

Settimo Cielo

di Sandro Magister

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“Francis, a Happy Hour Pope.” A Major Survey on Italians’ Unsteady Faith



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A quarter of a century has passed and three popes have come and gone since the last major survey on religious belief in Italy, in 1995. And now that a new survey has provided all the data, it is known that the Catholic faith has dimmed a great deal, despite the vast consensus surrounding the current pope and primate of Italy, Francis.

“People of little faith” is the title of the first book to give an account of the new survey, by Franco Garelli of the University of Turin, from the presses of the publisher il Mulino.

“Uncertain faith” is the title of the second, by Roberto Cipriani of the University of Roma Tre, with a preface by Enzo Pace, published by Franco Angeli.

The first book is based on the numbers of a massive survey, the second on open-ended interviews – that is, not guided – of a representative sample of the entire population. And it is this second book that best captures the religious “sentiment” of Italians, more lively and varied than that given by dull standardized answers to a questionnaire.

The chapter on Jorge Mario Bergoglio is exemplary. Starting with the title: “Francis, a happy hour pope,” which takes up the very words of one interviewee: “I see Pope Francis as the happy hour type, the classic friend you’d have a coffee with at the bar, everybody’s pal...”

The interviews were conducted in 2017, four years after Bergoglio’s election as pope, and record a rather broad consensus for him. With many signs, however, that show what sort of consensus this is, acutely analyzed by Professor Cipriani.

To begin with, while the dry answers to the questionnaire gave 82 percent positive judgments on the pope, 5.4 percent negative judgments, and 12 percent not sure, in the interviews the positives drop to 70 per cent, the negatives rise to 8, and the unsure to 22.

But it is above all when Cipriani adopts the criteria of “sentiment analysis” that the proportions vary, and by quite a bit. “In regard to Francis,” he writes, “positive sentiments are 33.2 per cent, negative 20.3, and neutral 46.4.”

And these are some indications that the scholar derives from the interviews:

- “the judgments on Pope Francis almost always concern aspects external to the ecclesial world and do not touch on the real dynamics within the Church”;

- “Francis’s actions are evaluated more in terms of socio-political interventionism than along spiritual lines”;

- “intra-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial communication shows evident problems: on the one hand, the pope’s official documents, including the encyclicals, are not remembered even as to their titles, much less the contents; on the other hand, even some basic facts are reported with great imprecision and even with macroscopic misunderstandings and inversions”;

- “what instead hits the mark is the series of papal statements and gestures concerning migrants, the poor, the suffering”;

- “a press conference with the pope aboard an airplane manages to obtain almost universal coverage, so that a simple sentence can become an all-around talking point”;

- “what is certain is the strong influence of the mass media in formulating judgments on Francis”;

- “however, there remains a good dose of uncertainty in judging the pope’s body of work, tasked now with disguised conservatism, now with excessive reformism, with conflicting points of view even within the same interview.”

All this in 2017, the year in which Francis’s popularity reached its peak and started - in Cipriani’s view as well - on the downward curve. In a parallel survey by Demos in 2017, 77 percent of Italians considered Francesco “trustworthy.” Two years later, in 2019, trust in the pope dropped to 66 percent.

But the heart of the survey is above all the comparison between these judgments on Pope Francis and the general weakening of the Catholic faith in Italy.

That even in Italy, as in many other countries, the Catholic faith is increasingly “doubtful” and less “certain” is now an irrefutable fact, which the survey amply documents. And all the indicators show this decline continuing over the next few years.

But that’s just the thing, in the interviews the judgments on Francis do not even touch on this general crisis of faith. They talk about him as if unaware of it. And even in the questionnaire, to the specific question of whether the pope is capable of patching things up with religious faith, half replied no.

One startling indicator of the weakening of the Catholic faith in Italy is in judgments on life after death. Compared with the 1995 survey, those who believe in another life have decreased significantly: they were 41 percent and now they are 28.6, while those who deny any future life have doubled, from 10.4 to 19.5 percent.

So then, in the face of this collapse of faith in the resurrection, it is striking that none of the interviewees, coming to the topic of Pope Francis, should speak of him as a proclaimer of eternal life.

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