

Criticism of Pope Francis as a crisis of faith and a hindrance to evangelization

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Aim: To examine the criticisms directed at Pope Francis's pontificate by certain high-ranking Church prelates and Croatian Catholic-themed websites, with the aim of showing that negative criticism of Pope Francis constitutes an obstacle to evangelization because it creates divisions within the Church.

Methods: The study was conducted using the theological-pastoral methodology of the Lateran School, in which the criticisms directed at Pope Francis are presented, followed by the role and importance of the pope as the successor of the Apostle Peter, and finally, the reasons why public criticism of the pope is neither in the Catholic spirit nor in the Church's interest.

Results: Our findings are presented in three parts. The first addresses the manner and motives behind the attacks on Pope Francis. The second outlines the Catholic Church's teaching on the Roman Pontiff. The third part highlights the presence of postmodernity within the Church and the internal conflict and inconsistency among Pope Francis's critics, many of whom passionately defended tradition, yet fiercely attack the papacy as the institution that safeguards that tradition. Collectively, these actions, centering on negative criticisms of Pope Francis, hinder evangelization by enabling divisions within the Church. After analyzing over 70 articles from two Croatian catholic websites (*katolik.hr* and *vjera-idjela.com*) in which Pope Francis is explicitly mentioned, results show that *katolik.hr* had 4 articles presented Pope Francis in a positive light, 20 were neutral, and 26 portrayed him in a distinctly negative tone. On *vjeraidjela.com*, one article portrayed Pope Francis positively as someone who contributes to the faith, three were neutral, and six were negative, with a critical perspective on his papacy.

Conclusions: Public criticism of the Roman pontiff through mass media presents a real barrier to the evangelizing mission of the Church, especially when such criticisms come from within the Catholic community, whether from clergy or laity. Criticisms directed at Pope Francis often reflected an immature faith and a theologically rigid mindset.

Keywords: Pope Francis; criticism; tradition; postmodernity; evangelization

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Introduction

Criticizing popes was historically not an uncommon practice, particularly among European kings and Protestants. The former clashed with them over temporal supremacy, whereas the latter did so over religious authority ((1), p. 56–57, 75). Yet unlike all other popes in the history of the Church, Pope Francis (2013–2025) was most criticized by Catholics themselves, both high-ranking prelates and ordinary faithful. Certain media frequently accused him of heresy, deficiencies in teaching Catholic doctrine, and a lack of trust in Church tradition ((2), p. 202; (3)).

This article, therefore, reflects on the consequences of these criticisms for the Church's pastoral mission. The focus of this paper is not on defending Pope Francis from criticism, the Manichaean opposition to criticism and apologetics, or an uncritical and unequivocal adherence to one side; rather, it seeks nuanced reflection and subsequently attempts to distinguish between constructive, beneficial, and unhelpful, harmful criticism ((3), p. 173). In addressing this topic, we will first list certain Church prelates and Catholic websites who frequently criticized Pope Francis. Then, we will examine the significance of the papal primacy for the Church and finally highlight the presence of postmodernity within it, the dangers of publicly criticizing the Pope for the unity and evangelization mission of the Church, and the internal conflicts of his critics. In this paper, we primarily focused on negative criticism found in selected Croatian Catholic media, aiming to highlight its adverse consequences for the Church's mission.

Positive criticisms are constructive and based on facts, while negative ones are destructive and aimed at devaluing their target, rather than at improving the Church. The latter were therefore not so much directed at the critique of a papal document, but at Pope Francis as a person, who had repeatedly emphasized his willingness to accept constructive criticism (4). More precisely, it is entirely appropriate to criticize the Pope if it serves to build up the Church as such, and he, as a person, is subject to criticism; however, for such criticism to be fruitful, it must be expressed truthfully and respectfully. It is not appropriate to criticize the Pope's person and his pastoral approach in a way that generates animosity toward him.

The destructive criticisms indicate a lack of acceptance of Pope Francis as the leader of the Catholic Church. First, they often offered an implicit rejection of him as a Latin American who speaks in an informal tone, avoids academic language typical of most cardinals, and instead communicates in a direct, unfiltered, and approachable way. From the very beginning, Pope Francis's pontificate has been marked by a departure from codified ecclesiastical language. Pope Francis' voice is not that of a sovereign who tightly controls his people, nor a theological expert who defends the unquestionable authority of dogma; rather, it is above all the voice of a pastor who bends down before human suffering and problems, offering help without any condemnation (5, 6). Prelates who criticize Pope Francis often refer to documents issued during his pontificate and highlight their ambiguity and doctrinal divergence from Catholic theology ((7); (2), p. 202). Furthermore, a troubling phenomenon among Pope Francis's critics is a subtle rejection of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and their interpretation of the most recent ecumenical council as the true cause of the current crisis in the Catholic Church (8).

Although it is legitimate to offer constructive criticism of papal documents, it is important to remember that destructive criticism that exists solely for its own sake is not in the spirit of the Christian faith. This is especially true when such criticism comes from Catholics who blame the Pope for a crisis in the Church that predated his pontificate. The very fact that Pope Benedict XVI abdicated the Chair of Peter indicates that the Church faced serious internal problems even before Pope Francis, as well as difficulties in proclaiming the Gospel in the modern world.

Methods

In accordance with the theological-pastoral methodology of the Lateran School ((9), p. 13–64; (10), p. 311–328; (11), p. 81–92), we will first present the criticisms directed at Pope Francis, distinguishing between constructive and destructive variants, as well as explicit and implicit ones. Next, we will explain the role and importance of the pope as the successor of the Apostle Peter and present the reasons why public criticism of the Pope was neither in the Catholic spirit nor in the Church's interest. It is one thing to constructively critique certain parts of the Pope's homilies or documents for lacking stylistic refinement or sufficient Christological emphasis, but quite another to question his Catholic faith, theological knowledge, infallibility, pontificate, or motivations. While the former is acceptable and even helpful, the latter undoubtedly constitutes a precedent and a real obstacle to the Church's evangelizing mission.

While studying articles about Pope Francis on Croatian Catholic websites, we noted many that were negative towards his pontificate. Two such websites that were prominent in the Croatian context were *katolik.hr* and *vjeraidjela.com*; both are primarily focused on the Catholic defense of the faith against various religious deviations, and present articles authored by Catholic priests, theologians, and religious teachers. We proceeded to extract such articles, classifying them as positive, negative, or neutral according to the following criteria:

- Positive articles were those in which Pope Francis was spoken of in good faith, as the Holy Father concerned for the faith and the Church. For example, the article titled “Sensationalist Journalism Deliberately Misrepresents the Words of the Holy Father” (12) defended the Pope against malicious disinformation in secular media.
- Negative articles included those in which Pope Francis was portrayed as a heretic, globalist, or poor theologian.
- Neutral articles were those in which the Pope was mentioned only in passing, or in which his documents were referenced purely in a formal manner.

All excerpts of the analysed texts presented here were originally written in Croatian; they are translated here into English.

Results

Just as there have always been clerics who believed themselves to possess superior theological insight than the Pope throughout the history of the Church, today we encounter both clerics and laypersons who view their own understanding of Catholicism as the only true and orthodox one, even when compared to the Pope. Although a certain tension between the Pope and prelates has long existed ((13), p. 87), the phenomenon of cardinals and bishops explicitly or implicitly criticizing Pope Francis is unprecedented in the history of the Church. As noted above, this phenomenon extends beyond the critique of a specific papal document, as was the case with the controversial footnote 351 in the apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (14, 15), and involves a direct critique of Pope Francis as a person, his pontificate, and, by extension, the Catholic Church as a whole. While several prelates have voiced criticism of the Pope, this analysis will focus on the two most frequently cited figures in recent years: Cardinal Leo Raymond Burke and Archbishop Carlo M. Viganò.

Cardinal Leo Raymond Burke

Cardinal Leo Raymond Burke is the former Prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, the highest judicial authority within the Catholic Church. He is an expert in canon law and arguably the most prominent and influential prelate to have implicitly questioned Pope Francis's pontificate. His critique began with the Synod on the Family (2014–2015), which addressed the role of the family in contemporary society, particularly regarding access to the sacraments for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics. The outcome of that Synod was the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, which was widely criticized for its ambiguities in pastoral approaches toward divorced and civilly remarried people. Cardinal Burke, along with Cardinals Joachim Meisner, Carlo Caffarra, and Walter Brandmüller, submitted an inquiry (*dubia*) in 2016 to the Congregation (now Dicastery) for the Doctrine of the Faith, raising questions and expressing doubts regarding the abovementioned exhortation. The Dicastery never issued a response, with two of the cardinals (Joachim Meisner and Carlo Caffarra) passing away in the meantime.

