Dressing Pope Francis: His Public Costume between Pontifical, Jesuit, and Franciscan Traditions

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Abstract

When Jorge Bergoglio became the first Jesuit to be elected as a successor to St. Peter, it created a novel problem in papal and Jesuit history: how would a Jesuit interpret the long-standing but ever-evolving traditions of pontifical dress? This article sets out how Francis’s public sartorial choices have developed as he has negotiated his twin roles within the church. It further considers the influence of both Jesuit and Franciscan visual and material culture on the image he cultivates and the intersections between them and the imperatives of papal fashion. Finally, it considers the contribution of clothing to Francis’s image and reputation within the church and in popular media in Italy and in the wider world.

Keywords

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s election as pope in 2013 created a new paradigm in both Jesuit and papal history. For nearly five centuries, until at least the putative papabilità of Carlo Maria Martini (1927–2012) in 2005, the idea that a priest of the Society would emerge as St. Peter’s latest successor had seemed improbable, even fantastical. Conspiracy theorists, who labored under the delusion that the Jesuits were little more than a sinister sect aimed at subverting the church or the state, occasionally accused them of plotting to infiltrate...
and seize control of the papacy as a prelude to wider plans.\(^1\) Even those who were not quite persuaded of the Jesuits’ nefarious intent nevertheless still eyed them suspiciously. Domenico Maria Giocobazzi (1691–1770), the duke of Modena’s agent at the 1721 conclave, for instance, reported a line attributed to the famous Roman “talking statue” Pasquino: “St. Peter, if you give the keys to Jesus [i.e., the Jesuit], he’ll never return them!”\(^2\) The sudden end of Jesuit exclusion from the papacy in 2013 was, therefore, a momentous enough event for the history of the church in itself.\(^3\) And yet, Pope Francis, as Bergoglio has chosen to be known, made it still more extraordinary by, in effect, renouncing (or at least displacing) his Jesuit identity in favor of an older Franciscan one. *Francisco Porteño*, Francis of Buenos Aires, has made it quite clear that he chose his pontifical name out of respect for, and admiration of, the thirteenth-century St. Francis (1181–1226), a man who (ironically enough) doggedly pursued a cherished ideal of holy poverty and service of all God’s creatures in the face of strong papal pressure to conform to established monastic norms.\(^4\) Pope Francis’s triple identity—as Jesuit, as pontiff, and also as Franciscan—has created a remarkable and intriguing challenge for him as he has introduced himself and his office to the public. He has needed to be seen as pope to embody the church’s authority if not its majesty. However, as Franciscan, he has strived to exhibit simplicity and humility. As a Jesuit, moreover, his order’s history has arguably given him license to behave in a somewhat chameleon-esque fashion, balancing the needs and prerogatives of his other two identities in order to pursue the greater good. Francis’s pontificate and the image of himself the pope presents through it has been, in short, a paradox.

This essay explores Pope Francis’s strategies as he has attempted to balance the papal, Jesuit, and Franciscan identities within him. It pays particular attention to questions of dress and appearance, in part because historians now widely accept that the visual, including clothing, always has meaning and that

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such meaning is necessarily historically contingent. Clerical dress has not always formed a primary focus of inquiry for historians of fashion nor fashion for scholars of ecclesiastical history. Yet there is much we can learn about the church from studying its members’ sartorial choices, and much in those choices that historians of fashion (and other branches of material and visual culture) can use to complicate their trendsetting histories of consumption, status competition, and taste. Some historians and theologians have begun to construct a debate about the interpretation of ecclesiastical fashions in various contexts. They note, in particular, how ecclesial discourses about clothing have generally reconfigured notions of masculinity in many of the same ways as secular discourses do (or have done): men use (and have used) appearance to project both their masculinity as individuals but also to articulate a wider social vision for manliness. Clerics throughout the church’s history have participated in this discourse, which is also rightly often viewed as a vehicle for social competition. However, those same clerics have typically struggled with a specific issue when they have done so: the imperative to symbolize their unique God-given form of authority within a framework generated by displays of other kinds of masculine performance. As Jo Ann McNamara pointed out thirty years ago, since the Gregorian Reform of the eleventh century, Latin priests have been unable to perform masculinity via the normative channels—sex, sport, martial activity, etc.—used by their secular peers. Other methods have been required.

