporary globalizing humanity is living through an even more radical change of epoch remains an open question. To tackle the latter question, a more profound, more *spiritual*, approach to our way-of-being-in-the-world is needed.

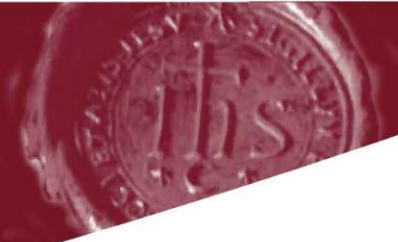
During his twelve-year pontificate, Pope Francis inspired Christians and all people of good will to face the uncertain future with courage and hope. “Change of epoch” (*cambiamento d’epoca*) was, indeed, one of Francis’s many memorable expressions. Francis employed the term on several occasions, though he never clearly defined it.<sup>3</sup> Yet this is precisely as it should be: if we truly are living through a radical change of epoch, it cannot be fully grasped and controlled. Amidst a deep-going epochal shift, the very criteria by which we judge reality and its changing are in evolution. Instead of clearly controllable concepts, spiritual resilience, creativity and capacity for discernment are then needed. It is precisely such openness to the new and a firm willingness to go forward that is the legacy Pope Francis left us, and this

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<sup>1</sup> This article further develops thoughts expressed in Finnish in Alpo Penttinen, “Mihin katolinen kirkko on menossa?”, in *Roomasta maailman ääriin: globaali katolisuus*, ed. Petra Kuivala, Mikko Ketola, and Jyri Komulainen (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2025), 219–236.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Alexander Stubb, *The Triangle of Power: Rebalancing the New World Order* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2026).

<sup>3</sup> He first used the expression as a pope in his speech to the Fifth Convention of the Italian Catholic Church in Florence on November 10, 2015. Yet the genealogy of the expression for Pope Bergoglio must extend at least to the Aparecida Document of the Latin American bishops from 2007, the final redaction of which Cardinal Bergoglio chaired.



article seeks to explore its spiritual meaning more deeply, especially in view of the emerging global Church.

The argument in the article proceeds in four phases. First, I briefly present the methodological perspective from which I approach the spiritual legacy of Pope Francis. Second, I introduce theological stylistics as a fruitful interpretive tool for evaluating the papacy of Francis. Third, I argue that the papacy of Francis should be seen as part of a much larger paradigmatic shift currently underway in contemporary Catholicism. Fourth, I consider some crucial characteristics of theological thinking for a truly global Church as it emerges, from a Western perspective, after secularization.

## 1. The Epochal Shift in Contemporary Catholicism

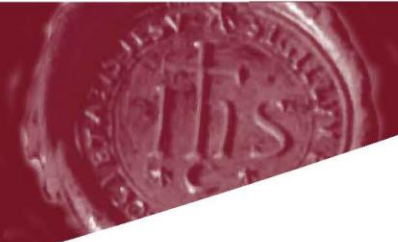
Western tradition's fascination with different epochs and the changes between them owes a great deal to the biblical dynamism, Christianly read, between promise and fulfilment, the old and the new.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), aspiring to update the biblical message for the modern world, made use of the biblical conception of changing historical epochs. According to the Fathers of the Council, modern humanity is indeed living through a historical change of epoch, a radical transformation in the very foundations of human existence in the world.<sup>5</sup> In today's globalized context, human existence has become interwoven into a single, overarching network of relations. We have moved from a premodern, static worldview to a modern, evolutionary understanding whose full dimensions are only gradually becoming clear.

In many ways, Catholic theology since the latest Council has been an attempt to activate the deep potential of the Christian tradition for the contemporary global age. Crucial in this

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<sup>4</sup> In the New (!) Testament, see, for example, Mk 1:15, Mt 11:13, Jn 1:17, Lk 22:20, Rom 7:6, 1 Cor 7:31, Gal 4:4, Col 2:17, Heb 10:1, Rv 21:1, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §4, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).



attempt has been the desire to overcome the rationalistic bias of the Western theological tradition, emphasizing human reason (or its specific European formation) over all the other dimensions of being human. With roots in the Greek metaphysical and Latin scholastic tradition, the post-Tridentine Catholicism easily gave the impression that Christian Revelation is primarily an intellectual thing that can be grasped and controlled by a certain kind of conceptuality. This metaphysical – and inherently violent – way of being Church culminated in the antimodernist and apologetic style of theology, officially sanctioned by the Magisterium from the late 1800s to practically the Second Vatican Council.