This letter contributed to an intensification of criticism toward Pope Francis, sparking increasing discontent among both clergy and laity. Particularly problematic was the fact that Cardinal Burke, along with other prelates, published a book during the Synod, *Remaining in the Truth of Christ*, the title and contents of which implicitly suggest that the Synod on the Family was at risk of betraying the truth of Christ, and thereby the mission of the Church itself. While theological debate is intrinsic to the theology and history of Christianity, caution is warranted when influential cardinals openly oppose the Pope and his decisions, as this undermines the unity of the Church and sows discord among the People of God (16). By publicly voicing their concerns in response to *Amoris laetitia*, prelates such as Cardinal Burke provided an opening for other priests and laypeople to align themselves with the growing dissatisfaction toward Pope Francis's pontificate.

Cardinal Burke also criticized Pope Francis's 2021 *Motu proprio*, *Traditiones custodes*, which revoked the provisions of the 2007 *Motu propria*, *Summorum Pontificum* issued by Pope Benedict XVI, on his official website (17):

The Roman Pontiff possesses the necessary power to defend and promote the doctrine and discipline of the Church. However, this is not an “absolute power” that includes the authority to change doctrine or eradicate a liturgical discipline that has been alive in the Church since the time of Pope Gregory the Great, or even earlier.

A notable contradiction emerges from the aforementioned exposition by Cardinal Burke. While he acknowledges that the Pope possesses the authority to modify the Church’s disciplinary practice, he asserts that he cannot alter liturgical discipline. While it is indeed true that the Roman pontiff does not have the authority to change Church doctrine – which Pope Francis does not attempt to do so in his *Motu proprio* – by virtue of his office, he does have the prerogative to promote disciplinary measures within the Church as he deems appropriate. Liturgy undoubtedly falls within this domain ((18), p. 239–240).

Furthermore, Cardinal Burke criticized Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, contending that certain passages challenge traditional theological truths (19). Although Cardinal Burke stated that he has nothing against Pope Francis as a person (20), he still supported Archbishop Viganò in his call for the Pope’s resignation (21), thereby encouraging other clergy and laity to disobey and resist Pope Francis.

Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò

In 2018, Archbishop Viganò stated that Pope Francis knowingly concealed allegations against Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who had been accused of sexually abusing minors (22, 23). This represents a grave accusation leveled against the Roman pontiff, delivered publicly and without reservation. Such an open denunciation of Pope Francis by Archbishop Viganò, a former apostolic nuncio, provoked significant public reaction, placing Pope Francis in an extremely delicate position.

The issue of pedophilia is unprecedented in the history of the Catholic Church, which has endured profound shame and humiliation due to numerous cases of pedophilic abuse cover-ups, perpetrated by both clerics and laypersons. Even more distressing is the Church’s continuing struggle to overcome the crisis of sexual abuse (24) as an institution. The causes are manifold: priestly formation within seminaries, clericalism, religious fundamentalism, laxity, and even the presence of structural sin within ecclesiastical institutions, where perpetrators are often protected rather than held accountable, while victims are frequently marginalized.

Aside from being unfounded (25), these defamatory claims undermine the personal integrity and reputation of their target. Viganò went so far as to accuse Pope Francis and attribute the coronavirus pandemic to divine punishment, claiming it was a result of idolatry, or more specifically, the display of the Amazonian fertility deity Pachamama at the Vatican during the Amazon Synod. Due to such actions, he was expelled from the Catholic Church (26, 27). It is important to emphasize that Pope Francis unequivocally condemned pedophilia (28), significantly amended church legislation (Book VI of the Code of Canon Law) to explicitly criminalize sexual abuse, and prioritized the protection of victims and the sanctioning of pedophilia ((29), p. 22–25). He even established the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors at the beginning of his pontificate (30), while during his papacy, every episcopal conference (and diocese) created a special department for the protection of minors (31).

Catholic websites

Mass media hold immense significance for the Catholic Church, as affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in its decree *Inter Mirifica*, which highlighted that the media can be of great benefit to humanity, playing a vital role in the education of individuals and supporting the Church in its mission to build the Kingdom of God ((32), n. 2). The Church can fulfill its evangelizing mission – its primary calling – through various forms of media ((33), p. 257–262). Yet while modern technology has brought undeniable benefits, it is also a double-edged sword, where its value depends on the manner and purpose of its use ((34), p. 20); (35), p. 26–31)). In this sense, one observes the emergence of platforms, both globally and within Croatia, that present themselves as Catholic, while openly publishing content critical of the current Roman Pontiff in an inappropriate manner. In the context of Croatia, two such platforms warrant closer examination: *katolik.hr* and *vjeraidjela.com*.

Katolik.hr

The website *katolik.hr* describes itself as a Catholic apologetic platform that defends and promotes the Catholic faith. It features a significant amount of useful material, with many articles being well-intentioned and serving as valuable resources for Catholics seeking a deeper understanding of their faith. However, several articles on the site exhibited an overly harsh and imprudent tone in their criticism of Pope Francis, portraying him as a principal cause of the Church's current crisis due to his "ambiguous statements" that "contradict Church teaching" and are said to "cause scandal" (8). The site often substantiates its critiques of Pope Francis with reference to previously influential Second Vatican Council documents, such as the encyclical *Mortalium animos* (1928), which adopts a dismissive stance toward other religions and Christian denominations (8), yet simultaneously fails to reference any that affirm the value present in other religions and Christian denominations, such as the *Nostra aetate* or *Unitatis redintegratio*.

In the article titled "The Spiritual Crisis of the Church", the author writes: "In the latest encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, the Pope bypasses Jesus's teaching on brotherhood, instead promoting an undefined concept of universal fraternity" (8).

Similarly, in another article titled "*Fratelli tutti* – the Main Principle of Freemasonry", the author criticized the encyclical, claiming it represents a fundamental principle of Freemasonry, and asserted that Christian brotherhood was fundamentally distinct from the universal brotherhood described by Pope Francis in the encyclical, which is, according to the author, of Masonic character (36). Such assertions are concerning, particularly when coming from someone who identifies as a Catholic apologist. Criticizing the papal encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which reflects on universal human fraternity and draws inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi, does not speak to the author's credit. The encyclical *Fratelli tutti* does not introduce novel teachings; rather, it reaffirms that all human beings share the same Creator and, by that very fact, possess equal rights and dignity ((37), n. 5, 58)). The author seems to overlook that the Pope's mission is not confined exclusively to Catholics, but rather constitutes the universal mission of Jesus Christ addressed to all humanity; as Christ's vicar, he proclaims the call to salvation to all, even Freemasons, inviting them to embrace

Jesus Christ. After all, it is love, rather than criticism or religious formalism, which Christ himself opposed, that brings about true conversion of the heart ((38), Mark 2:27).

It is unusual for a faithful layperson, especially one appealing to ecclesial tradition, to presume to instruct the Pope on how to write encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, *motu proprio*, or other documents. Given the historical marginalization of the laity's voice within the Catholic Church prior to the Second Vatican Council, it is both paradoxical and perplexing that those who most vehemently invoke the Church's tradition are often the ones most vocally critical of Pope Francis.

It is also difficult to ignore the implicit rejection of the Second Vatican Council on this platform, as some authors suggest that “while a significant portion of the Second Vatican Council's documents align with Church teaching, certain texts allegedly deviate from the Church's two-thousand-year tradition” (39). In doing so, they fail to distinguish between the dogmatic teaching and the pastoral modalities of evangelization; while the former remains unchanging, the latter may have evolved. The Church has always sought to engage culture through inculturation – the embodiment of the Gospel within culture and a precondition for evangelization – as seeking new forms of evangelization suited to diverse audiences is essential for its effectiveness. Critics of Pope Francis on this platform frequently rejected any changes in tone or method, viewing them as unnecessary, modernist, or even threatening to the Church (40).

