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Pope Francis focuses his remaining energies on Ukraine battlefield

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Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—On March 13, Pope Francis will observe the 10th anniversary of his election to the papacy. In that decade, he has reached outward to a fractured world, and inward to a fractured church. Seldom in the modern history of the Catholic Church has a pope been plunged into

both external and internal crises at the same time.

The world is broken by the immense suffering of the Ukraine war, and the church is torn between those who want to advance the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, in which the People of God are all deemed equal, and those who still consider the function of the laity is to pray, pay, and obey.

It has been the lot of Argentinian Jorge Bergoglio (a.k.a. Pope Francis), an 86-year-old man who is in declining health, to try to keep the Catholic Church from breaking into open schisms while simultaneously appealing to world leaders to “make concrete efforts to end the [Ukraine] conflict, reach a ceasefire, and start peace negotiations.”

In this period, Canadian Michael Czerny, a fellow Jesuit, has risen from a humble position as a Vatican official to become the Pope’s right-hand man in promoting a social justice agenda for all humanity. The Pope wrote a foreword for Czerny’s latest

book, *Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis*, in which Francis called Czerny his “pastoral guide.”

Born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1946, Czerny was brought to Canada as a two-year-old by his parents who had escaped Nazi wartime persecution. He became a Jesuit, obtained his doctorate in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Chicago, and co-founded the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice in Toronto. In 1990, when six Jesuits in San Salvador were murdered by the military, Czerny rushed to take the place of the leader of the slain priests. The Vatican then called him to Rome to work with migrants, refugees, and social justice issues. In 2019, Pope Francis suddenly named Czerny a cardinal. When the Ukraine war broke out, Francis immediately sent him to the war zone to provide relief to the first wave of refugees.

Now Czerny’s formal job is prefect of the Dicastery on Promoting Human Development, but his real contribution to Francis’ global

outreach has been as a ghostwriter for two of the Pope’s most important documents. Francis’s encyclical, *Laudato Si’* (On Care for Our Common Home), is a plea to the world for environmental security, which was hailed internationally as an expression of conscience in caring about the climate crisis. This was followed up by a lesser known but equally important encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), which proposes friendship as the way to build a better, more just and peaceful world, with the commitment of all people and institutions.

The Vatican will never confirm this, but it is evident that Czerny’s hand guided the drafting of both documents. It is a case of both the Pope and the cardinal seeing the world through the same prism, as first expressed by Vatican II: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

Pope Francis agonizes over the Ukraine war, indeed once breaking into tears when describing the devastating effects of war’s madness. Mexican President Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador proposed that Francis be part of an international commission to mediate an end to the conflict. Moscow is unlikely to be agreed to that because Francis views President Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine as “senseless, repugnant, and sacrilegious.”

Francis has to deal with a war-torn world while fending off his critics within the church. For some, he is seen as an unwanted liberal. He accepts gays, provides the eucharist to divorced Catholics, and slammed clerical careerism. He has not overturned any doctrines, but the very fact that he lives in a modest hotel instead of the papal palace is enough to turn conservative cardinals against him.

Francis sees the church as a “field hospital,” and wants its resources concentrated on the weakest and most vulnerable people: the poor, the immigrants, the unborn, and the elderly. His critics want a static church. Fearing that too progressive a stance will produce a schism in the church, Francis, treads softly—too softly for some, who want, for example, the immediate ordination of women. Such an action would certainly produce a bonfire in the church. Francis doesn’t want that because he knows he has to concentrate his remaining energies on stamping out the real war, in the Ukraine battlefield.

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