Much recent scholarship on clerical masculinities across all periods, in fact, engages the nature of those other methods and their relationship to

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those pursued by other males; it also focuses, understandably, on the means by which various priests in different contexts worked to overcome the difficulties presented by this state of affairs. The medievalist Robert Swanson, for instance, has suggested that many priests (especially elite theologians) identified themselves as a “third sex” somewhat akin to the angels.8 Ruth Mazo Karras, another medievalist, on the other hand, notes that many clerics always continued to cleave as close to their secular counterparts as they could when it came to behavioral norms: they saw sin only in following through with the *coup de grâce*.9 When it came to clothing, in particular, clerical answers to the manliness question (as McNamara dubbed it), and even modes of argumentation through which those answers were articulated, assumed an important role as proxies for still bigger questions—and therefore also for even grander claims—about what clerics are, how they relate to laymen, and about the sources and nature of their ministry and covenant, now and in the past. Pope Francis himself is part of this paradigm: he is engaged in the latest phase of the church’s efforts to renew its responses to all those things. His dress can, therefore, be situated within the long history and broad context that the discourses around them supply. Contemporary attitudes towards Francis divide, even amongst Catholics. Some of his biographers (Austen Ivereigh, Marco Politi)10 see him as a decisive liberal and a modernizer. Critics, such as Damian Thompson of Britain’s *The Spectator* magazine (and formerly of *The Catholic Herald*) see him, on the other hand, as engaged only in empty and counterproductive gesture politics.11 Francis’s pontificate may well be a

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watershed for how popes project their soft power via self-fashioning—and it marks a new stage in what the late John O’Malley (1927–2022) has called the “papalization” of Catholicism\textsuperscript{12}—but the relationship of the power of the image and the underlying reality will likely continue to be contested even well after this particular pontificate draws to a close.

The Politics of Ecclesiastical Dress: Papal and Regular Traditions

The key insight from which to develop this discussion is the observation that what priests wear has always been a matter of political and theological contention. This contentiousness goes back, ultimately, to the early church itself. The very idea of a separate priestly caste emerged only slowly during Christianity’s first three centuries, and it introduced a question of what distinguished priests from laymen.\textsuperscript{13} Answers to that question have varied across places and over time. However, they have almost always involved some form of visual distinctiveness. The pope’s visually distinctive costume arose from perhaps as early as the fourth or fifth century, but it evolved most obviously during the eleventh-century Gregorian Reform.\textsuperscript{14} Until that moment, popes had styled themselves along the lines of Roman patricians—or else in the manner of Byzantine courtiers. The alb, chasuble, stole, cope, dalmatic, maniple, sandals, and pallium—key items in the papal wardrobe—all had Roman origins.\textsuperscript{15} The tiara, on the other hand, may well have developed from the καμελαύκιον [camelaucum], a special type of hat worn at the court of Constantinople (the Liber pontificalis describes the appropriately named Pope Constantine as the first pope to wear this in the early eighth century).\textsuperscript{16} Medieval papal fashions, in fact, evolved principally to assert and emphasize


\textsuperscript{14} Miller, Clothing the Clergy, 26–29.


the pope’s basic majesty. As Christ’s vicar, and the *Iudex ordinarius omnium*, the pope needed to present himself as the personification of his plenitude. Color and material were important resources in this process: late medieval popes built their wardrobe around expensive, even exclusive, fabrics and an aesthetic palette that privileged red (or purple), white, and gold (also, not coincidentally, the imperial colors). The tiara too became a key accessory for symbolizing this imperial majesty. Its second crown, said to have been added by Boniface VIII (r.1294–1303) around 1300, was claimed to symbolize the pope’s temporal as well as spiritual authority (its third crown, added in the mid fourteenth century was then said to symbolize “imperial” authority too). Some later popes have tempered their visual projection of majesty with a countervailing projection of humility. This was especially the case in the approach to self-presentation of the Dominican Pius V (r.1566–72) and the Franciscan Sixtus V (r.1585–90) in the sixteenth century and was also common amongst the “moral pastor” popes of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Paul VI’s decision to set aside the tiara entirely, in fact, symbolized a transformation in emphasis that has been evolving since the 1960s. Papal vestments have generally simplified since that date and are illustrated with religious and spiritual motifs rather than the family arms and profane designs that had been highly typical in the two centuries before c.1850.