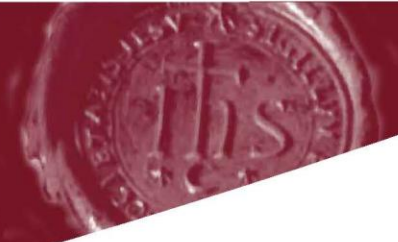
Since then, Catholic theology has been learning a more pluralistic style of approaching the many challenges and opportunities that the contemporary global age offers. The primary task of theological reflection – ranging through all the individual theological disciplines – in this context is to move beyond the older rationalistic conception of Revelation.<sup>6</sup> Is Divine Revelation, as the living heart of Christianity, to be identified with a specific semantic content expressible in words, for example, in creeds or catechisms? Or does Christianity concern itself with our entire way-of-being-in-the-world, that is with how we relate to the surrounding reality?

This theological question, in its current Catholic form, traces back to Pope John XXIII, who, at the opening of the Second Vatican Council in October 1962, called for a proper distinction between the immutable substance of the Christian faith and its changing expressions.<sup>7</sup> For Pope John, the “proper” distinction was a *pastoral* one, where the supreme criterion is always the salvation of souls and the boundless mercy of God. But if we take pastoral sensitivity as our highest theological and ecclesial principle, can we still, in good conscience, maintain any strong distinction between the inner content of faith and its outer form of expression (cf. 1 Jn 3:18)? How to develop such a theological approach to Christian existence that would not split it into separate spheres but that would let its inherent, holistic beauty shine forth?

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 36–52; Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8–29.

<sup>7</sup> John XXIII (October 11, 1962), *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, §6, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_spe\\_19621011\\_opening-council.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html).



It was especially the Romantic tradition in modern European thought that hoped to find a remedy for fragmented human existence in the aesthetic experience. Consequently, in Catholic theology, especially Hans Urs von Balthasar contributed significantly to overcoming the rationalistic model of Revelation through his *theological aesthetics*.<sup>8</sup> Yet his work remained still too univocally rooted in the tradition of Western metaphysics to be able to take seriously the Church's global future.<sup>9</sup> From a decidedly postsecular European perspective (the only one from which I can honestly write), there is greater potential in the theological stylistics of the German-French theologian Christoph Theobald, who uses the concept of *style* to interpret our present condition as a "new-old mission land."<sup>10</sup> His aim is to avoid all traces of neocolonial rhetoric about a "new evangelization," and instead to open Catholic theology to a hermeneutics of *hospitable holiness*. Christian Revelation certainly cannot be reduced to any single book, not even to Sacred Scripture or to the formidable *Catechism of the Catholic Church* of 1997. But perhaps it may be reflected in a holistic way-of-being-in-the-world that seeks to open itself to the hidden and invisible Otherness<sup>11</sup> of our world, to its wondrous diversity?<sup>12</sup>

Pope Francis's often spontaneous and creative speech-acts surprised many people, even created some confusion, perhaps especially for the Catholic insiders. Inside the Church he was sometimes criticized for not having a theological vision of his own. This is certainly wrong. Francis had a crystal-clear vision of the Gospel and the Church, but this vision did not come primarily from academic theology books. His vision had developed through the many decades

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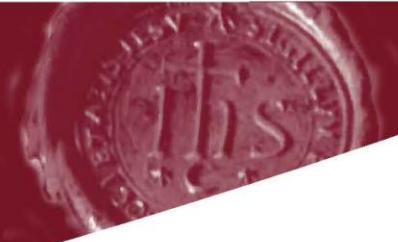
<sup>8</sup> Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Volume 1: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> von Balthasar considered the European Late Medieval nominalism as a "catastrophe," by which the Western tradition lost the vital contact with Greek metaphysics (see his *My Work: In Retrospect*, trans. Brian McNeill [San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993], 84).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Christoph Theobald, *Le Christianisme comme style: une manière de faire de la théologie en postmodernité* (Paris: Cerf, 2007); *Christentum als Stil: für ein zeitgemäßes Glaubensverständnis in Europa* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> In a Levinasian style, I capitalize the Other and its cognates in this article.