Vjeraidjela.com

The platform *vjeraidjela.com* (where “*vjera i djela*” translate to “faith and action”) is a Catholic theological website featuring a wide range of instructive articles by numerous contributors, including many Catholic priests and teachers of religion. Amidst the theological content, there is a column titled “Between Reason and Heart”, the content of which markedly criticises Pope Francis. For instance, the article titled “The Higher Committee for Human Fraternity and the Lobotomization of the Faithful by the Imperative of Obedience” notes: “Pope Francis holds highly questionable theological views – so distorted, in fact, that they may unambiguously be labeled heretical” (41). This can be understood as an unequivocal declaration that the Pope is a heretic – since if one holds questionable theological views, one is also a heretic – and constitutes an unprecedented approach to Catholic theology. It would be more comprehensible if this critique originated from a Protestant or Eastern Orthodox critic, but in this case, the author is a self-professed Catholic. Pope Francis is frequently reproached for not focusing sufficiently on Catholics and directing too much attention to non-Catholics. The same author of the previous article wrote the following: “Many are scandalized by the fact that the Pope is willing to engage in dialog with those who believe differently or not at all, while appearing closed to dialog with his own” (42). Is it not the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel to all people? Did not Christ command his apostles: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” ((38), Matthew 28:19). The Pope's duty is not merely to minister to the faithful, but to reach out to all people, just as all the baptized are summoned to evangelize to everyone.

In another article, the same author asserts: “The entire Church has become a captive of Pope Francis and his erroneous views, which he absorbed within the Argentinian theological milieu” (41). Here, Pope Francis was criticized for his South American (Argentinian) theological background and pontificate, with implications that he adhered to “liberation theology”. However, in theological terms, Pope Francis is more accurately associated with the “theology of the people”. Notably, the Marxist social theory emerged in response to challenges and questions posed by globalization, advocating for the poor and marginalized and emphasizing the importance of dialog, encounter, and openness toward others. In contrast, liberation theology has primarily focused on combating poverty and social injustice within Latin America. It is important to highlight that Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI never condemned liberation theology as such; rather, they criticized specific variants or distortions of it that placed Marxist social analysis at their center ((43), n. 7, 9, 10; (44)).

Criticisms directed at Pope Francis can be partially understood as stemming from the historical identity of the Catholic Church as a predominantly Western institution shaped within a European cultural framework. This influences certain critics who appear unable to move beyond a nostalgic vision of the Church as a dominant authority in society, as they cannot imagine it not being powerful or politically influential. The future of the Church, however, lies in its openness to the world and to changes that facilitate evangelization and the spiritual life of the faithful, and not a return to a past that no longer exist, and perhaps never truly did. In this context, Marco Politi writes the following about Pope Francis’s pontificate ((2), p. 299):

The construction of a synodal Church, one that is no longer monarchical, remains his key objective. If he succeeds in transforming the Synod of Bishops into a permanent instrument of co-governance within the papal government, making them function like mini councils that determine the Church’s course across the seas of modernity [...] the Pope’s revolution will become irreversible.

This raises the question: is it still possible to organize a large-scale ecclesial council with thousands of cardinals, bishops, and theologians, as was the case during the Second Vatican Council? This seems increasingly unlikely. Therefore, the so-called “mini councils” in the form of synods are a practical alternative, as they address specific issues, are easier to convene, and are more accessible to follow.

One of the most prominent cardinals within traditionalist circles, and former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2012–2017), Cardinal Monsignor Gerhard Ludwig Müller, frequently cited by the aforementioned platforms, commented the following in an interview republished by *vjeraidjela.com* website on the issue of heretical popes in Church history (45):

Over the centuries, the concept of heresy has been interpreted both broadly and narrowly. In today’s technical sense of formal heresy, i.e., the direct denial of revealed doctrine as defined by the Church as a truth of the faith, there has never been a heretical pope (not even in private capacity), not even when considering the matter historically. The fact that the Bishops of Rome, as successors of Peter, have always remained faithful to the apostolic faith and have actively presented it to the universal Church is both historically demonstrable and affirmed as a tenet of Catholic and divine faith.

Although some Catholic websites portray Cardinal Müller as a “major critic” of Pope Francis, this appears to be an exaggeration. When speaking about the crisis in the Church or the presence of weeds within it to the media, he refrains from explicitly naming Pope Francis or any other cardinal or bishop. He speaks vaguely, recognizing the counterproductivity of publicly criticizing ecclesiastical prelates by name. Moreover, Cardinal Müller has, on several occasions, defended Pope Francis against malicious criticisms of his papacy, stating once that “there is only one legitimate pope, and his name is Francis. Whoever held the papal office, whether living or deceased, is no longer pope, even if he is owed all gratitude and personal respect” (46, 47). In doing so, he articulated a fundamental truth of the Catholic faith – namely, that there can be only one pope. Once a person resigns from the papal office, he no longer holds the papacy, since the authority to govern the Church belongs exclusively to the pope and to bishops in communion with him.

Analysis of articles concerning Pope Francis

An analysis of opinion pieces published on *katolik.hr* and *vjeraidjela.com* reveals certain data that challenge the apologetic character of these platforms. Both websites emphasize orthodoxy, tradition, sound doctrine, and the ecclesial magisterium. It is fair to say that a considerable number of texts can be categorized as apologetic in nature, as they attempt to distinguish truth from error in the midst of the darkness of relativism. *Katolik.hr* is more overtly apologetic in its orientation, having been established by the Apologetics Association of Bl. Ivan Merz, whereas *vjeraidjela.com* features a broader range of content and a greater number of contributing authors, making it theologically richer.

While both websites offer a wealth of useful material that aids many believers in deepening their understanding of the faith, the following data do not support the apologetic character that some authors on these websites strongly emphasize. Upon analyzing over 70 articles from both websites in which Pope Francis is explicitly mentioned, one can conclude that criticism of Pope Francis initially originated from prelates in the Catholic Church.

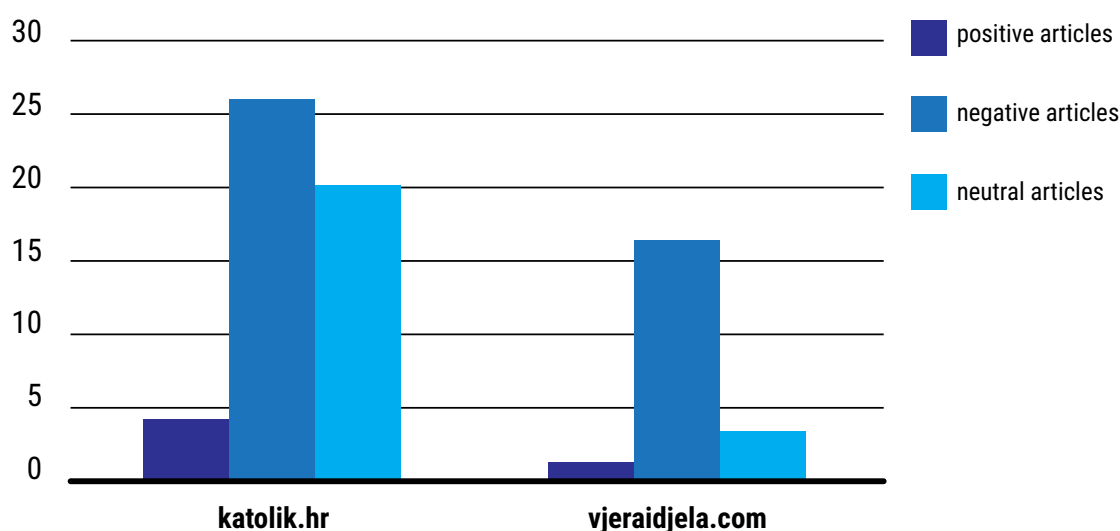


Figure 1. Analysis of articles on websites about Pope Francis published up to and including March 1, 2024.

This means that members of the clergy, rather than laypeople, were the first to direct critique toward Francis's pontificate, thus paradoxically encouraging laypeople to follow suit.

On *katolik.hr*, 4 articles presented Pope Francis in a positive light, 20 were neutral, and 26 portrayed him in a distinctly negative tone. On *vjerajdjela.com*, 1 article portrayed Pope Francis positively as someone who contributes to the faith, 3 were neutral, and 6 were negative, with a critical perspective on his papacy. The majority of the texts on *katolik.hr* and *vjerajdjela.com*, therefore, referred to Pope Francis in a negative context (**Figure 1**). It is important to note, however, that this analysis encompasses all articles from *katolik.hr* and *vjerajdjela.com* in which Pope Francis is mentioned either directly or indirectly.