Franciscan dress, in contrast to papal dress, arose in part as a reaction to the growing aggrandizement of all clerical dress in the twelfth and early thirteenth

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centuries. Thanks to the pioneering work of Lester Little, in particular, we think of the Franciscan message and Franciscan spirituality as an emergent response to the rise of the merchant in urban settings in Italy and beyond.22 The Franciscan, with his vow of holy poverty and his aspiration to a beggar's appearance, was the antithesis of the “proto-capitalist” man of commerce who sought to use his wealth to consume sartorial finery and who induced civic authorities to introduce draconian sumptuary legislation as a result. Franciscans, by contrast, wore simple habits of undyed wool (in effect, grey or brown)—the simpler, the better.23 Unlike their fellow friars, the Dominicans, they also often went ostentatiously shoeless (although the exhortation to shoelessness was a counsel, not a precept, and was thus not binding).24 A link between Franciscan dress and the wider clerical dress paradigm, however, is this: other clerics, often drawn from the ranks of secular elites, were moved to develop clerical dress in parallel with secular fashions in order to assert class membership as well as clerical state. The enrichment of papal dress in line with that of secular princes—especially the holy Roman emperor—was itself a prime example of that effect. Late medieval Franciscans, on the other hand, competed to outdo each other in their austerity. Indeed, they argued extensively over the requirements of their poverty of dress, and their disputes in this regard formed a significant element in wider conflicts between the hierarchy and “Spiritual Franciscans” in and after the 1290s and between the Capuchins and other branches of the order in the sixteenth.25

Jesuit traditions of dress differed markedly again from Franciscan ones—and so too did Jesuit reasoning behind choices in physical appearance. Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491–1556), when he founded the Society in 1540, was much less concerned with questions of dress than Francis of Assisi had been over three centuries earlier. For Ignatius, the priority for his movement was not embodying holiness but defending the faith (in this respect, he had more in common with St. Dominic than Francis). Ignatius's approach to questions of the visual presentation was, therefore, essentially pragmatic. Markus Friedrich notes how “at times, he stopped cutting his hair and nails, wore only the coarsest

23 On the evolution of Franciscan costume in the thirteenth century, and since, see the entries by Giovanni Odoardi et al., in Giancarlo Rocca, La sostanza del effemiro: Gli abiti degli ordini religiosi in Occidente (Rome: Edizioni Paoline, 2000), 324–35.
24 Bonaventure, Apologia pauperum, 306.
clothing, went barefoot or wore shoes in which he had deliberately cut holes.”26 Moreover, when he had come under the scrutiny of the Inquisition in the late 1520s, Ignatius expressly stated that clothing was of little importance.27 Yet, the primary early Jesuit “uniform” to emerge was the simple black cassock—a garment that marked its wearer out as both serious and professional (it also associated him with Spanish court dress).28 Other early Jesuit texts relating to clothing likewise sometimes simply emphasized an imperative to fit in.29 Thus, those Jesuits who traveled to the Far East made the case for swapping out their black cotton cassocks for silken garments. Confrères back in Europe were suspicious of such strategies of “going native.”30 However, the arguments over this conflict were far more utilitarian than those that prevailed in Franciscan debates about clothing. Silk-wearing Jesuits suggested that their Eastern costume was needed to inspire confidence amongst those whom they wished to convert. Their critics counterclaimed that black cassocks were just as likely to be respectable to local populations as more luxurious raiments. Such debates did, of course, have connotations for the construction of Jesuit masculinity, which, unlike Franciscan, was not uniquely bound up in performative virtue.31 However, the complexities of maintaining a mission of channeling information and enforcing obedience meant that variety was never entirely eliminated.

