



Face to Face

Wim Wenders has released a film on Pope Francis intended to be a personal journey with the Holy Father rather than a biographical documentary about him

by Gerard Condon

IN LATE 2013 a Vatican City official mailed a letter to the Berlin office of Wim Wenders with an irresistible offer: that he make a documentary about the recently elected Pope. The 73-year old, a pioneer of 'New Wave' German cinema, has directed many critically acclaimed movies, including *Paris Texas* (1984), *Wings of Desire* (1987) and *Pina* (2011). The offer included unprecedented access to the Vatican's film archives and face-to-face interviews with Pope Francis. The result of his work is a visually stunning meditation on the ministry of the 266th successor of Saint Peter

and spiritual leader to the world's 1.2 billion Catholics.

Jorge Bergoglio (born 1936) is the first pope from the southern hemisphere, the first Jesuit pope and, most importantly, according to Wenders, the first pope to style himself after Francis of Assisi (1181-1226). Using a hand-cranked 1920s camera, Wenders recreates key moments in the Italian saint's life, including his vision of Jesus asking him to "restore my Church." By choosing the name 'Francis,' Cardinal Bergoglio signalled his desire to be like the man from Assisi who renounced wealth, who respected "Sister Earth," who promoted Church reform and inter-faith dialogue.

Defining images

Viewers looking for a biography of Pope Francis, or insight into how the Church is governed, may be disappointed. Instead of critical analysis, we get defining images. In one of the film's few clips of the Pope before his election, Archbishop Bergoglio is shown addressing a gathering of youth in Buenos Aires in 1999. They have made a pilgrimage from all parts of the city, both rich and the poor. Though the young people, too, are from different socio-economic backgrounds, he asks them to hug each other, as a sign of their desire for reconciliation and as a witness to onlookers. That is the kind of Church that Pope Francis wants, one that "ferments fraternity" for the common good.

Other symbolic actions quickly followed the Pope's election, such as his decision to move into a simple apartment in the Vatican, rather than the Apostolic Palace, and his preference for an ordinary car over official limousines. In Philadelphia, USA, he washes and kisses the tattooed feet of a prisoner; in Africa he caresses the face of a sick child. At Sunday Mass in the city of Tacloban, in the Philippines, he wears the same rain-soaked poncho as the congregation, to underline his solidarity with those who have lost everything in a devastating typhoon.

Wenders' interviews with Francis (conducted from 2016 to 2018) reveal the personality of the pontiff as a warm-hearted, self-effacing man, who is passionate about the Gospel. He is more relaxed than I expected, possibly because the interviews were conducted in his native Spanish. Wenders interviewed the Pope with an *interrotron*, a device developed in the 1980s that has the interviewee speaking directly to the camera. This gives the impression that the Pope is talking to the viewer, and is transferring the responsibility for his words to our hands and feet. So what is his message? I took away three stand-out themes from this film

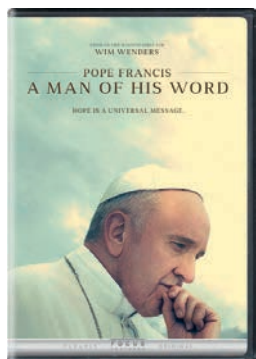
Wim Wenders and wife Donata at the premier of his film *Pope Francis: A Man of His Word* during at the 71st Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, France

1. Human Ecology

On the question of climate change, Pope Francis blames unfettered capitalism and our “culture of waste.” Humanity has “plundered” the earth, and we are just beginning to pay the price for our crime. But hostile weather patterns are just one symptom of the ecological crisis. Human poverty, too, is caused by a consumerist mentality that is indifferent to the needs of the poor. As the Pope points out, 80 percent of the world’s wealth is held by just 20 percent of mankind.

As a remedy to this injustice, Pope Francis suggests that we choose to live simply. Human dignity, he says, depends on three ‘Ts’: ‘Tierra’ (land), by which he means access to resources; ‘Trabajo’ (productive work), and ‘Techo,’ secure shelter. It is the absence of these basic rights that leads to the depraved living conditions that he sees in the *favelas* of Latin America and the refugee detention centres around Europe. The Pope conceives family life as the key building block of society. It is the place where people learn the meaning of love, even if, as he puts it, sometimes plates are let fly.

Pope Francis recalls the first time he came across a gated community. Back then, in 1970, the concept was then entirely novel. Now, he laments, this “closed circle” mentality is commonplace. Nations too are inclined to build walls more than bridges (a not-so veiled reference to President Trump). In a world grown cynical of political leaders, it is little wonder that Francis is regarded as a beacon of hope, a “shepherd to the world” as one religious Sister



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puts it. You can see that hope in the faces of the huge crowds who turn out to meet the Pope.

2. Church Reform

Francis wants “a poor Church for the poor,” one that cannot be accused of being self-serving. He thinks that the clergy, including himself, ought to “talk little, listen a lot, say just enough; always look people in the eye.” He advocates respect for gay people (“Who am I to judge?”) and a meaningful role for women in the Church. On the question of sexual abuse crimes committed by priests, he tells Wenders that his response is one of “zero tolerance,” and notes that the Church must support the civil authorities in rectifying these wrongs.

3. Rooted in Prayer

The Pope exudes self-belief, a quality, I think, that is founded on his daily communion with the Lord in prayer. The film has many images of the Pope at prayer in his travels and at home in the Vatican. His contentment is another sign of his personal holiness. This is a Pope who smiles easily and often, in contrast with the more sullen faces of the members of the Roman Curia. He tells Wenders that one reason for his contentment is that he is reconciled with his own mortality. Another is the prayer of

St. Thomas More (1478-1535), which he recites each morning. It begins: “Grant me, O Lord, good digestion, and also something to digest. Grant me a healthy body, and the necessary good humour to maintain it.”

Independent view

This visually stunning 96-minute film is complemented by a sparse music score and Wenders’ gentle voiceover. I felt, in one scene, a heart-wrenching pathos as Francis paid a surprise visit to a squatter camp outside Rome. The living conditions were miserable, but the smiles on the migrants’ faces spoke of God’s love. *Francis: A Man of His Word* is especially well edited with captivating switches between the view from the ‘popemobile’ as the Pope is driven through the waving crowds, to photo-calls with world leaders, to his carefully chosen words.

Wenders was born a Catholic, but is a convert to the Protestant faith. He insisted on having the movie independently financed and was given editorial control (‘final cut privilege’). However, in an interview with Joe Neumaier (June 12, 2018) the director admits that, over the course of the project, Pope Francis “got under my skin.” What impressed him most is the “Pope’s kindness, courage, his confidence and his endless optimism.” ♦