Normative guides

In today's context, marked by secularism and pluralism, and closed-mindedness towards the transcendent ((48), p. 34), where the Catholic faith no longer holds a dominant position in the Western world, but exists merely as one among many religions and Christian denominations, the question arises regarding the role of the Roman pontiff, who has been consistently rejected by Protestant communities that emerged during the Reformation, as well as by various non-Christian religions. However, in the modern world, the opposition to the papacy is also present among Catholics. Strikingly, it is often those who identify as traditional Catholics who have become the most vocal critics of Pope Francis. Although critics of Pope Francis often asserted that their criticism was directed toward a particular pontificate, rather than the papacy as such, it is, in essence, impossible to separate the two. To critique Pope Francis is, by extension, to critique the authority of the Catholic Church itself, given that Pope Francis possesses as full legitimacy as any pope ever held; for example, Pope Benedict XVI received 84 votes at the 2005 conclave, while Pope Francis received more than 90 votes at the one held in 2013 ((2), p. 69). To demonstrate how such tendencies run counter to Catholic faith, we must articulate what the Roman pontiff fundamentally represents.

The Pope as guardian of tradition

The authority of the pope is episcopal, for he is the bishop of Rome and a member of the college of bishops, which he presides over. This characteristic is crucial, as it bridges legal terminology used to describe such attributes. Papal authority is of an episcopal nature and serves a pastoral purpose. It is not concerned with secular or political matters; rather, it is directed toward the fulfillment of the threefold mission of teaching, sanctifying, and governing Christ's flock toward *éschaton*.

According to the Catechism: "The Roman pontiff and the bishops are authentic teachers, endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people entrusted to them, the faith that is to be believed and applied in daily life" ((49), § 2034). The Catholic Church holds that Christ himself conferred authority upon the pope and the bishops in communion with him, entrusting them with the safeguarding of the deposit of faith and orthodox doctrine, especially the pope. Critics of the pope often fail to perceive this broader context, inadvertently undermining the Catholic tradition itself.

The vicar of Christ

Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, describes the Roman pontiff as the visible foundation of the faith and Church's unity ((32), n. 18). By divine right, the pope possesses the fullness of pastoral authority, enabling him to exercise governance over the entire Church. As the successor of the Apostle Peter, he inherits the same governing authority that Christ personally bestowed upon Peter. Just as Peter was the head of the apostolic college, the pope is the head of the college of bishops. He is the vicar of Christ and the shepherd of the universal Church. With regard to his authority as a teacher, the pope is considered infallible in matters pertaining to faith and morals when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, by virtue of his office as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful. He confirms his brethren in the faith and definitively proclaims doctrines concerning faith and morals ((50), can. 331, 333 § 2, 353 § 1; (32), n. 25).

As stated previously, successors of Saint Peter hold a central role in guiding the faithful. The pope is an earthly shepherd endowed with divine authority ((38), Matthew 16:19). Nevertheless, both the Apostle Peter and his successors, the popes, are human beings, and as such are fallible and imperfect. Human beings cannot rely solely on themselves, for “every man is a liar!” ((38), Psalm 116:11). The significance of Peter in the Scripture is illustrated through five distinct instances in which Christ addresses him. For example, he commands him in the Gospel according to Luke: “from now on you will catch men” ((38), Luke 5:10), “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” ((38), Luke 16:19a), “whatever you bind upon earth shall be bound in heaven” ((38), Luke 16:19b), and “strengthen your brothers” ((38), Luke 22:32). The fifth instance can be found in the Gospel according to John: “feed my lambs [...] follow me” ((38), John 21:15–19). Theologian Niko Ikić wrote the following concerning the biblical foundation of Peter's ministry: “The ministry of Peter in the Church is entrusted with responsibility for the entire Church. [...] The Church's trust in authority is grounded in this faith. Within this trust, one must recognize the charism of infallibility granted by the Spirit for the sake of truth.” (51).

Peter's ministry is not merely a bureaucratic function, where the Roman pontiff only maintains the existing hierarchy. Although the pope exercises monarchical authority, he is not a monarch in the secular sense – he does not hold absolute power and is accountable to God. His function is not a natural, but rather a supernatural one, established by Jesus Christ for the governance of the Church in its journey toward the Parousia. Papal infallibility is not a magical power, but a charism rooted in divine institution guaranteed by apostolic succession, which has safeguarded the transmission of the authentic faith preserved by the Church since apostolic times. The pope's infallibility does not derive from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, but from his communion with Jesus Christ; “Therefore, Christ himself is the guarantor of the Church's infallibility, and the Church's infallibility is the effective instrument of truth” (51). Just as the episcopal office gains legitimacy through communion with the Holy Father, so too is the pope's infallibility founded in the reciprocal love between Christ and the successor of Peter, who is an integral part of the Church. Stjepan Bakšić concludes ((52), p. 11):

Over the course of eighteen centuries, the whole Church has steadfastly professed, through the Pope, councils, Church teachers, and the faithful, indeed through the best of its sons, that

the decisions of the Roman Pontiff on matters of faith are unshakable, immutable, and, most importantly, true because they are infallible.

Pastor aeternus

Pastor aeternus, the dogmatic constitution of the First Vatican Council, states as follows ((53), chapters 2 and 3):

Whoever succeeds Peter in the Holy See, by Christ's own institution, inherits Peter's primacy over the entire Church [...] The Roman pontiff is the true vicar of Christ, the head of the whole Church, the father and teacher of all Christians; and our Lord Jesus Christ entrusted to him, in the person of blessed Peter, the full power of shepherding, ruling, and governing the entire Church.

The Church is not merely a human institution concerned with social issues; rather, it is an institution established by God and founded by Jesus Christ, with its core mission being to proclaim the Kingdom of God. It represents the community of believers, Christ's disciples, making it inseparably connected to Jesus Christ. It does not, therefore, exist for its own sake, but rather for the salvation of souls; the Holy Spirit or Paraclete assists it in its mission as the third divine person through which God guides his Church so that he might show the world what is sin, righteousness, and judgment ((38), John 16:8). The primacy of the pope, as defined by the First Vatican Council, is one of jurisdiction. The term "jurisdiction" underscores the binding authority entrusted to the pope by Christ, which demands the obedience of all the faithful. It stands in contrast to the primacy of honor (*primus inter pares*) recognized in Eastern Orthodoxy with the ecumenical patriarch, which entails advisory and guiding capacities, but not coercive authority.

Papal authority is universal, insofar as it extends to all members of the Church with respect to any matters that may arise; it is ordinary, meaning it is exercised regularly, rather than exclusively in extraordinary circumstances; it is not delegated, as it is intrinsically vested in the papal office; it is supreme, signifying that it is not subject to any higher authority; it is complete, encompassing all issues that may pertain to the life of the Church; and it is immediate, requiring no intermediary for its exercise ((50), can. 331–333). The primacy of the pope is a mystery within the economy of salvation. While it may be grasped rationally and can be historically verified, it nonetheless retains a mystical dimension that eludes complete comprehension. This symbolism of the pope ultimately points to Christ as sovereign over heaven and earth. In his primary office, the pope is bound by objective norms of fidelity derived from the proclaimed Word of God, the fundamental structure of the Church, and tradition. While he receives the divine assistance necessary to fulfill his ministry, this does not exempt him from the grave responsibility before Christ, appointed by God to judge the living and the dead ((38), Acts 10:42). The episcopal office within the Catholic Church demands humility, prudence, and holiness from its bearer (54).

Pope as the visible unity of the faithful

Underlying the theology of Peter's ministry is the principle of communion-unity in the Church amid its diversity. While communion is a sociological concept, communion has ontological meaning and is the formal embodiment of Peter's primacy according to divine relation. It serves as a permanent and visible center and the foundation for the communion

of local churches, animated by the Holy Spirit. This is felt by many who find themselves outside the proverbial boat of Peter during times of crisis concerning faith and communion (55). Without Church authority, neither unity nor communion can be sustained. The First Vatican Council affirmed the pope's authority – not only matters of faith and morals, but also disciplines and administrative decisions concerning the universal Church ((52), p. 3–4) – giving rise to the obligation of obedience. The authority that the pope receives from Christ is intrinsically ordered and imposed upon the successor of St. Peter as a grave moral responsibility. While the faithful should be obedient to the Holy Father, they are not obliged to assent to everything the pope expresses in his personal capacity or in matters unrelated to his office or the mission of the Church (56).