Jesuit community, a form of homosociality that was especially intense within the Society, was achieved through other means beyond the visual. Such means included shared emotional experiences derived from participation in textual communities and shared glorification of martyrdom. Jesuit brotherhood was itself a complex phenomenon with multifaceted inputs.

Ultimately, these three different vestiary traditions reflected different ways of interpreting the priest’s imperative to exhibit holiness (via glory, humility, and/or cultural context). The idea that a single individual might need to embody more than one of these three distinctive traditions had rarely been tested before 2013. Two Renaissance Franciscan popes, Sixtus IV (r.1471–84) and Sixtus V, are the most obvious and best-known examples. However, three other Franciscan popes—Nicholas IV (r.1288–92), Clement XIV (r.1769–74), and Pius X (r.1903–10)—are also worth noting as cases, as are the many Franciscan and Jesuit cardinals created between the elevation of Bonaventure (1221–74) in 1273 and the present day. As a point of comparison with Pope Francis, Pius X may actually be the most interesting of all these figures because of his status as a member of the Third Order—a status which allowed him to perform his devotion to the Franciscan ideal without following all the rule’s precepts (it could thus always be subordinated to the imperatives of episcopal, and later papal, display). For the purposes of this essay, what may be worth noting is simply the variety of ways these different prelates negotiated their double ecclesiastical status. Sixtus V very conspicuously “Franciscanized” his accession ceremonies, as Irene Fosi has noted.32 However, as pope, he retained all the same visual cues as his recent non-Franciscan predecessors. Cardinal Seán O’Malley, OFM Cap, the archbishop of Boston and one of Pope Francis’s immediate contemporaries, by contrast regularly appears in his friar’s habit, wearing his bishop’s cross and sometimes a red cardinal’s zucchetto alongside it. These different choices reflect both personal preferences and possibly a different ideological understanding of the hierarchy of ecclesiastical identities. For Sixtus V, the papal office was clearly primal, but Cardinal O’Malley sees his Franciscan identity as primary.33 While no Jesuit before Francis was made pope, Jesuit cardinals have been forced to make similar decisions about when to appear in curial or Jesuit dress.

32 Fosi, “Court and City in the Ceremony of the possesso,” 48–52.
Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election on March 13, 2013, was not entirely unexpected, but neither was it a certainty. The Argentine cardinal had been widely tipped as a frontrunner in pre-conclave commentary. Some accounts claimed him to have been *proxime accessit* at the previous conclave in 2005. The prospect of a Jesuit pope was clearly no longer so alarming to other quarters of the church as it once had been—a sign of the Society’s enhanced reputation during the second phase of its existence (and, especially since the start of the twentieth century). Nevertheless, Bergoglio's decision to “Franciscanize” himself on the papal balcony was more surprising (and surely cannot be explained entirely by a fear of wider hostility to a papal Jesuit). There had been no Pope Francis before. Indeed, no pope had chosen an entirely novel papal name for centuries: excluding antipopes, one has to go back to Pope Lando (r.913–14) in the early tenth century. Pope Francis has variously explained his name choice and the special devotion to Francis of Assisi, which it self-evidently represents: “vocabor Franciscus in memoriam sancti Francisci de Assisi” (I will be called Francis in memory of Saint Francis of Assisi) he is said to have told the conclave’s president Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re at the moment his election was confirmed. The pope grounds his decision sometimes in his belief in a need to highlight the plight of the poor, at other times in the need to care for nature ("our common home," as his 2015 Encyclical *Laudato si’* puts it). “Do not forget the poor,” Pope Francis claims his friend Cláudio Hummes (1934–2022), the archbishop of São Paolo, told him at the critical moment. “Oh, how I wish for a Church that is poor, and for the poor!” he told an audience of media representatives a few days later. *Laudato si’,* Francis’s great prognostication on the environment, on the other hand, invokes Saint Francis in its opening lines to justify the catastrophe of global warming as the greatest threat to our

