

Analysis

# Pope Francis's struggle to balance transparency and tradition

## Bishops just wrapped up two-week Synod on the Family

By David Perlich, [CBC News](#) Posted: Oct 20, 2014 11:05 AM ET Last Updated: Oct 20, 2014 11:17 AM ET

Pope Francis has walked out onto a tightrope, and now his balancing act begins.

Today, as the 200 or so Catholic bishops who participated in the Vatican's Synod on the Family return to their homes around the world, they take with them powerful emotions, some wounded pride and deep divisions over homosexuality and the nature of marriage.

Some critics have called the synod a "loss" for Francis and his vision for change. But it's highly unlikely this pope thought there would be quick and easy agreement; he's playing a long game.

It will be how Francis manages the acrimonious debate while maintaining stability that will be the true mark of his papacy.

When Francis was elected in 2013, many cardinals participating in the conclave said they were looking for change. They might get more than they bargained for.

This recent synod wasn't the end of debate, but just the beginning. And a beginning is a delicate time.

Any time change is in the air, and people are called on to come up with a new vision, things can seem unstable.

## A time of instability

Under Pope Francis, many of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics, as well as their bishops, are feeling freer to sound off on some of the most controversial social justice issues facing the Church: homosexuality, same-sex marriage, divorce, remarriage and unmarried couples.

The recent synod and its (some say watered-down) final report have exposed the depth of the disagreements. The Vatican tried to smooth over those divisions as the synod wrapped up, putting out messages stressing solidarity and openness.

In the end, there were plenty of smiles and handshakes between cardinals in the hallways. In that, it's not unlike the leadership race in a

political party: there's heated debate over core issues, unpleasant things get said and people choose sides.

But after the deal is done, everyone stresses unity for the good of the party.

Even so, when you open up debate and let people voice their true feelings, things can spiral out of control.

Candid debate and transparency seems to be part of Francis's plan to reinvigorate his Church — to help it re-engage with our increasingly complex modern society. As he himself put it, “God is not afraid of new things.”

But having uncorked the genie's bottle and gotten his wish, members of Francis's Catholic hierarchy are now having a go at each other, and he must play referee. It is a courageous risk he's taken with his personal reputation and authority. And there's no guarantee he'll succeed.

While Francis has been praised since his election, there's now growing anger in some Catholic quarters. A few prominent clergy are calling his silence on the most controversial topics during the synod a lack of leadership. Others say it was vital in guaranteeing open debate. Still others say Francis should do more to push a progressive agenda.

Everyone blames the referee.

## Reassuring nervous bishops

So far, Francis is striking a roughly middle path, warning against “the temptation of the hostile rigorist” and “destructive do-gooding” — in other words, those who would throw over core church beliefs in the interest of accommodation and those who wouldn't change one letter of law.

This savvy Jesuit Pope didn't choose those words randomly. It was a way of reassuring nervous bishops of all stripes. It was a strike at those on the traditionalist *and* progressive fringes of the Church.

But any time you open up debate on profoundly personal moral views — on those ideas that people hold to be most dear to their concept of truth and justice — it can be both terrifying and deeply painful.

When people feel threatened, they tend to circle the wagons and hunker down. A push for openness can, at times, actually cause deeper division.

Francis must ensure that, having welcomed dissension, he will be able to keep his cardinals and bishops in check, and that logical debate won't descend into anger and a confusion of ideas.

To do this, he may need to better define his vision of what's open to change, what's off limits and how far he'll let debate go before stepping in.

Francis needs to reassure conservatives that he's not going to allow the wholesale scrapping of traditional church teaching. And he'll need to reassure progressives that there's hope for change.

In the meantime, we can expect divergent opinions to become more entrenched.

## Next steps

Between now and the next, far more important synod in October 2015, various groups of cardinals, bishops and church groups will use what they've learned from this synod – which ideas and individual words can become flashpoints, who's on whose side and how the global media react to the debate – to set a new agenda.

The Vatican always suggests the Holy Spirit guides Church debate. But sometimes, the Holy Spirit seems to get some help from old-fashioned power politics. There are already angry conservative whispers that organizers of the recent synod rigged it to push change.

So, there will be lobbying over lunch. Phone calls between influential personalities. Gentle (and not so gentle) ecclesiastical arm-twisting. Plans made to defend particular doctrines. And plans to alter those doctrines.

Theologians will worry the historical details. High-profile cardinals will trade barbs in media interviews. Like-minded individuals will band together, and each interest group will try to find a front man to represent their views publicly.

Already the German Cardinal Walter Kasper seems to be the voice of progressives, and the American Cardinal Raymond Burke is seen as representing a traditional standpoint. Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea often seems to represent the concerns of African church. And others will come to the fore.

But all eyes will be on Francis, looking to him for guidance, challenging him to keep a firm hand on the tiller without shutting down the dissent he himself has called for.