<sup>12</sup> With this methodological emphasis on the holistic *lived* experience of being Christian I align myself with the proposal of Rossano Zas Friz De Col for a new paradigm in spiritual theology where the notion of (Ignatian) Christian Life plays a crucial role (cf. Rossano Zas Friz De Col, *Ignatian Christian Life: A New Paradigm*, trans. Susan Dawson Vásquez [Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies, 2021]).



of his pastoral activity as a priest and as a bishop, always trying to reach those who risk drifting farthest from the Church. This is the main reason why the notion of style, organically flowing from and reflecting the concrete lived experience, may serve as an especially fruitful approach to Francis's papacy.

## 2. The Style of the Franciscan Moment

Pope Francis was a Jesuit priest from Argentina, driven by a vision of God's boundless mercy and love for all people, especially those whom the world oppresses, exploits or renders invisible. Francis urged us to perceive reality from the margins, the peripheries, such as the *villas miserias* of his former diocese in Buenos Aires. God, this spiritual style suggests, is not necessarily most present where human attention naturally turns, but rather in those places we are inclined to dismiss as irrelevant, meaningless, or even repellent (as in the case of the carpenter's son, born among animals and dying a criminal's death on a cross). That such a pope sat on the Throne of St. Peter for twelve years may well be described as the Catholic Church's "Franciscan moment," a liminal moment that will decisively shape the future of Catholicism.<sup>13</sup>

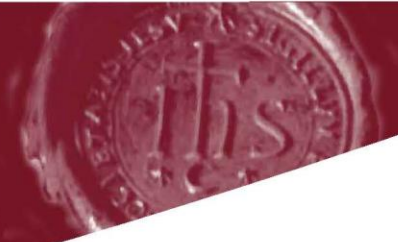
To grasp the full import of Pope Francis's legacy for the global Church, however, we should not approach it doctrinally, according to the old European rationalistic models. One should not expect doctrinal innovations from the Bishop of Rome. It is the role of the Roman See throughout history to preserve and transmit the fullness of Divine Revelation. Yet it appears that Francis's deepest concern did not lie in the domain of Christian doctrine per se, but rather in the *style* by which that doctrine is lived and from which doctrine can never be detached.<sup>14</sup>

This is why Theobald's concept of *theological stylistics* offers a valuable tool for interpreting Catholicism's Franciscan moment. Perhaps this moment is not so much about articulating the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving Toward Global Catholicity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Throughout his pontificate, Francis regularly spoke of "style" to describe his vision of the Christian faith, the Church, and synodality, also here drawing on the Aparecida Document where the concept is often used.



Church's ancient faith in new propositional terms but about discovering a new way of *living* that faith in the here and now, amidst the ongoing epochal change? The notion of "style" may help us transcend the traditional dualism of form and content, and the violent metaphysical tradition on which both rest. Theological stylistics seeks to guide us beyond purely intellectual frameworks into the lived reality itself, into the concrete *form-of-life* that is not so much thought as it is experienced and enacted.

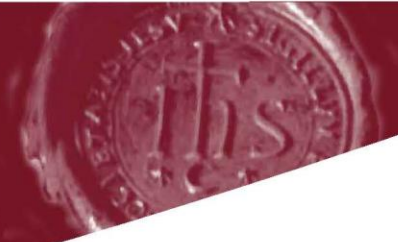
Theobald identifies three key dimensions of the notion of style.<sup>15</sup> First, starting from the area of human artistic creativity, style emphasizes the unique individuality of a work of art or of the artist themselves. The *allure* of a genuine artwork arises from the fact that there is nothing else in the world quite like it. The artist succeeds in creating something truly novel and personal, something that defies categorization. Yet it is precisely in this singularity that the artwork becomes capable of generating a unique event of encounter (*Begegnungsgeschehen*). In this second dimension of style, the viewer, listener, or reader is drawn into the very act of creation through which the artist has brought something new into the world. Style, in this sense, reorders the world so that its deeper meaning and hidden beauty can emerge with greater clarity. Third, the concept of style helps us to recognize that the creative act, in and through which form and content are uniquely conjoined, reveals a particular way-of-being-in-the-world, of "inhabiting" (*habiter*) it. A *particular* way, because there are always many styles. Style, properly speaking, can only be understood in the plural: as a multiplicity of styles (cf. 1 Pet 4:10).