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35 Politi, *Pope Francis Among the Wolves*, 17.

peaceful coexistence with and on our planet. "I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome," the pope writes in the tenth article:

I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

Pope Francis, from the outset of his pontificate, has worked to translate his devotion to Francis of Assisi into behavior and visual form. As pope, he has inherited that papal wardrobe described above, and subject to the modifications undertaken by some of his recent successors. But as a Jesuit and “Franciscan,” he has felt it necessary to adapt it further to reflect his desire for simplicity and the need to emphasize what he sees as the pope’s unique role in embodying Christ’s humility as the servant of man. Francis’s basic approach to papal costume clearly owes much to his twentieth-century predecessors, John XXIII (r. 1958–63), Paul VI (r. 1963–78), and John Paul II (r. 1978–2005). John XXIII’s decision to divest himself of obviously regalian accessories, confirmed by Paul VI, was referenced above. John, Paul, and John Paul replaced those regalian items with what they saw as symbols of pastoral authority: the pallium.


John Paul II also championed the use of plain white as the definitive mark of the pontifical outfit, an approach he may have borrowed from Queen Elizabeth II (r.1952–2022), who during her reign likewise adopted outfits in block colors as her distinctive brand and to improve her visibility in crowds. John Paul was occasionally even photographed with other garments and accessories (for instance, famously, a hiking jacket or accessories in indigenous designs), which only served to underscore the basic association of the white cassock with the pontifical office. Benedict XVI (r.2005–13) moved away from this model somewhat, reintroducing a range of traditional vestments and accessories (famously the camauro headdress and red leather shoes). Yet Francis has eschewed that reversion in favor of a doubling down on John Paul II’s vision. Going further than John Paul, Francis made it a trademark of his image from early on to, for instance, be seen in the basic black shoes of the manual shift worker. This preference for black was surely highly purposeful and echoed the original Franciscan impulse to wear basic undyed wool. It also reflected the Jesuit tradition of adaptability: a pope for the poor had to be seen to share in their lifestyle and its discomforts. And, as the early Franciscans also identified, what more appropriate part of the body to do that with than the feet?

Pope Francis has had fewer opportunities to express his Jesuit identity through dress than his Franciscan. In some ways, this is surprising for the Jesuits, especially following their nineteenth-century revival, have been ardent supporters of the papal monarchy within the church. Yet the lack of distinctiveness of Jesuit attire perhaps works against visual association and, unlike cardinals who are members of regular orders (such as Séan O’Malley), Francis does not appear in public in the dress of his order (and he did not prior

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40 On the significance of this, see Berhard Schimmelpfennig, “L’incoronazione papale nel tardo Medioevo, con uno sguardo all’inaugurazione’ di Benedetto XVI,” Studi storici 47 (2006): 959–75.


44 See O’Malley, Jesuits and the Popes, 95–106.
to his election as pope, in part because Jesuits no longer had a distinct dress code). Liturgical occasions have, however, allowed Francis to wear vestments with the Society’s emblems on them. The Mass celebrated for the Most Holy Name of Jesus in thanksgiving for the recent canonization of Pierre Favre, S.J. (1506–46) in Rome’s Il Gesù Church on January 3, 2014, is, for instance, a good example of this from early in Francis’s pontificate. Francis wore a chasuble in papal white but with the design of a pallium picked out on it in martyrs’ red. The pallium portion of the vestment was embroidered in gold with Jesuit “IHS” Christograms on the back and front and the names of key early Jesuit figures (Ignatius, Luigi Gonzaga, Francis Xavier, etc.) alongside a lambent flame on its front and rear stripes. On other liturgical occasions, Francis has, however, reverted to more generic designs. Such designs had already been simplified during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with specific identifying labels, such as those of the pope’s familial coat of arms, disappearing in favor of biblical designs or even abstractions. Benedict XVI’s pontificate was an exception to the general trend but Francis, in his choices, has reverted to the norm. In fact, compared to not only Benedict but also John Paul II, Francis is more often seen in entirely plain liturgical garb—again, a nod to his Franciscan ideal of simplicity. Where non-standard designs appear on his vestments, they tend to be specific and cultural—for instance, when he visited Chile in 2018 and wore a chasuble with an image of the “Atacama Giant” (said to be the local deity Tarapacá).