The pope possesses extensive authority and is obligated to exercise it whenever necessary to uphold the unity of faith and communion in Church. Failure to do so with the college of bishops can result in significant harm to the people of God, as well as undermine the supreme mode by which Christ has constituted his Church. Misuse of papal authority, therefore, also connotes the misuse of the power entrusted to the pope by Christ, as it is intended for the edification of the Church, not its destruction ((52), p. 13–14). The pope's office of building and preserving the Church entails safeguarding the unity of faith and communion among clergy and laity, and therefore demands a humble love for the Holy Father from the faithful ((50), can. 245).

Although the Church is entrusted with a mission from God, it does not exist apart from the world. In this sense, the pope is not only a spiritual authority, but also holds political significance, insofar as the Catholic Church is the only religious institution in the world that possesses its own sovereign state. No member of the faithful, whether layperson or cleric, who publicly criticizes the pope in a manner that damages his reputation (and, by extension, the reputation of the Church) acts in service of the Catholic faith. The Code of Canon Law explicitly prescribes duties for all clerics, among which are reverence and obedience to the supreme pontiff – the pope ((50), can. 273–274). Beyond these, every cleric, from deacon to presbyter to bishop and cardinal, is obliged to contribute to the edification of the Church as the mystical body of Christ ((50), can. 275, § 1–2), implying that they must also cooperate and assist one another in fulfilling Christ's mission, always working for the good of the Church as a whole. With this in mind, it is neither prudent nor appropriate for prelates to engage in disputes through the media, as such actions distort the image of the Church, as well as diminish the public perception of its unity, and consequently, the public's respect.

Naturally, the pope is a human being and, as such, is subject to original sin. The pontificate of Pope Francis began with the act of confession, through which he sought to demonstrate both his humanity and the necessity for the ecclesiastical hierarchy to partake in the sacrament, as all people, regardless of their rank, are subject to sin. The act of confession is an act of humility. The sacrament of Penance gives life, absolves sin, and draws us into the supernatural life, which is impossible without sanctifying grace. However, the pope's human nature does not negate his infallibility, as he is not omniscient or immune to making poor practical judgments. According to the dogma of the Catholic Church, infallibility means that the pope, by a special gift of the Holy Spirit, is only infallible when speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals ((57), p. 184).

It is, therefore, true that a pope may act contrary to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and instead follow his personal will, which may not reflect God's will. Yet, since no one can definitively discern "the mind of the Spirit," the Catholic faithful are called to heed the pope and the college of bishops, who govern the Church together. It is essential to distinguish between the personal sinfulness of the pope as a man and the notion of a heretical pope who would lead the Church astray. While history records popes who were public sinners, there has never been a pope who was formally a heretic from the Catholic perspective (47). The premise that the pope is a heretic is so difficult to prove that it is almost entirely wrong from a Catholic perspective.

Discussion

The Catholic Church believes that the Holy Spirit guides it through the Magisterium, led by the pope. Just as it is impossible to separate the Church from its divine founder, Jesus Christ, it is also impossible to separate the Church from God. Accusing Pope Francis of leading the Church into ruin is also an implicit accusation against the cardinals who elected him during the conclave, many of whom were appointed by now-deceased popes, one of whom has been canonized and another of whom remains highly respected in conservative circles. With that in mind, criticism directed at Pope Francis is, in its essence, a rejection of apostolic succession, one of the clearest expressions of which is the papal conclave. Catholics who critique Pope Francis because of his pastoral approach do not serve the People of God; rather, they create division within the Church, thereby casting doubt on the credibility of Catholicism itself.

Apostolic succession

The 2013 conclave was attended by numerous cardinals, including some who would later become critics of Pope Francis's pontificate, such as Raymond L. Burke, Joachim Meisner, and Carlo Caffarra (known for their submission of the *dubia* to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2016). Like Cardinal Bergoglio, they were eligible to be elected to the papacy, but none received the necessary majority of votes. It is not unthinkable that some of the excessive criticism and media pressure aimed at Pope Francis may stem, at least partially, from envy among certain cardinals who were not elected. One must remember that cardinals are also human beings. They have emotions and passions, they know one another personally, and have preferences regarding who they would like to see in the papal office. The frailty of human nature, manifested in vanity, envy, and base passions, appears even among high-ranking officials of the Church, which has been widely acknowledged ((58), p. 119).

The cardinals who elected Pope Francis to the papacy had received the cardinalate either from Pope John Paul II or from Pope Benedict XVI (**Figure 2**). Thus, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected by a body of cardinals whose cardinalate had been conferred upon them by previous popes. Among these was Pope John Paul II, who elevated then-Archbishop Bergoglio to the rank of cardinal in 2001. At the papal conclave in which the Argentine Cardinal Bergoglio was elected Roman pontiff, 115 out of a possible 117 cardinal electors

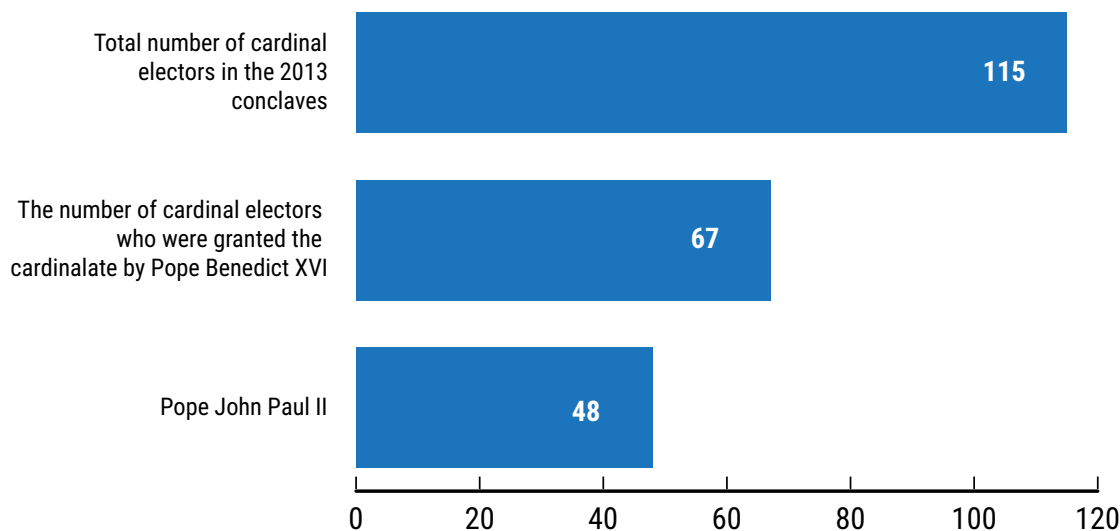


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the proportion of cardinalates granted by the two popes to the cardinal electors who participated in the 2013 conclave.

of the Catholic Church were in attendance (two cardinals did not participate); 48 (42%) had been appointed by Pope John Paul II and 67 (58%) by Pope Benedict XVI. Together, these electors chose Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the next pope during the 2013 conclave with a two-thirds majority. Accordingly, Pope Francis was elected with the support and authority of cardinal electors, who themselves were appointed to their office by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Therefore, to reject or call into question the legitimacy of Pope Francis's pontificate is, by extension, to reject the very notion of apostolic succession.

Apostolic succession is precisely what guarantees orthodoxy. It has safeguarded the faith for centuries through the service of the Church's sons – popes, bishops, and priests. By laying hands on their successors, the apostles ensured the preservation of the deposit of faith. Without this, there is no Church. The pope acts as a guarantor of apostolic succession more than any other bishop or presbyter, for he is elected by the College of Cardinals, who, in turn, are appointed solely by the pope. It is therefore profoundly imprudent to question the pontificate of Pope Francis or to challenge its legality and legitimacy. Accordingly, to disregard the pontificate of Pope Francis is to disregard the Church and apostolic succession itself, pointing to a distorted ecclesiology (59).