The theological potential of the category of style becomes tangible when applied to the Gospel narratives: what is the style of Jesus, his particular way of inhabiting the world? Theobald refers to Jesus' style as "hospitable holiness" (*sainteté hospitalière*).<sup>16</sup> The man from Nazareth, especially as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels, possessed a singular capacity for self-emptying, allowing him to become radically present to each person he encountered, here and now. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus does not impose himself on anyone, but in every

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<sup>15</sup> Theobald, *Le Christianisme comme style*, 116–205; *Christentum als Stil*, 52–53.

<sup>16</sup> Christoph Theobald, "La sainteté hospitalière. Une manière messianique d'assumer le risque de l'accueil," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 44 (2023), 571–579.



encounter he creates a space of complete freedom and holiness, within which the Other can come to discover themselves anew (cf. Lk 17:19).

A recurring scene in the Gospels depicts Jesus surrounded by a crowd (*ochlos*) yet attentively turning toward someone whom no one else notices, someone forgotten or marginalized. To this solitary one – be it Mary of Magdala, Bartimaeus, or the Samaritan woman – Jesus offers a singular space in which they may rediscover themselves and re-enter the path of life. In Jesus, the centuries-long experience of Israel with God as a merciful Father appears to take on a startling, almost unsettling concreteness. Authentic style, where form and content exist in harmonious unity, without any hypocritical dualism, generates around itself a new, more profound reality, a “kingdom of God.”

Francis, to be sure, was only one pope. He was a shepherd shaped by the Argentinian “theology of the people” (*teología del pueblo*), in whose heart the “preferential option for the poor” (*opción preferencial por los pobres*) always had a place of honor.<sup>17</sup> In itself, this is nothing unique; there are countless Jesuits who have given their lives in solidarity with oppressed Otherness. But when such a figure is elected to the Throne of St. Peter, something new and unprecedented emerges. Old ideas and prejudices are shaken, and what was once unthinkable becomes conceivable. Might the Roman tradition of Christianity still be capable of a profound renewal, of becoming a living part of the global civilization to come?

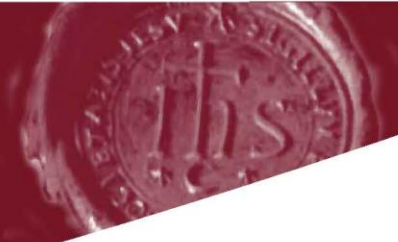
### 3. Beyond Spiritual Violence: Global Synodality

Karl Rahner famously argued that the reforms of Vatican II marked a decisive shift toward a truly global Church (*Weltkirche*), comparable to the early Christian move, associated with St. Paul, from an essentially Jewish to a more universal community.<sup>18</sup> Just as early Christianity

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Juan Carlos Scannone, *La teología del pueblo: Raíces teológicas del papa Francisco* (Maliaño: Sal Terrae, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979), 716–727; Günther Wassilowsky, *Als die Kirche Weltkirche wurde: Karl Rahners Beitrag zum II. Vatikanischen Konzil und seiner Deutung* (München and Freiburg im Breisgau: Universitätsbibliothek, 2012).



expanded beyond the Mosaic Law, Rahner saw the modern Church facing the challenge of embracing global cultural diversity. While Rahner advanced Catholic theology beyond older apologetic frameworks, he still operated within abstract metaphysical categories. In contrast, the postmetaphysical emphasis on “style,” as exemplified by Pope Francis, reframes Christianity less as a fixed set of doctrines and more as a lived way-of-being-in-the-world characterized by “hospitable holiness”: a spiritual openness to others, dynamic engagement with the world, and continual discernment of the will of God in each unique situation.

Now it is already clear that “synodality” will be Pope Francis’s most important institutional legacy for the future of Catholicism. The concept of synodality encapsulates Francis’s entire vision of the Church: it is the holy people of God journeying through history, in which all are equally important and equally called to holiness, each, however, in their own way. Synodality is a constitutional dimension of the Church, for Christian salvation is irreducibly communal: no one is saved alone.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, what drove Pope Francis as a global shepherd was God’s universal will to save all people (cf. 1 Tm 2:4). Accordingly, Francis proposed that the crucial criterion for Catholic theology moving forward must be the infinite mercy of God: any theological construction that sets limits to that mercy cannot be true.<sup>20</sup>