Francis has continued to develop his image of the Jesuit-Franciscan pope over the course of his pontificate—and in his later years, has shown a particular willingness to embrace vulnerability and infirmity as part of the visual presentation of his leadership (this could be interpreted and both Jesuit and Franciscan). John Paul II went to some lengths in his declining years to avoid putting his frailty on full display, and Benedict XVI cited his ill-health as a reason for resigning the papacy. However, Francis has let himself be filmed and photographed in his wheelchair since May 2022 (a contrast to John Paul II, who used a wheeled throne). Many of the images of Francis in this position are not


46 See https://www.traditioninaction.org/RevolutionPhotos/A986-Tar.htm (accessed October 16, 2023). I do not endorse the content of this website but it contains the clearest images of the chasubles used on Francis trip to Chile in 2018.

particularly flattering. Indeed, one featured on the cover of Britain's *Catholic Herald* in July 2022 with the headline “Endgame" showed a glum, tired-looking pope looking down at his hands as he was wheeled past behind some railings.\(^{48}\) Such provocations arguably help Francis in his mission to project humility. They certainly allow him to communicate stoicism in the face of suffering—another very Franciscan, although also Jesuit, quality. Of course, not all recent images of Francis and his vestments are of this kind. In early 2023, the pope was the subject of an astonishing viral internet meme in which he appeared looking purposefully into the mid-distance while wearing a full-length white “puffer jacket.” The image was a deep fake created with artificial intelligence by a thirty-one-year-old construction worker from the Chicago area. The aim had just been to “make something funny,” Pablo Xavier told *Buzzfeed*. “I try to do funny stuff or trippy art—psychedelic stuff. It just dawned on me: I should do the Pope. Then it was just coming like water: ‘The Pope in [a] Balenciaga puffy coat, [or] Moncler, walking the streets of Rome, Paris', stuff like that.”\(^{49}\)

### Francis and Changing Perceptions of the Papacy, Franciscans, and Jesuits

There can be little doubt that Francis's ten-year pontificate (at the time of writing) has had a considerable effect on perceptions of the papacy in the twenty-first century. Francis inherited the papacy at a moment of low public esteem. Benedict XVI, though not necessarily to blame for the opprobrium he attracted to his office and the church, had become a figurehead for all that many in Western secular societies and beyond saw as wrong with the Roman Catholic Church.\(^{50}\) His now notorious remarks about Islam in his 2006 Regensburg Lecture alienated Muslim opinion.\(^{51}\) Mainstream opinion and secular governments were suspicious of his handling of the child sexual abuse

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\(^{48}\) *The Catholic Herald* 6627 (July 2022), cover image.


crisis which engulfed the church during his pontificate. In this context, the church needed a pastoral pontiff who would revitalize his office’s reputation for humility and integrity. For many liberal Catholics and non-Catholics, Francis has achieved this, and they have embraced his efforts.\(^5\) His self-presentation—and, indeed, awareness of the importance of image—have helped this considerably, as the sorts of favorable commentaries on Francis as pope that have been produced have underlined. Such commentary tends to cast Francis explicitly in that pastor role (cf. Marco Politi’s *Pope Francis Among the Wolves: The Inside Story of a Revolution* or Austen Ivereigh’s *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church*). The sense that the pope offers a “new broom” is an important part of his messaging, and his deliberate attempts to contrast himself visually to Benedict XVI in his fussy traditionalist attire has surely been a major factor in his success.

