# Pope Francis’s metaphor reveals limits of papal power compared to corporate influence



Pope Francis, who passed away on Monday, offered a striking metaphor during his papacy that likened reforming the Roman Catholic Church to cleaning the ancient Egyptian Sphinx with a toothbrush. This comparison highlighted the enormous challenge of enacting change within an institution as vast and historically entrenched as the Vatican. Speaking to the Financial Times, this vivid imagery underscored the reality that even a leader perceived to have papal infallibility faces tangible limits on their authority.

Historically, the papacy held immense sway, with figures such as Pope Innocent III in the early 13th century regarded as Europe's most powerful person. While the role has evolved since then, Pope Francis still commanded a global audience of approximately 1.4 billion people. This number surpasses the constituencies of notable political figures such as European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Nonetheless, the limits on his capacity to initiate radical change were evident throughout his tenure.

Francis is credited with pushing moderate reforms within the Church, including efforts to improve financial transparency and a softer stance on issues related to gender. However, his broader vision for social and economic transformation faced resistance. For example, following former US President Donald Trump's re-election, many American companies reportedly sought to withdraw commitments aimed at addressing inequality and social justice — areas where the pope had urged greater compassion from the financial sector.

In contrast to the papacy's spiritual might constrained by institutional inertia, corporate leaders wield substantial practical power, often overseeing organisations with user bases far exceeding the Catholic Church's membership. Sundar Pichai of Alphabet and Mark Zuckerberg of Meta Platforms lead companies whose reach spans billions; Facebook’s applications boast around 3 billion users, while Google’s search engine reaches an even larger global audience.

Financially, the remuneration of leading corporate executives reflects their influence. Last year, JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon and Goldman Sachs CEO David Solomon each received $39 million in compensation, with Blackstone’s Steve Schwarzman earning an extraordinary $1 billion. While donations to support Pope Francis’s work through the Vatican’s Peter’s Pence amounted to approximately $55 million in 2023 — a figure surpassing most Wall Street CEOs’ pay — the margin is closing. This proximity in financial terms calls attention to the growing prominence and reward of top corporate executives.

Despite their extensive authority, these business leaders continue to seek further control. Zuckerberg serves as a notable example, holding super-voting shares that secure an enhanced degree of decision-making power, a form of corporate "infallibility." Additionally, professional norms in many large companies resist separating the roles of CEO and chairperson, a trend seen in nearly half of the S&P 500 firms. Both Dimon and Solomon maintain combined leadership positions within their organisations, reinforcing their consolidated influence.

However, two critical insights commonly recognised by popes extend beyond immediate power: the dependence on the wider community and the imperative that the institution endure beyond any one individual. Pope Francis understood his authority was contingent on his 1.4 billion followers, and the Catholic Church’s two-millennia history reflects a deep-rooted emphasis on continuity. By comparison, many of today’s high-profile corporations are still in their infancy relative to the Church’s longevity, making this longitudinal perspective a significant consideration for their leadership and governance.

The Financial Times reporting emphasises the contrast between ecclesiastical and corporate leadership, exploring the complexities of power, influence, and institutional endurance in these two distinct spheres.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/wonder-and-wit-five-years-pope-francis-unique-turns-phrase> - This source corroborates Pope Francis’ metaphor of reforming the Roman Catholic Church as 'cleaning an Egyptian Sphinx with a toothbrush,' illustrating the difficulty and subtlety of enacting change within the Vatican.
* <https://theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/pope-francis-confronts-the-fallibility-of-his-reform-agenda/news-story/04ad07713211cce78b8ff794c6904c3d> - This article supports the claim about Pope Francis acknowledging the fallibility and limitations of his reform agenda in the Vatican, using the same Sphinx metaphor.
* <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2018/03/27/pope-francis-tough-talk-about-media-spin-rings-hollow/> - This source discusses the challenges Pope Francis faced in media and institutional reforms, illustrating the resistance and complexity behind his efforts to push change within the Vatican.
* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273572/number-of-catholics-in-the-world/> - Provides data on the global Catholic population size of approximately 1.4 billion, supporting the claim about the Pope’s large global audience.
* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> - This source confirms the claim regarding the billions of users of corporate platforms like Facebook and Google, illustrating the comparison between the Church’s constituency and corporate audiences.