Criticism of the pope and modernism

The term “modernism” is not used here as it is in art history or philosophy, and should not be confused with similar concepts such as modernity, but should rather be understood in the way it is employed in theological discussions following the Second Vatican Council. Although theological modernism originated long before this event, it was popularized by conservative theological thinkers who were dissatisfied with the outcomes and changes in the Church that followed, and sought to distinguish between the traditional, “pre-Council” faith and the “modernist faith” that emerged afterward. Therefore, in our understanding, modernism represents everything that is new, changed, and progressive in Church teaching, as opposed to the traditional, orthodox, and unchanging (60). Paul's

confrontation with Peter ((38), Galatians 2:11) is frequently cited as evidence that the pope may be publicly criticized if he acts contrary to the doctrine of Christ. However, should this be regarded as an absolute principle? More precisely, is it legitimate to draw an inductive conclusion that anyone may publicly criticize the pope, simply by invoking that particular passage of the Scripture? While constructive criticism offered *bona fide* can be fruitful, criticism for its own sake, especially if *ad hominem*, is destructive and dangerous, since it is directed against the head of the Catholic Church by Catholics themselves. Although Paul did confront Peter directly, he did not persist in his criticism. Pope Francis's critics, meanwhile, hold to their critiques to such an extent that they make everything he does seem incompatible with Catholic teaching, and some even called him an anti-pope (61).

Criticism that is delivered indiscreetly causes a person significant psychological harm and impacts their public reputation. The Code of Canon Law instructs that the lay faithful must avoid anything that harms the Catholic faith and morals when using public media ((50), can. 831, §1). The criticism that was directed at Pope Francis often conceals a modernist tendency beneath a mask of tradition. This phenomenon is largely attributable to erroneous interpretations emerging from the postmodern and secular society that increasingly disdains humility and obedience – virtues upon which the Church has been built across the centuries ((38), Romans 16:26, Romans 1:6, 2 Corinthians 10:5–6; (32), n. 5). Consequently, in the name of upholding tradition, some adopt an oppositional stance toward the pope, the very person charged with safeguarding that tradition. Indeed, many of Pope Francis's critics present themselves as orthodox Catholics, yet they call into question the very essence of Catholic identity – the institution of the papacy, in which lies the principal distinction between Catholicism and other Christian confessions. The criticisms levied against Pope Francis echo the accusations of the Protestant Reformers, who labeled the pope a heretic and even an Antichrist intent on destroying Christianity (62).

Critiquing authority within the Church

Catholics are not papists, and their attitude toward the Holy Father should not resemble that of a serf toward his feudal lord, nor should it reflect the relationship of master and servant, as conceptualized in Hegelian terms ((63), p. 121–125). Rather, this relationship should be moderate, grounded in spirit and truth. As the Apostle Paul declared: “Not that we lord it over your faith, but are fellow workers with you of joy” ((38), 2 Corinthians 1:24). This applies to the entire Catholic hierarchy. The lay faithful are not strangers or tourists within the Church. They are not, metaphorically speaking, mere visitors who come to purchase what the priest offers. Rather, by virtue of their baptism, they belong intrinsically to the Church and form an integral part of the People of God (64). As such, the laity bears co-responsibility in the Church's pastoral mission; a layperson who fails to publicly profess the faith has, consequently, failed as a believer. In recent times, efforts have been made to give greater authority to the laity within the bounds of what Catholic ecclesiology permits. However, the fact that certain laypersons have “taken matters into their own hands” and assumed roles reserved for bishops does not serve the good of the Church. Through such actions, they fall into the sin of presumption, while the bishops fall into the sin of omission.

Critics of the Pope frequently find themselves in contradiction with both theology and ecclesial praxis. They often dislike modernists and critique “progressive” Catholic media for their conformity to the spirit of the world, yet themselves engage in something that has never before been practiced in the Church and can therefore be considered modernist – public criticism of the pope. Historically, neither prelates and priests, nor lay faithful have publicly criticized the pope without being excommunicated. This paradox was addressed by Nodilo (65):

The Pope’s “opponents” are those who desire the return of grand rhetoric, great defenders of dogma, and powerful “bombs,” and simultaneously demand the right to launch such bombs themselves. However, the two are mutually exclusive. If one truly desires the “old Church,” the only consistent strategy is to remain silent and submit to authority. Yet such submission is precisely what the critics refuse to consider. In so doing, they embody the very values they claim to criticize – freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, equality before the law... and other “fruits of modernism”. Thus, in an ironic twist of fate [...] critics of “modernism” are in fact at the forefront of “modernist” advancement and perhaps too proud to realize it.

Taking all this into account, one must acknowledge that the Church has traditionally been an institution in which reverence for authority was deeply ingrained and strictly observed (66). Even Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, states the following regarding respect for superiors ((67), p. 362):

We ought to be more ready to approve and praise the decrees and directives of our superiors than condemn them. Even if they are not, or perhaps never were, as they ought to be, speaking against them, whether in public discourse or private conversation with ordinary people, is more likely to cause gossip and scandal than to bring about any benefit. Such speech would only embitter the people against their superiors, whether secular or spiritual.

Even when a superior is in error, one must exercise caution when offering correction; public denunciation in this context is neither in the spirit of Scripture nor prudent, especially when the superior in question is the Holy Father.

Postmodernity within the Church

The contemporary world lives in the era of postmodernity. In literature, the concepts of postmodernism and postmodernity are often intertwined, making it difficult to precisely define the latter or place it within specific boundaries of certain thought (68, 69). There are debates that deny postmodernity in favor of modernity, viewing that it has not really transcended modernity, but rather is a similar phenomenon. Namely, modernity emerged during the time of rationalism, naturalism, and materialism, aiming to overcome them ((69), p.157). Postmodernity, meanwhile, inherits, at least in philosophy, similar features as modernity, such as skepticism toward ethical and religious absolutes ((69), p.158).

Postmodernity is a state of postmodernism. The latter encompasses various disciplines: philosophy, theology, art, and politics. In a narrower sense, postmodernity – which translates as “after-modernity” – is a direction that denies the existence of the so-called grand narratives, absolute truths, and philosophical systems that explain the world in its totality ((70), p. 447). While philosophical modernity placed emphasis on scientific truths, especially on rationalism, progressivism, and the Enlightenment – the so-called age of reason – postmodernity denies some universally accepted truths that previously held value ((71),

p. 391). It is important to emphasize that we write from a theological-Catholic paradigm in which there exists revealed truth. We do not question the truth of one or the other. In this sense, postmodernity emphasizes the subjective feeling of faith and individualism in theological thought, as well as liberation from any form of authority ((70), p. 451). For this reason, the bridges that were built over centuries now seem to be out of use, and people apparently no longer feel the need for the transcendent ((72), p. 244). Postmodernity relativizes and surpasses traditional values, turning instead toward the subjective, individual, and plural. This places it in direct conflict with the doctrine of the Catholic Church, which denies moral and religious relativism. In postmodernity, everyone has their own narrative, their own truth, and no authority is recognized (73). The lattermost position is very important for our work, as it is precisely authority (reputation, earned trust) that is an ontological quality necessary for the correct understanding of Catholic faith and ecclesiology.

From a sociological perspective, authority is a fundamental social determinant, as no society has ever existed without some form of political or religious authority. Historically, this authority was held by patriarchs, tribal deities, kings, and pharaohs; today, we see it embodied in parliamentary democracy and the institution of the presidency. Thus, one may affirm that authority is embedded within the very fabric of anthropology. Authority holds particular weight in the Catholic Church, mainly because of the teaching that Jesus Christ instituted it and entrusted it to the apostles, principally to Peter and his successors. Therefore, authority is a fundamental characteristic of the Catholic faith, for its mission – namely, the preservation and guidance of the deposit of faith through apostolic succession – cannot be properly understood apart from authority.

The actions of certain critics of Pope Francis, however, do not stem from authentic Catholicism, but rather from postmodernity. Although such individuals present themselves as orthodox and traditional defenders of the Catholic faith, they reject the religious authority of Pope Francis granted to him in apostolic succession. Not only do they refuse to accept his authority, but some go so far as to deny that he is truly the pope. For instance, Ivan Poljaković wrote the following on *katolik.hr* (74):

Pope Francis has repeatedly shown that his speeches, writings, and actions are not Catholic. It is important to emphasize that this is not a matter of the Pope expressing doubt regarding a single article of faith, as was typically the case with heretics throughout Church history. Rather, it concerns the assertion that over the course of his 10-year pontificate, Pope Francis has made it abundantly clear that his beliefs align in virtually no respect with the faith of the Catholic Church. [...] I do not consider Pope Francis a heretic in the strict sense of the term. Rather, he is simply not a Catholic, but an apostate. [...] Only when the bishops publicly proclaim the truth – that Jorge Mario Bergoglio is not a Catholic – will God assist us.