What though of Pope Francis’s impact on Jesuits and Franciscans? The pope has arguably done more to promote the latter than the former—in part simply because of the symbolic force of his name, which involves Francis and not Ignatius. Pope Francis’s special insight could be said to have been that Franciscan spirituality was the variation of Catholicism which most clearly resonated with our own age. In his critique of modernity, it is the medieval world Lester Little described in *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy* that looms largest: the industrial, avaricious merchant (or financier) is its dominant figure and the pastoral, outmoded, mendicant pope is his antidote.\(^5\) Pope Francis has reanimated this Manichean perspective, most notably through his series of publications: in *Laudato si’* and its critique of industrialization, and also in *Laudate Deum* (an apostolic exhortation which followed up that encyclical in 2023) and in *Fratelli tutti* (2020), which preached not only the value of social friendship but also the express dignity of the poor. Each of these documents, all of which have been well received in large quarters, quite notably and deliberately invokes and even quotes Francis of Assisi in its opening lines.

Pope Francis has also rehabilitated Franciscanism via his many travels, which, on the one hand, build on the record of Paul VI, Benedict XVI, and John Paul II, but on the other, can also be read as a purposeful recreation of a medieval Franciscan missionary strategy. On his own election, he described himself as a pope “from almost the end of the world” and his journeys everywhere—but in

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particular to Asia—have changed perceptions of the “humble friar.”

Francis appearing in this performative Franciscan guise, as he did most recently when he visited Mongolia in August 2023, returns that missionary archetype to the center of the image of itself that the church projects (and even to the heart of its self-understanding). The iconic photograph of the Mongolia trip, much reproduced in global media, remains Francis in Ulaanbaatar standing aside the Mongolian president in front of a colossal statue of Genghis Khan: a wizened old man in a simple white outfit, with a cane, surrounded by soldiers and dignitaries of a court of the East in exotic “Oriental” garb.

Pope Francis’s impact on the perception of Jesuits has been perhaps somewhat less dramatic. For one thing, the pope has made so much of his devotion to Francis of Assisi that few casual observers—even those sympathetic to his ecclesial vision—seem to recall his Jesuit origins. Francis’s Franciscan aesthetic further obscures the link. On the other hand, Francis has quietly appointed a quite considerable number of Jesuits (rather than Franciscans) into senior positions throughout the Roman Curia. Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development; Luis Francisco Ladaria, prefect of the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith; Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the Synod of Bishops; Gianfranco Ghirlanda, draf ter of Praedicate Evangelium (the Vatican’s new constitution); Juan Antonio Guerrero Alves, prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy; and Daniele Libanori, auxiliary bishop of Rome, are some important examples. Such appointments, on a scale not seen hitherto in any previous pontificate, could be said to have had a cumulative impact—and the reforms these men seem to have been intended to deliver have also begun to shape perceptions of the Society within the wider church or beyond. Reports in international Catholic media (e.g., “the pope’s Jesuit men”) suggest that Francis is receiving some scrutiny for them. However, the fact that such reports do
not immediately accuse the Jesuits of doing what the Society’s earlier critics always accused its members of plotting to do—to take over the papacy from within—may be the truly telling point. The church has moved away from anti-Jesuitism, even its twentieth-century incarnation. That Francis has felt so little need to justify his decision to invest the Society with such a crucial and visible role in papal governance or to defend the papacy from any suggestion of a Jesuit supremacy itself speaks to a changing relationship amongst former ecclesiastical rivals.

