

Editor's Note: The terms used here of “conservative”, “liberal” and “moderate” are all relative to the post-Conciliar Church. Indeed, many of these cardinals, even those deemed conservative, would have been considered liberal by pre-conciliar standards. There is, however, a significant difference between the most liberal of the cardinals and the most conservative of them, which demands that there are different terms to differentiate them. For more on this, see the interview with Mr. Verweij on our YouTube channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o1y19lYkww&t>

By Serre Verweij

Various commentators have claimed that Pope Francis has stacked the of Cardinals with liberals, and yet this doesn't take into account the number of more orthodox cardinals that Pope Francis has appointed.

For a variety of reasons, Francis has appointed not a few cardinals with traditional views on sexuality, women, and doctrine more generally. Some of these were 'surprise' appointments from the West and Latin America, but also many from the third-world. Many of them are surprisingly young, too. The notion of Francis appointing any conservative cardinals is shocking and confusing to many and deserves a detailed analysis.

A handful of orthodox from the West

Gerhard Ludwig Müller stands out as an obvious early example of a conservative cardinal appointed by Pope Francis. His orthodox stances are well-known and speak for themselves, but since Pope Francis inherited him as freshly appointed prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, it can be argued that his appointment doesn't really count as a typical Francis appointment.

Lars Anders Arborelius from Sweden is very similar, however. He has opposed the agenda of the German Synodal Way and its attempts to change Catholic doctrine in German territory, defended traditional sexual ethics, and has been sympathetic towards the Tridentine Mass, trying to limit the application of *Traditionis Custodes*.

He represents countercultural orthodoxy in Western Europe, as opposed to the attempts to adapt to liberalism promoted by Hollerich and the Belgian and German bishops.

Gérald Cyprien Lacroix from Canada, named during the first consistory in 2014, has also been a clear countercultural pro-life force, who has taken a strong stance on abortion and euthanasia. He propagated a conservative interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia* and did not endorse communion for the divorced remarried. He has actively striven to re-evangelize

Quebec which he lamented had become heavily secularized. He has joined Pope Francis' call to be pastorally inclusive, while also affirming that Church doctrine on sexuality is known and won't change, during a 2015 [interview](#).

"There is room for everyone. The door is open," Cardinal Lacroix insisted. "Of course you know that the Catholic Church will never promote same sex marriage, but do we respect homosexual persons? Do we welcome them? Do we accompany them? Of course. But to respect the Church and its teaching, which is based on a long tradition and also the word of God, we will not go so far as to bless. But that doesn't mean we reject."

Orani João Tempesta from Brazil was one of the first conservative Latin Americans ever named cardinal by Pope Francis. He has been relatively critical of liberation theology, downplayed radical statements by Pope Francis during the early years of his pontificate and has aligned himself with the Christian 'right' in the context of Brazilian politics. He encouraged President Bolsonaro to sign declarations opposing abortion and gay marriage.

Dominique Mamberti, the French archbishop who was appointed by Pope Benedict XVI as Secretary for Relations with States and then by Pope Francis as the Prefect of the Apostolic Signatura as replacement to Cardinal Burke, serves as another clear conservative. He was rumoured to dislike restrictions on the Tridentine Mass and has openly opposed gay marriage and limitations on religious freedom in the name of LGBT rights. When New Ways Ministry started the narrative that he was supportive of LGBT rights, he outright [rejected](#) this assertion, pointing to his conservative anti-gay marriage track record.

Increasing number of Asian conservatives in the last few years

Pope Francis appointed such prelates throughout the years, but their numbers tended to be relatively limited. The trend of conservative appointments clearly accelerated in 2022.

He added **William Goh Seng Chye** from Singapore in 2022, an orthodox Asian prelate who has taken a more critical stance on China, supported traditional practices such as communion on the tongue and expressed doubts about allowing non-bishops to vote at the synod.