Such a position is both *de facto* (2013 conclave) and *de jure* (according to the Code of Canon Law) incompatible with the Catholic faith. Herein lies the “postmodern subversion”: what historically signified fidelity to tradition and orthodoxy – namely, the papacy – is now being weaponized into anti-papism. Some even go so far as to label Pope Francis not merely a false pope, but an antipope (75). Thus, a pope who has been legally and legitimately elected is not an orthodox or Catholic pontiff in the eyes of his critics, simply because they disagree with the way he governs the Church. These accusations are neither prudent nor conducive to the Church’s edification. On the contrary, they generate division and factionalism unbefitting of the Catholics. The office of the Roman pontiff exists to guide the Church

along a linear path of development, not to lead it backward toward long-forgotten eras that have already been transcended. Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, also wrote about postmodern Christian relativism. He considered postmodernity to be the main cause of theological relativism, where doubts arise regarding some traditional Christian truths, leading to the emergence of the so-called pluralistic theology ((76), p. 188).

The paradox among critics of Pope Francis

A paradox can be noted among the critics of Pope Francis in their appeal to Pope Benedict XVI as the true Catholic Pope – one who, in their view, safeguarded the traditional Catholic faith (77). This appeal, however, disregards several important facts. First, it must be acknowledged that Ratzinger was initially regarded as a young liberal theologian from Bavaria (78), belonging to the same pre-Second Vatican Council school as Yves Congar, Hans Küng, Johann Baptist Metz, Karl Rahner, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Edward Schillebeeck. All of these theologians, including Ratzinger, were co-founders of the theological journal “*Concillium*” (1965) aimed at promoting the spirit of the Council. After some time, the group parted ways, as certain theologians began to advocate for tertiary-conciliar theological ideas. Ratzinger aligned himself with the trajectory of the Council and, together with other theologians (Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Lehmann), founded the theological journal “*Communio*” in 1972. This journal embodies the hermeneutic of continuity, in contrast to the journal “*Concillium*”, which represents the hermeneutic of discontinuity (79). The said hermeneutic is often critically attributed to Pope Francis as well. It is important to emphasize that Cardinal Ratzinger himself was at one time accused of theological progressivism. Bearing this in mind, one must not forget that Pope Francis, while still Cardinal, did not advocate for the “liberation theology” movement entrenched within Argentine clerical circles, but rather aligned himself with the “theology of the people”, which firmly positions him within a conservative stream (80–83). From the very outset of his pontificate, he has affirmed the hermeneutic of continuity (84). Formed within a nation marked by deep poverty, Bergoglio was particularly attuned to social issues.

A second important point is that Pope Benedict XVI, upon his resignation from the papal office, pledged obedience to his successor (85). As a distinguished theologian, Benedict XVI understood that the credibility of any Catholic, and particularly a Catholic theologian, rests in fidelity and humility before the apostolic succession, which finds its origin in Jesus Christ. The primary representative of apostolic succession is the pope. Critics of Pope Francis distort the doctrine of the Catholic Church by selectively referencing Church documents in order to cast doubt on the current leadership of the Church. They cause division within the Church, which is anti-Gospel and contrary to the faith, and they legitimize their non-Catholic stance under the pretense that refusing to recognize the pope as such is entirely in accordance with Catholic tradition. This is evident in the fact that some of his most fervent critics even prayed for his conversion to the Catholic faith (86).

It is also worth noting that the late Cardinal George Pell, well-regarded within conservative circles, criticized Pope Benedict XVI’s decision to resign from the papal office, as he

disapproved of him retaining all the external symbols of papal authority: the papal name, the white cassock, and the use of the title “Your Holiness”. Consequently, both the secular and Catholic public developed the impression that the Church had two heads. According to Pell, Pope Benedict XVI should have done as Pope Celestine V (1294) did – that is, relinquish all signs of the papal office (87, 88).

The inner conflict among critics of Pope Francis

Psychology has drawn attention to the importance of the unconscious in humans. Freud, a pioneer in the field, recognized that elements within the human psyche significantly influence a person without necessarily being present at the conscious level. Here we encounter the unconscious – a source of many psychopathologies that affect our daily lives ((89), p. 97–102). Our unconscious is a true treasure – an origin of our deepest desires and repressed thoughts, wherein a person actively represses what they cannot confront – sometimes in dreams, and sometimes through behavior (90). According to Freud, the unconscious is larger in scope than the conscious part of our mind. There are various interpretations of Freud’s concept of the unconscious, but the dominant one is that the unconscious arose from the repression of ideas, thoughts, and memories, moving from consciousness to the subconscious through active mental processes (91). We can access the unconscious in different ways, one of which is psychoanalysis ((89), p. 107–110). The psychiatrist Scott Peck considers that the unconscious significantly contributes to the formation of one’s personality. According to him, repressed thoughts in our inner world represent our true *self*, whereas the conscious self often serves as a mask or a projection of what others expect from us (92, 93).

The unconscious thus comprises our authentic personality, which has been repressed not only from the public sphere, but even from ourselves. It is precisely the unconscious that contains what is most truthful within us. It represents our authentic self. Within the unconscious lie our most deeply buried emotions and desires, which we have repressed due to social pressure ((89), p. 270–275). Here, the emphasis is on repressed feelings, thoughts, and desires. The unconscious differs from the conscious precisely in that it is repressed and hidden from awareness, manifesting through slips of the tongue (Freudian slip). According to a medical definition, slips arise from unconscious conflicts, are psychologically conditioned, and tend to have a certain concealed tendency. These are unconscious mechanisms that emerge as a compromise between the conscious desire and the contents repressed into the unconscious (94). Thus, the unconscious, which is hidden from our awareness, is revealed through language errors, jokes, and similar phenomena of which we are unaware. We believe that criticisms of Pope Francis’s pontificate are also a kind of slip, where the guardians of tradition (*traditiones custododes*), the pope and bishops in communion with him, are criticized, and where the Holy Father is depicted as a theological novice and a poor shepherd – all supposedly in the name of defending the faith. As a social being, a human cannot always remain open, authentic, and transparent toward others, for the realization that what one truly thinks may threaten one’s existential standing leads them to mask the self into a socially acceptable form that conforms to the collective consensus. This means that every individual discloses fragments of their repressed

personality through their gestures and words (95). The internal conflict is best recognized by the contradiction between what is being said and what is being done.

There are various definitions and classifications of internal conflict (96–98), but here, we understand it as a mental struggle within a person emerging from contradictions in their desires, values, beliefs, emotions, or social paradigms. What we want to highlight here is the phenomenon that manifests when criticizing the Pope, namely, open intolerance towards the Holy Father on one side, manifested in the critics' extremely negative, doctrinally heretical, and pastorally misguided reprovals, and the defense of authentic Catholic faith on the other. If we consider what Pope Francis's critics appeal to and why they reproach him (**Table 1**), we can observe contradictions and inconsistencies among his critics, which, in psychological terms, can be expressed as a state of internal conflict.

Table 1. Grounds for criticism of Pope Francis and their underlying justifications

Parameters	Doctrinal	Pastoral	Liturgical
Why are they calling out Pope Francis?	Departure from tradition, hermeneutics of discontinuity, modernism and heresy	Obscure teaching, rigidity towards traditional Catholics, laxity towards non-Catholics, and religious relativism	Ban on the Latin Mass, changing liturgical customs, profanation of the Holy Mass
What are they referring to?	Orthodoxy: scripture and tradition	Catechism of the Catholic Church and Code of Canon Law	Traditional Latin Mass and liturgical customs before the Second Vatican Council

The Pope's critics fail to distinguish between the doctrine of the Catholic Church and its pastoral practice. Specifically, they reject pastoral discipline by treating it as immutable and universally applicable, which is contrary to both Scripture and theological science as such. While doctrine and pastoral practice within the Catholic faith are clearly inter-related, they remain distinct. Indeed, the hermeneutical key employed by Pope Francis in pastoral practice gives primacy to reality over ideas ((99), n. 231). Critics of Francis find it difficult to comprehend how the immutable and already defined dogmatic doctrine of the Catholic Church can be communicated in diverse ways. Paul, who wrote his epistles only a few decades after Christ's death and resurrection, clearly understood this dynamic, stating: "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." ((38), 1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

Paul says, "I have become all things to all people." In doing so, he does not wish to justify sin or divergent lifestyles, nor does he imply a dilution of the Gospel; rather, he affirms that he withheld nothing of God's design in his proclamations ((38), Acts 20:17). Paul proclaimed what he believed deeply in his heart and mind: the risen Christ. However, the method he used to proclaim it varied according to the social context in which he found himself. Recognizing that the Gospel must be communicated differently to different peoples, cultures, and nations, Paul adapted his message to the recipients' capacities, knowing well that one cannot speak to a Jew in the same manner as to a Greek or a Roman. The inner conflict of Pope Francis's critics is most evident in their willingness to defend the dogma of papal infallibility, while simultaneously offering harsh criticism of Pope Francis.