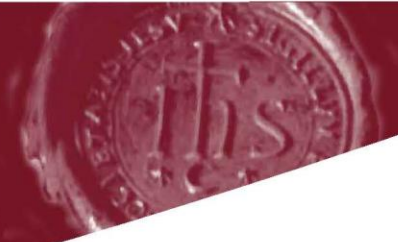
Pope Francis placed synodality at the center of the Church’s renewal and invited theologians to think big when, in his speech for the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops in October 2015, he stated that synodality is precisely what God expects from the Church in the third millennium.<sup>21</sup> Behind this statement lies the conviction that in the first Christian millennium, the Church functioned in a synodal way, through reciprocal cooperation among the different episcopal sees, while the second millennium, especially in the West, was marked by the

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<sup>19</sup> The most important Papal document on synodality remains Francis’s speech on the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops on 17 October 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

<sup>20</sup> See Francis’s letter to the new Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on 1 July 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/Lettera-Francesco-al-Prefetto.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/Lettera-Francesco-al-Prefetto.html).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Piero Coda, “The Way of the Church in the Third Millennium,” *Proche-Orient chrétien* 68 (2018), 316–325.



centralization of ecclesial authority and governance in Rome. The Orthodox Churches have better preserved the essential synodal mode of church governance, which the Roman Church now seeks to rediscover.<sup>22</sup>

This is true as far as it goes, but the synodality envisioned by Pope Francis was also something other than that of the Eastern Churches. The Franciscan understanding of synodality refers not only, or even primarily, to the administrative function of bishops, but to the vocation of all the baptized to be living members of the Body of Christ. In this way, synodality seeks to advance the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the universal call to holiness among all Christians. The premodern model of Catholicism that divided the Church into two classes of Christians, the clergy who teach and govern (*Ecclesia docens*) and the laity who are taught and governed (*Ecclesia discens*), has, in any case, long outlived its time.<sup>23</sup>

Even more profoundly, synodality can be read as the nascent global Church's attempt to reconcile itself and go beyond its spiritually violent, mainly European, past. Spiritual violence in this context would mean giving in to the temptation of presenting reality as if it would absolutely coincide with our received conceptualization of it. Spiritual violence, in other words, reduces the amazing plurality of the world into a certain intellectual way of approaching it, often connected with the one who has most power and capital. Spiritual freedom, on the other hand, lets the wondrous multiformity of reality shine forth as it is, without judging it according to one's own contingent preferences.

The German Catholic Church's *Synodaler Weg* ("Synodal Way"), for example, has clearly recognized the crucial dimensions of the current epochal shift in the global Church: sexual morality, the priestly form of life, ecclesial power structures, and the role of women in the Church, all of these are the key axes along which future Catholicism is being shaped. Equally clear, however, is the fact that the Catholic Church in Germany has approached these issues

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Marcello Semeraro, "Sinodalità," in *Nuovo Dizionario Teologico Interdisciplinare*, ed. Oreste Aime et al. (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2020), 653–658.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), §§31–39, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html).



with such intensity and one-sidedness that it risks distancing itself, and even breaking away, from the wider Church, as Pope Francis explicitly warned.<sup>24</sup>

The development of global Catholicism is an extremely delicate and complex process. It grows at different paces and with different styles, like a rhizome, open to radical Otherness, multifaceted, a whole far greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>25</sup> The temptation is enormous, almost irresistible, to approach this only from within our own context, even to reduce it to that. But in doing so, we would close off the horizon of the future and lose the immense spiritual potential hidden in this epochal change. The great challenge for future Catholicism, from a Western point of view at least, might not be so much theological brilliance but the humility to accept one's own insignificance, and to make room for others. But how could the Western theological tradition ever be ready to embrace such a different theological style after nearly two millennia of violently metaphysical dominion?