Virgílio do Carmo Da Silva from East Timor has proven a similar voice of orthodoxy who joined conservative cardinals in Prague to condemn gender ideology.

Giorgio Marengo, a missionary leader in Mongolia originally from Italy, quickly proved to be critical of Shamanism and religious syncretism and a supporter of Church tradition. In 2023 another conservative from South East Asia, **Sebastian Francis** from Malaysia, who appears to be relatively close to Goh, got added. Francis openly questioned problems with *Amoris Laetitia* and possible openings for the divorced remarried to receive communion,

during his ad limina visit in 2018. He also has a less rose-colored view of Islam than Pope Francis and has been quite willing to speak about how Muslims have problems with being tolerant and criticized Sharia influencing the legal system in Malaysia. While he positively engaged with synodality, he emphasized that it isn't revolutionary for Malaysian Catholics, where a form of synodality was developed based on the Second Vatican Council starting in the late 1970s and continued under the pontificate of John Paul II. Malaysia has an interpretation of the Second Vatican Council based on continuity that fitted well with the conservative pontificate of John Paul II. Finally, when asked about the controversial Vatican deal with China in 2023 he dodged the question and started to praise attempts by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC), led at the time by the firmly anti-China Cardinal Bo from Myanmar, instead. The FABC had spoken out against increasing persecution of the Church in certain authoritarian states in early 2023.

Pablo Virgilio David from the Philippines deserves a special mention, too. He was named cardinal last year, is currently president of the bishops conference in the Philippines, and has been leading the fight against the legalization of divorce. He has attended both pro-life and pro-family marches, successfully encouraged the senate to sink an anti-discrimination and pro-LGBT bill (yet falsely presented as supporting it), and has argued, that married men could only be ordained priests if they live in total abstinence.



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The African block

The African cardinals have always been the most consistent batch of conservatives Francis has added to the sacred college. **Antoine Kambanda** from Rwanda has opposed *Fiducia Supplicans*, contraception and divorce, **Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel** from Ethiopia has called on a constitutional ban on homosexuality and opposed contraception also, **Dieudonné Nzapalainga** from the Central African Republic is firmly opposed to changes regarding priestly celibacy and **Désiré Tsarahazana** from Madagascar stated unequivocally that Church doctrine hadn't changed, after the 2020 documentary that suggested Pope Francis supported civil unions for homosexual couples.

When Francis almost doubled his number of cardinal appointments during the three consistories held from 2022 to 2024, the African appointments ensured that several new members were added to the orthodox block.

In 2022 Pope Francis added conservative Nigerian and Cardinal Arinze protégé Peter **Okpaleke** to the college (he added an anti-LGBT Salesian from Ghana as well, but unfortunately this prelate died later the same year from heart problems), in 2023 he appointed **Protase Rugambwa** from Tanzania and **Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla** from South Sudan; and finally in 2024 he added one conservative African, **Ignace Bessi Dogbo** from Ivory Coast.

The few cardinals who seemed to have more centrist leanings were pushed to the right by the sudden and anti-synodal release of *Fiducia Supplicans*. It is said to have united African cardinals into a more unified conservative block.

Ambongo Besungu personifies this trend. While originally appointed bishop by Pope Benedict, he was supportive of much of Pope Francis' agenda, relatively friendly with the German speaking bishops, specifically Christoph Schönborn and very involved with ecological causes. He emphasized during the Amazon synod that he supported Francis, thought he faced a lot of opposition, and that he wasn't one of the conservatives who opposed the synod as a trojan horse meant to sneak in things like married priests. At the same time, he suggested that the synod should not push married priests allegedly to not give such critics ammunition, that an overreliance on ordained clergy and resorting to married clergy was a mistaken approach, and that Africa had dealt with this more successfully. He also argued that the synod should include criticism of communist China in its final document. He has defended priestly celibacy on other occasions, too. Yet, during the Synod on Synodality, initially, when asked about possible outcomes on topics such as LGBT issues, he simply said that the outcome would be accepted as the will of God.