These two positions are incompatible: one cannot believe the dogma of papal infallibility, while simultaneously doubting the orthodoxy of the current pontificate. This is a contradiction that fails to satisfy the criteria of logical reasoning. Moreover, such a stance cannot be called Catholic, since Catholicism has always entailed humility before the supreme authority of the Church.

Crisis of the Church as a crisis of faith among Catholics

Aversion toward the Holy Father within Catholic circles can only be interpreted as a deficiency of faith in God (the Holy Spirit) who guides the Church. A lack of faith in God leads to a breakdown of trust in the Catholic Church and its hierarchical structure, thereby casting doubt on the governance of the Holy Spirit. To deny the pope is to deny apostolic succession. It is likewise impossible to separate, as some attempt to do, Jesus Christ from the Church. As has already been established, Jesus Christ instituted the Church and appointed the Apostle Peter as its head. It is precisely through the successors of Peter, by means of apostolic succession, that the Catholic faith maintains a permanent link to Jesus Christ. Opposition to Pope Francis is, in fact, a manifestation of unbelief, cunningly disguised as orthodoxy. These are undoubtedly individuals who have long since lost their faith, or perhaps never possessed authentic faith to begin with ((100), p. 34).

The great Church Father and disciple of John the Evangelist, Ignatius of Antioch, wrote the following of such people long ago: “There are those who, wickedly cunning, cloak themselves with the name [of Christ], yet act in ways unworthy of God. You must avoid them as wild beasts; for they are rabid dogs who bite in secret; you must guard yourselves, for their bite is hard to heal.” ((101), p. 45–46). This is precisely what theologians refer to when they speak of wolves in the sheepfold who prevent others from entering the flock ((102), p. 109). Ignatius refers to many who either possess a distorted view of the faith or are believers for opportunistic reasons, thereby causing scandal to genuine believers. They live double lives by persecuting faithful members of the Church and disturbing the peace of the flock. Nevertheless, one might ask: Is the current crisis in the Church more reflective of its internal nature (due to weeds) or the result of external factors? It is difficult to offer a definitive answer. The truth, perhaps, lies somewhere in the middle: it is plausible to suggest that the Church harbors internal problems which it is not capable of resolving because such problems would otherwise not persist on such a scale. The revelations of sexual abuse scandals within the Church in recent years underscore this reality, while the continued concealment of such offenses has only worsened an already grave situation and further marginalized victims. These issues must be faced with prudence, justice, and reconciliation, as this will restore trust and contribute to the building up of parish communities, dioceses, and the Church as the Body of Christ.

Obstacles to evangelization

The modern individual – who is much in need of the proclamation of the Gospel – is unlikely to embrace the Catholic faith when he witnesses disunity among bishops, priests, and lay faithful. This is especially true when persistent public criticism of the Holy Father comes from Catholics themselves. Theologian Tonči Matulić believes that there is a compelling reason why Pope Francis was not particularly popular among certain Catholic circles, especially the conservative ones. Namely, Pope Francis had addressed sensitive issues within the Church, such as sexual abuse, clericalism, and financial misconduct. This is supported by the fact that Book VI of the Code of Canon Law regarding penal sanctions in the Church was revised and the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors established during the pontificate of Pope Francis (103). Of course, Pope's homilies, in which he frequently draws attention to clerical and lay forms of rigidity and clericalism, have also attracted criticism. Matulić writes as follows (104):

A strange and theologically incomprehensible aversion has taken root among some of our brethren toward Pope Francis. Why is this the case? We surmise that it is because Pope Francis, unlike any pope in the recent history of the Church, speaks openly about the dark sides and deviations of clericalism within the Church.

Yet, the fact that Pope Francis raised uncomfortable questions need not to be detrimental to the Church or its ministers; rather, it can be a profound expression of love and concern for the Church, and a way to open a new chapter in its evangelizing mission. The Pope envisions this mission as one carried out by a loving, inclusive, open and compassionate community, marked by faith in Jesus Christ. He has chosen to purify the Church of moral corruption by directly confronting the issues that weigh it down. Many believers, both clergy and laity, evidently disapprove of this. They consider that the Church's pastoral strategy should remain unchanged, and that the world must submit itself humbly to the Church. The disagreement between Pope Francis's critics and his defenders lies in their contrasting views. The former believe the Church must exist as an isolated community in order to preserve orthodoxy, while the latter maintain that it must be a welcoming community, for only in this way can it effectively evangelize and fulfill its mission. However, there can be no communion and love without truth, and truth often feels uncomfortable, as it shines light into the darkness. One of the common objections against Pope Francis is that he is critical of the clergy. Yet, this very critique can inspire within priests a renewed sense of spirituality and deeper commitment to their mission. It may serve as a path toward enlightenment, helping them to realize that they are not mere ecclesial functionaries or administrators, but collaborators with Christ in building the Kingdom of God. Pope Benedict XVI once warned of this exact matter (105):

My experience has confirmed for me that many functions within the structures and life of the Church are carried out by individuals who in no way share the Church's faith [...] In Church institutions – hospitals, schools, and the Caritas – many key positions are occupied by individuals who do not support the Church's inner mission, thereby obscuring its witness.

Acknowledging the sinful deeds of the Church, namely its human and fallible dimension, is not a novelty among papal pontificates. Pope John Paul II did the same during the Jubilee Year (March 12, 2000), when he publicly confessed the faults of individuals within the Church and asked forgiveness for those wrongs (106). The concealment of wrongdoing

within the Church has historically proven to be imprudent; the uncovering of the weeds within the Church, its transparency before the world, and its engagement with the people of our time (synodality), can bring about genuine transformation that will become evident in new spiritual movements within the Church, making it a more attractive and compelling institution.

Catholics engaging in destructive criticism of the pope in the public sphere create division among themselves which ultimately become visible even to non-Catholics. Such behavior is antithetical to the Gospel, for Christ's desire is that all may be one ((38), John 17:22). Above all, it provides non-Catholics with a reason to not convert to the Catholic faith. If Catholics themselves are divided, accusing one another and labeling each other as heretics, it is entirely understandable that outsiders would hesitate to enter such a communion. Consequently, public criticism of the pope is contrary to faith, to the Gospel, and to the Catholic identity. Many of Pope Francis's critics are experiencing a personal crisis of faith, which they project onto the Church and the papacy. In doing so, they externalize the responsibility for their own spiritual condition. After all, has there ever been a time when the Church was not in some form of crisis?

In this light, the destructive criticism directed at Pope Francis by some Catholics distorts the public image of the Church and significantly hinders both evangelization and re-evangelization. First, it undermines the unity of the Catholic Church. Second, it fosters factionalism within the People of God, with some standing "for" or others "against" the pope. Third, it disrupts the proper formation of lay believers, cultivating a distorted and erroneous perception of the relationship between the pope and the prelates. Fourth, it legitimizes opponents of the Catholic faith by exposing internal disunity, thereby compromising the Church's mission (salvation of souls). Fifth, it confuses Catholics around the world by misrepresenting the Pope not as the shepherd, but as an adversary to the flock. Sixth, it reflects a deficient ecclesiology, wherein critics of Pope Francis imply that every baptized believer is entitled to publicly critique the Pope on the basis of subjective spiritual impressions. This indicates that many members of the clergy interpret faith more narcissistically than ecclesially. Seventh, it downplays the role and presence of the Holy Spirit in guiding the Church, and diminishes the significance of the successor of Saint Peter. Eighth, it denies apostolic succession by casting doubt on the legitimacy of the conclave (2013) and the pontificate of Pope Francis. Ninth, by questioning apostolic succession, it undermines the magisterium of the Catholic Church, which includes the Pope and the bishops in communion with him. Tenth, it reveals a phenomenon of Catholics, both clerics and laypersons, whose faith has not been properly formed, and in some cases, reveals a subtle disbelief masquerading as exaggerated devotion and traditionalism. A positive dimension of these criticisms is that the Church is no longer a closed institution in which clericalism thrives unchecked. The contemporary Church is increasingly manifesting itself as an open community, where direct encounter and mutual understanding are prioritized.

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