#### 4. Radical Secularization as a Door to Global Catholicism

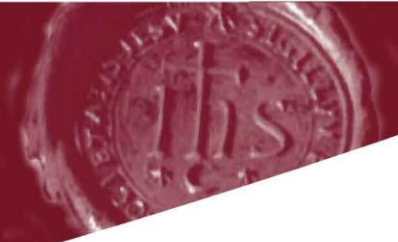
In his 2019 Christmas speech to the Roman Curia – the occasion where he most deeply delved into the notion of an epochal change – Pope Francis seems to have focused its central import as clearly as can be hoped for.<sup>26</sup> Explaining the urgent need to reform the Curia and ignite a renewed fervor of evangelization in the whole Church, Francis exclaimed: “Brothers and sisters, *Christendom no longer exists!*” (*non siamo nella cristianità, non più!*). With this he meant simply that the traditional European division of the world into a Christian and a non-Christian

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<sup>24</sup> Francis, *Schreiben von Papst Franziskus an das pilgernde Volk Gottes in Deutschland* (June 29, 2019), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190629\\_lettera-fedeligermania.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190629_lettera-fedeligermania.html).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), §§235–236, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (hereafter abbreviated as *EG*).

<sup>26</sup> Francis, *Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia* (December 21, 2019), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20191221\\_curia-romana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.html).



part is no longer purposeful. Even in the old strongholds of Christianity in the West, the Church is no longer the only point of reference for culture and human existential search.

Coming from a non-European “periphery” and with his characteristic *parrhesía*,<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis could state quite bluntly the state of affairs in the old Christian West: it is no longer there.<sup>28</sup> Instead of succumbing to futile criticism of this fact, and of a nostalgic longing to a lost Christian past, Francis encouraged the Church to go openly and courageously forward. For Francis, this entailed no binary choice between the tradition of the Church and its future, either conservatism or progressivism. Rather, the essence of the ecclesial tradition is to live and change and go forward.

Nothing is lost in human cultural evolution, at least in the big picture.<sup>29</sup> *Secularization* is and remains the way European Christianity (and its Anglophone offshoots) has travelled to the threshold of a truly global Church. It can also become the door through which it enters the global predicament. But for this the inner logic of European secularization must be clearly identified, radicalized, and thus speculatively overcome. Such would be a theological way of seizing our present moment in history and glimpsing beyond it towards the future horizon opening up before us.<sup>30</sup>

Radicalizing the inner logic of secularization in thinking reveals it not primarily as a negative process through which a human population distances itself from a religious form-of-life, but as a positive process in and through which it gradually enters into historical becoming.

*Saecularisatio* shows itself as entering into the *saeculum*, accepting our essential conditioning in

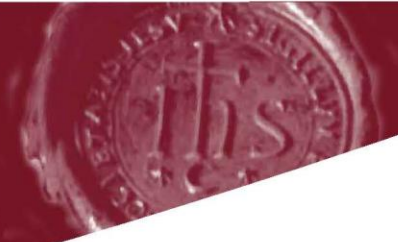
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<sup>27</sup> Cf. *EG*, §259.

<sup>28</sup> On the end of the Christian, or perhaps better “Constantinian,” era, see Chantal Delsol, *La fin de la chrétienté* (Paris: Cerf, 2021); Marie-Dominique Chenu and Mauro Pesce, *La fine dell’era costantiniana* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> For a fuller discussion of the logic of Radical Secularization, see Alpo Penttinen, *A Fundamental Theological Study of Radical Secularization and its Aftermath* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2024).



a certain time and place.<sup>31</sup> Time and change are not to be feared and avoided but decidedly affirmed because they make us who we are. From a spiritual perspective, then, secularization becomes meaningful not so much as a societal or sociological process but as the historical opening up of human consciousness to its radical embeddedness in a particular cultural milieu.

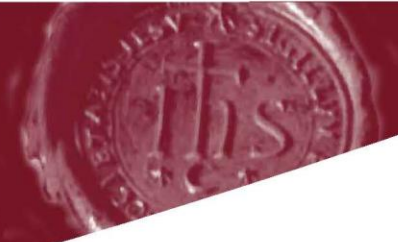
Of course, there is also the other dimension to the logic of secularization. It is the gradual fading away of the religious sense of absolute eternity, which is also a statistical fact in more secularized contexts.<sup>32</sup> This has to do with how human religious consciousness has developed through the millennia. As far back as religious phenomena can be observed in human evolution, they have sprung from a conscious or nonconscious positing of a trans-human intentionality or meaningfulness in reality. In fact, this is what can be said to define religion as religion, that is as belief in a non- or trans-human power in the world that humans have to take into consideration. How radically different from human existence this trans-human meaningfulness is considered to be changes from a religious tradition to another, but their common defining feature is this abstract notion of a trans-human meaning in reality, or simply “transcendence.”