After *Fiducia Supplicans* was released, Ambongo quickly joined and then took charge of the African opposition against the document, organizing a continent-wide response. Even when Pope Francis and Cardinal Fernandez folded on the issue, Ambongo kept emphasizing how the document had damaged trust in synodality and criticized Western liberalism and cultural colonization. However, he went even further by emphasizing how homosexuality isn't just contrary to African cultural values, but simply to the Catholic faith and natural law, and openly expressed his agreement with Cardinal Sarah's defense of the faith during an interview.

A mild Eastern European turn

The fact that only one African got appointed in 2024 may very well have been a response to the near universal rejection of *Fiducia Supplicans* in Africa. Yet, this ended up being largely irrelevant, due to Francis adding an unusual number of Eastern Europeans and Western conservatives.

Pope Francis had named only one European before 2024 (not counting papal almoner Krajewski), namely the Polish Archbishop **Grzegorz Ryś**. In 2024 he added three Eastern Europeans, **Rolandas Makrickas** from Lithuania, **Ladislav Nemet** from Serbia, and **Mykola Bychok** from the Ukrainian Catholic Church.

Makrickas and **Bychok** are both clear and firm Eastern European conservatives. This didn't prevent some people from using Bychok as an example of packing the College of Cardinals with liberals by Pope Francis, because he partook in a refugee march in Australia where he heads the Ukrainian diaspora community. Yet, Bychok is fully in line with the leadership of the Ukrainian Catholic Church which has rejected *Fiducia Supplicans* and clashed with Pope Francis over his perceived weak stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Bychok himself took the opportunity, when he was announced as cardinal, to heap lavish praises upon the late Cardinal Pell, the Australian conservative Catholic icon. Makrickas specifically affirmed that Church doctrine doesn't change and is universal, and that only the way it is conveyed can change, when asked about this matter by The Pillar.

Makrickas and Bychok together with Ryś would likely join pre-Francis Eastern European cardinals such as Cardinal Bozanić from Croatia or Cardinal Erdő from Hungary in opposing a Pope who would be supportive of the German synodal path.

Ryś has been described as liberal, but he is only liberal by Polish standards, which is very much conservative by the standards of the global church. He has mainly been called liberal, because he is involved in ecumenism (not too different from Pope John Paul II) and the New Evangelization (something already promoted by Pope Benedict). Beyond this he has mainly

been a-political, commenting little on political conflicts in Poland and being more concerned with Church history and classical devotions than with the environment or migration.

Yet, he called the Church's doctrine against abortion unchangeable during the 2020 pro-abortion protests in Poland, has voiced his agreement with *Humanae Vitae* and emphasized that one's conscience cannot affirm that the use of artificial contraception is okay. He also stated during the Synod on Youth that all homosexual acts remain sinful and praised African bishops for taking a countercultural stance against polygamy, while additionally pointing out that pastoral care for homosexuals had to be aimed at individuals not groups and should be in continuity with previous church documents on sexuality. He further expressed his agreement with Cardinal Müller that there is no reason to change the discipline of priestly celibacy, repeatedly affirmed that the divorced remarried cannot receive the sacraments, but must receive pastoral care in other ways and finally, following *Fiducia Supplicans*, he stated multiple times that blessing of homosexual couples is impossible. This is what is called a liberal cardinal from Poland.

He also did not implement *Traditionis Custodes* in his archdiocese, [allowing the TLM to continue in parish churches](#), and celebrated according to the old rite at one point, though he expressed discomfort over the slap during confirmation. Finally, he stood together with fellow Polish bishops when they were facing criticism from the Vatican under Francis during their ad limina visit.