Beyond all this, however, one further important area in which we might be able to see Francis rehabilitating Jesuitism rather than Franciscanism is in its methods of intellectual and political engagement. Francis’s trademark style of leadership on many issues has been a certain calculated caution, which can come across as equivocation. We can see this, for instance, in his pronouncements on sexuality as well as women’s ordination. Francis tests a proposition with throwaway remarks or general words—“who am I to judge?,” of homosexuality, is the most famous example—but then waits to see the fallout. Thomas Massaro has noted this and places particular emphasis on the Jesuitism of Francis’s priorities, language, and management style. Matt Kappadakunnel has described it as a translation of Jesuit obedience models. Benedict XVI was often accused of telling Catholics what was true but what they did not necessarily wish to hear. On the other hand, Francis seeks to build and reveal the consensus. The Synod on Synodality (2023) is arguably the latest exercise in this process—and it may have shown how much appetite really exists for movement in doctrine on many hot-button issues. This is an essay on dress and clothing, so what has that to do with such matters? My contention here is that Francis’s self-presentation and approach to styling reflect the same essentially casuistic mentality: he seeks to experiment and gauge the reaction. The incorporation of indigenous, potentially pagan, designs on vestments during his 2018 Chile trip (mentioned above) is an example of how boundaries...
have been pushed. Like the Jesuits of old, donning silken robes to appeal to Chinese or Japanese elites, Francis has pursued an assimilationist strategy towards cultural differences. And like nineteenth-century Jesuits, whose ultramontanism knew found bounds, he sees no contradiction between the Jesuit mission and the papal. His aim, like his order’s, has been to spread the Catholic faith.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Pope Francis has brought together in his person a unique combination of three identities within the Catholic Church: papal, Jesuit, and Franciscan. Francis’s efforts to present his triple identity have been shaped by the requirements of performing his papal role, a desire to express sympathy with Franciscan theology, but also a very Jesuit pragmatism with respect to how membership of the Society is projected. Francis’s decisions about how to dress have very much reflected his wider approach concerning this internal ontological negotiation: in seeming papal and Franciscan, the pope is actually simultaneously following in the footsteps of previous Jesuits who were also willing to sublimate the distinctiveness of their outward appearance in pursuit of greater goals. Of course, one question that naturally arises about such a conclusion is whether Pope Francis (or Jorge Mario Bergoglio) can be seen as a typical Jesuit with respect to his attitude to all this. At an obvious level, a Jesuit who becomes pope cannot be said to typify membership of his order.

On the other hand, the Jesuits have always been nothing if not eclectic—hence the biting tradition of describing the pre-suppression Jesuits as “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (a telling metaphor). Recent research by Camilla Russell, like the much older research thesis of Thomas V. Cohen, emphasizes the sheer variety of Jesuit experience over decades and centuries. The ideology of homogeneity, common to every ecclesiastical order and, in the Jesuits’ case, reified in the special status accorded to obedience, does not contradict this general fact. The Society of Jesus exists in an unusual place within the church right now. Its reputation as an elite intellectual corps within the priesthood has taken something of a hit because of changing patterns of recruitment

60 Friedrich, *Jesuits*, 583.
and a general decline in vocations in the Western world. However, with his broadening of the understanding of what it means to intellectualize the faith, Francis could easily be seen to be contributing to a redefinition of Jesuit adaptability for a new age. His pontificate has been one full of outward signs and symbols of that shift in mentalities.

If the pope wears his Jesuitism lightly, what does that mean for the importance of clerical dress—and, more broadly, visual appearance—to the Catholic clergy as a whole in the twenty-first century? Francis's simplification of his dress represents just one of a series of trends that we can see developing in the contemporary church. Some clergy, drawing inspiration from Benedict XVI's aesthetic, have begun reverting to older pre-Vatican II style wardrobes—embracing once again the outmoded designs which in their minds signal a commitment to traditional values and spiritualities. Others, on the other hand, seek to minimize the separateness of their clerical dress from lay dress entirely: they limit their use of liturgical vestments and even the priest's distinctive black uniform and white collar. It is far from certain which will prevail—or even if any will emerge as truly dominant—and, in the context of these two alternatives, Pope Francis's approach could certainly be said to constitute a middle way. Medieval (and early modern) historians will, of course, recognize the parameters in this contest to define the cleric's image. It is a tussle that echoes those of the Gregorian Reform, when a minority of elite clerics in Rome sought to maximize the distinction between cleric and laymen, just as other priests elsewhere took different views.

The eleventh century was also a time when even those clerics who sought to render themselves visually distinct from laymen nevertheless still felt compelled to do so in dialogue with the relevant class model: a bishop, whatever his special status within God's church, still had to look male and elite (will that ever change?). Ironically, Francis of Assisi was one of the few significant figures within the high medieval church who did not take such a view. Though born into an elite family, he self-consciously styled himself to look un-elite and, indeed, to break down the barriers being erected between the visual presentation of clerics and laymen. Three centuries later, Ignatius did something similar but in a more pragmatic vein. Pope Francis follows in the footsteps of both.