Admittedly, this common core of human religiosity can appear as perfectly abstract in its absolute singularity. It is true, and it can only be seen from the hermeneutical perspective of After Secularization, that is from the historical opening unfolded by the process of secularization. The great novelty of the European secularization process is namely the possibility of exiting from religion altogether. In the contemporary postmodern, postsecular West it has become possible to be completely nonreligious. Speculatively considered it is not at

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<sup>31</sup> On the etymological roots of the “secular,” crucial for its adequate apprehension, see Jörg Rüpke, “Saeculum”, in *Brill’s New Pauly. Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*, ed. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, vol. 12 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 861–862; Denis Feeney, *Caesar’s Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 145–148; Robert A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ronald F. Inglehart, *Religion’s Sudden Decline: What’s Causing It, and What Comes Next?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: NYU Press, 2023).



all significant that still only a few people seem to choose such a perfectly nonreligious or radically secular way-of-being-in-the-world. The interesting point is that it has become possible in principle. With Marcel Gauchet, it can be argued that this possibility to depart from religion marks one of the greatest events in the evolution of human consciousness, one of its deepest epochal shifts.<sup>33</sup>

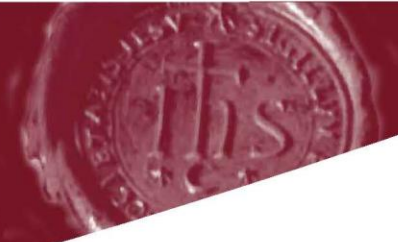
Yet there is a critical intellectual double-movement at work here. After the spiritual transformation process of secularization one cannot speak about religion in the abstract singular anymore. Now the question is whether a given religious tradition is willing to enter into the epochal dynamics of our postsecular condition. It is a condition where nobody can claim a power position outside of historical becoming. We all come from somewhere with our particular prejudices and conditionings. There is no absolute language, no absolute concepts, no “view from nowhere.”<sup>34</sup> There is our vulnerable human existence in time. Understanding the Other is a very difficult challenge. Amidst contemporary global hyperpluralism the challenge might seem quite insurmountable. It becomes even more important to keep alive the notion of our common humanity and the dream of our common future, as Pope Francis encouraged us to do with his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*.

God does not happen outside or at the expense of secular existence but exactly in and through it. This might be summarized as the main spiritual insight of Western secularization. Once having entered into this beautifully manifold material reality around us, we refuse to deny or in any way denigrate it anymore. This means that the old “other-worldly” religiosity is definitively dusking, but it can also give rise to a new dawn of world-loving spirituality, perhaps even a surprising springtime for the Church. Yet for this “a broad and generous effort at a radical paradigm shift” is needed, a genuine “cultural revolution,” as Pope Francis dared

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<sup>33</sup> In Gauchet’s words, in reference to the modern European departure from religion, “somewhere around 1700, the deepest ever fracture in history occurred, namely, the establishment of human becoming in a logic and mode diametrically opposite to what it had been from time immemorial” (*The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997], 162).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).



to say.<sup>35</sup> It might take some time for that to unfold, but as the late pope also often emphasized, in the Church one should not concentrate on occupying spaces of power but on initiating processes of spiritual growth and maturation.<sup>36</sup> In any case, the principle of Incarnation continues to go forward, perhaps especially in and through the ongoing epochal shift. Cannot one discern a profoundly Christian spirit in this kind of movement (cf. Mt 10:39, Mk 8:35, Lk 9:24, Jn 12:24)?

## 5. Conclusion: Neither This nor That

Pope Francis was sometimes criticized for not being clear enough in his teaching. In one situation he could say something and in the next one something else, the critics claim. Yet this is only understandable amidst a deep-going epochal shift, where not only many things change but where the epoch itself changes. If we really want to be part of the flow of history, instead of sitting at its shores, we must have the courage to speak up in the infinitely many different situations of our globalized world. We have to get our hands dirty to become part of historical becoming. Future generations will of course determine how the spiritual profile of Francis's pontificate will stand out in the long history of the Catholic Church. Yet for now it seems warranted to consider him as a great spiritual guide who wanted to accompany his Church amidst a radical change of epoch to become a living part of the global civilization. In sum, Pope Francis left us as his spiritual legacy a "fundamental option" for the future: the courage and determination to always go forward in hope.