Orthodox new blood

Fernando Chomalí Garib is another downright bizarre appointment. Francis made him the new Archbishop of Chile's capital and then, in 2024, a cardinal. Yet, the prelate is currently 67 and representative of the conservative current that came to dominate the Chilean church under Pope John Paul II. He calls on homosexuals to live in abstinence, and has opposed gay marriage, legal divorce, contraception, and abortion. He has been very outspoken on these issues similar to an American culture warrior bishop. Chomali is even an important figure of the old guard of the Pontifical Academy of Life, before Pope Francis radically overhauled it. He and his fellow Chilean bishops opposed communion for the divorced remarried in the aftermath of *Amoris Laetitia*.

He can be counted on to support a cardinal who is close to John Paul II and Benedict XVI and to oppose the progressive agenda of Zuppi, Grech and especially Paglia.

Francis Leo, the new cardinal from Toronto in Canada, is a similarly odd appointment by Pope Francis. He represents a young and energetic version of classical conservative Canadian clerics who rose to prominence under John Paul II. Yet, Francis both made him

archbishop and now cardinal.

He served as secretary of the Canadian bishops' conference before he was even appointed a bishop, and clearly supports the dominant conservative current of the Canadian church. He also had a brief career in the Vatican diplomatic service under Pope Benedict XVI. After becoming archbishop he was quick to take a strong pro-life stance against abortion and euthanasia. Additionally, he has been very outspoken against contraception and against gender ideology, as well. He disappointed progressives by not responding to an invitation to meet with the LGBT community after becoming archbishop. He has spoken positively of priestly celibacy multiple times.

François-Xavier Bustillo, from Corsica, France, is unusual and bizarre, even by the standards of recent cardinal appointments by Pope Francis. He was only made a bishop in 2021 and quickly started to support the Tridentine Mass. He has been rather critical of French secularism and has shown a very understanding attitude towards critics of Pope Francis. Most importantly, he had no problem supporting the controversial group SOS Chrétiens d'Orient, who support persecuted Christians in the Middle East. They are known for being pro-Assad and having far right groups. Yet, Bustillo had no problem with them organizing a trip to by Assad controlled Syria for Catholic youth under his care. His response to *Fiducia Supplicans* was to focus on its non-binding nature, to speak of homosexual relationships as a perverted situation, that the Church always had ways to support such sinners, but that sinners cannot demand, only ask for, a blessing.



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Conclusion: Good orthodox odds

Overall, dozens of cardinals appointed by Pope Francis have been critical of, and even outright rejected, either the German Synodal Path, *Fiducia Supplicans*, *Amoris Laetitia* or *Traditionis Custodes*, some rejecting all of these. Dozens of cardinals have defended priestly celibacy, the faith as unchangeable and emphasized that doctrine and ethics cannot be subject to the whims of national bishops conferences. Other likely conservatives such as **Paulo Cezar Costa** from Brazil or the patriarch of Jerusalem **Pierbattista Pizzaballa** deserve their own full analysis.

Last, but not least, the more than 25 cardinal electors who were appointed by Pope Benedict and John Paul II are almost all conservative, with the exception of the liberal Reinhard Marx from Germany and the liberal papabile Luis Antonio Tagle from the Philippines (who has lost a lot of steam), and possible also with the exception of moderates such as Cardinal Turkson from Ghana and Cardinal Barbarian from France. Nearly all other cardinal electors from before Francis are either regular conservative, or (semi)traditionalist including **Burke**,

Ranjith, Woelki, Eijk, Erdö, Collins, Sarah, Dolan, Cañizares, Filoni, Seger, Koch, Bozanić, DiNardo etc. Added to the dozens of conservative cardinals made by Francis they together make up roughly 50 cardinal electors, more than the one-third necessary to veto a modernist cardinal from becoming Pope. Together with the moderates, the conservatives have more than two-thirds of the cardinal electors on their side. If the deck is stacked against anyone it appears to be against the liberals because of the many cardinals from the peripheries and younger cardinals who are more of the John Paul II variety of Catholicism and less influenced by the so-called 'spirit of the Second Vatican Council'.

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