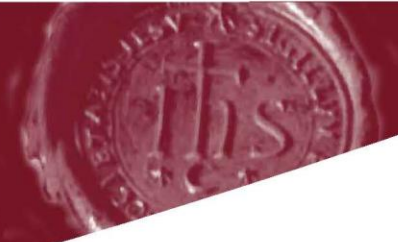
Amidst the ongoing, admittedly quite confusing, epochal shift, it is good to remember how the prescient French Jesuit and cultural critic Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) described the Christ-event. According to de Certeau, the Revelation of Jesus Christ is the "inaugurating rupture"

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<sup>35</sup> Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium* (December 8, 2017), §3,

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco\\_costituzione-ap\\_20171208\\_veritatis-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20171208_veritatis-gaudium.html).

<sup>36</sup> *EG*, §223.



(*rupture instauratrice*) for Christianity.<sup>37</sup> What is so striking in the Jesus presented to us by the Gospels is his singular ability to “erase himself” for the sake of the Other, so that the Other might truly discover themselves in God (cf. Lk 17:19). Christ’s style is one of self-withdrawal: he reveals himself precisely by concealing himself. This kenotic style of Christ (cf. Phil 2:5-11) unfolds all the way to the cross and reaches its culmination in the empty tomb, from which the ongoing history of Christianity continues to rise. It is precisely in his absence that Christ remains ever-present in the Christian Church’s ongoing history, not as its metaphysical ground, but as the necessary condition for its possibility.

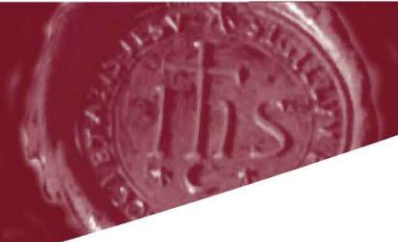
This “necessity,” however, is not a metaphysical *a priori*, not a fixed “foundation” or “foundational rupture,” but rather an ever-renewed *a posteriori* event, “inaugurating rupture.” It inaugurates time and again, yet remains beyond the reach of historical consciousness, even as it makes such consciousness possible. Christian Revelation centers on the singularity of Jesus, in and through whom the eternal Absolute truly entered time, making historical becoming itself a genuine possibility. The tomb is empty, and in its emptiness lies the possibility of Christianity’s ever-continuing history. The model here is not the dualistic binary of “either–or,” nor the totalizing impulse of “both–and,” both of which arise from the same metaphysical foundation, ultimately from spiritual violence. Rather, for the future to be truly future, it must be an eschatological *neither–nor*, something radically Other that will be given to us and that we can humbly and patiently wait for in the Spirit.<sup>38</sup>

With his bold and prophetic style, Pope Francis invited us to consider that we are once again living through such a radical threshold in the history of Christianity. We are stepping once more into the empty tomb and opening ourselves to its generative potential. But this creative potential can only be released if we allow the tomb to remain empty and resist the all-too-human urge to fill it with our own projections, fears, and desires. It is only in this spiritual openness to radical Otherness that a different kind of future can emerge.

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<sup>37</sup> Michel de Certeau, “La rupture instauratrice ou le christianisme dans la culture contemporaine,” *Esprit* (juin 1971): 1177–1214.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. John D. Zizioulas’s last book *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2023), to which Pope Francis contributed with a Foreword.



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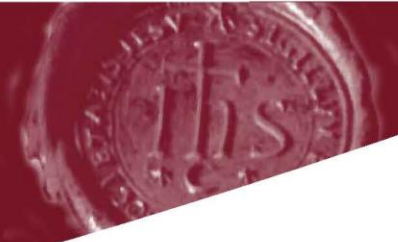
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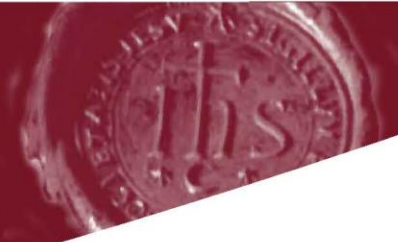
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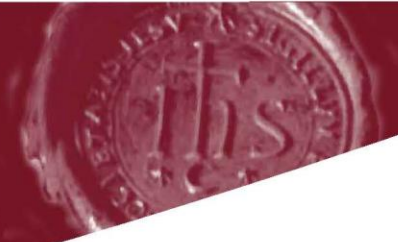
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