

The Last Pope, the Fall of the Vatican, and the Apocalypse: Prophecies About the Future of the Catholic Church After Pope Francis

The death of Pope Francis has once again sparked discussions about the future of the Catholic Church. Among both the faithful and the media, a variety of prophecies, visions, and theories have emerged, attempting to predict the fate of the Church following the end of his pontificate.

This article explores the broad spectrum of forecasts and revelations on the subject – ranging from traditional Catholic apparitions and the prophecies of recognized saints, to modern visions by mystics (including controversial and unofficial ones), as well as theological analyses and esoteric or conspiracy theories.

We will present both conservative (mainstream) perspectives and more alternative interpretations.

What Did Our Lady of Fatima Say?

Throughout the Church's history, there has been a rich tradition of prophecies interpreted by the faithful as pertaining to the future of the Church. One of the most renowned is the Third Secret of Fatima, revealed only in the year 2000, which contains a symbolic vision of the Church's persecution.

In the vision, the shepherd children saw a "bishop dressed in white" (whom they understood to be the pope) walking through a ruined city filled with corpses, praying for the dead. At the top of a hill, this pope is killed by soldiers, along with many clergy and laypeople.

The Vatican officially interpreted this vision as a prophecy of the Church's sufferings during the 20th century – particularly the martyrdom of popes (such as the assassination attempt on John Paul II) and the faithful during times of war and totalitarian regimes. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) emphasized that the vision represents the Church's way of the cross during the "age of martyrs," and that prayer could mitigate the events foretold.

However, some believe that the full content of the prophecy was not disclosed. Allegedly, a "fourth" or hidden part of the message warned of a crisis of faith and a massive apostasy from within the Church. Cardinal Mario Ciampi is often cited as having said, "In the Third Secret, among other things, it is foretold that the great apostasy in the Church will begin at the top."

Although the Vatican officially denies this, traditionalist interpretations suggest that Fatima warned of an internal crisis – possibly a schism or doctrinal errors at the highest levels of the Church, should humanity fail to convert.

In her messages, Our Lady of Fatima called for prayer, penance, and the consecration of Russia to her Immaculate Heart – promising a renewal of faith and a period of peace if these requests were heeded.

Fatima remains a Church-approved apparition, and its official interpretation does not predict the Church's fall but rather calls for conversion to avert divine punishments (wars, persecutions). Pope Francis himself strongly identified with Fatima's message – in 2022, he reconsecrated Russia and Ukraine to Mary in the spirit of Fatima.

The Apparition of La Salette

Another prophecy often associated with the future of the Catholic Church after the death of Pope Francis is the apparition of La Salette (1846) – a Marian revelation in the French Alps known for its apocalyptic tone.

In this apparition, the Virgin Mary shared secrets about the future of the faith with two shepherd children. In the widely cited (though controversial) version recorded by the visionary Mélanie Calvat, Mary allegedly said: "Rome will lose the faith and become the seat of the Antichrist."

The prophecy also speaks of the Church being plunged into darkness and of great chastisements (disasters) before a time of peace. This extraordinarily strong warning is often interpreted as a prediction of a spiritual collapse within the Vatican itself – possibly through secularization or doctrinal deviation at the Church's very heart.

However, it is important to note that the Church takes a cautious stance toward these words. While the apparition itself was approved in 1851 regarding the fact of Mary's appearance, the full expanded version of Mélanie's prophecies, published in 1879, has no official Church endorsement. There is evidence suggesting later additions by Mélanie herself – including prophecies that did not come true for the 19th century.

The Church emphasizes that the famous phrase about "Rome and the Antichrist" may not have been part of the original secret transmitted to the pope. Nonetheless, within traditionalist and conspiratorial circles, La Salette remains a cornerstone of fears regarding a future great betrayal of the faith at Rome.

Mainstream Catholic commentators refute extreme interpretations, pointing out that while Scripture (2 Thessalonians 2:3) foretells a great apostasy before the end times and the rise of the Antichrist, this does not imply that the pope himself would become the Antichrist. According to Tradition, the Antichrist is expected to be a secular ruler and usurper who will persecute the Church, not a pope.

Thus, if the La Salette prophecy is authentic, it could be understood to mean that Rome itself will fall under godless control, while the true pope and the faithful might have to operate underground – much like the early Christian Church.

Importantly, the Virgin Mary at La Salette also foretold a renewal: "The Church will be eclipsed but not overcome," and it will shine anew after a period of trials. This is interpreted as the Church's future victory after a profound purification.

The Apparition of Akita (1973)

A more recent Marian apparition, approved by the local bishop, took place in Akita, Japan, in 1973. The messages given by Our Lady to Sister Agnes Sasagawa bear striking similarities to the warnings of Fatima.

Mary warned that if humanity did not repent, a terrible chastisement would befall the world: "Fire will fall from the sky," destroying much of humanity, and "the survivors will envy the dead."

Regarding the future of the Church, an especially notable part of the Akita message states: "The work of the devil will infiltrate even into the Church in such a way that one will see cardinals opposing cardinals, bishops against bishops."

Our Lady of Akita predicted that priests loyal to her would suffer persecution from their own brethren, that altars and churches would be desecrated, and that the Church would be filled with those who accept compromises.

This dramatic prophecy clearly foretells internal division within the Church's hierarchy: an open polarization around fidelity to Mary and truth. Many believers already see these words reflected today in doctrinal conflicts among cardinals, divergent currents (traditional vs. progressive), and the notable number of priests abandoning the priesthood in recent decades.

Some interpret this prophecy as a warning of a potential schism if demonic infiltration advances. Yet, like the Fatima message, Akita ultimately calls the faithful to prayer, repentance, and especially the daily recitation of the Rosary, with an emphasis on praying for the pope and bishops.

The Church officially understands Akita as a call to conversion – not as a declaration of the Church's imminent destruction, but rather a warning about an internal crisis and divine punishment for humanity's sins, both of which can be averted through faith.

The Prophecy of Saint Malachy

One of the most famous prophecies regarding the papacy is attributed to St. Malachy, a 12th-century Irish bishop. His "Prophecy of the Popes" allegedly lists 112 Latin mottos describing successive popes, from the 12th century to the "end of times."

The final pope listed after Benedict XVI (who was referred to as "Gloria Olivae" – the Glory of the Olive) is the mysterious "Petrus Romanus" – "Peter the Roman."

The prophecy states:

"During the final persecution of the Holy Roman Church, there shall sit Peter the Roman, who shall feed the sheep amid many tribulations; after which the city of seven hills shall be destroyed, and the dreadful Judge will judge the people. The End."

Many interpreters believe that the list concludes with the successor of Benedict XVI. When Pope Francis was elected in 2013, some immediately tried to link him to this prophecy, pointing out, for example, that St. Francis of Assisi's birth name was Giovanni Pietro Bernardone, or that Francis, being the first Jesuit pope, is a "Roman" by his Italian roots.

These connections, however, are somewhat tenuous. Proponents of the Malachy prophecy often suggest that the true "Peter the Roman" might be the pope following Francis – particularly if he comes from Rome or assumes the name Peter II (although no pope has ever dared to take the name of the first Apostle).

It's worth noting that historians are highly skeptical of the prophecy's authenticity – it was most likely fabricated in the 16th century to influence the conclave of 1590. The accuracy of the mottos drops significantly after that era, suggesting earlier predictions were made retrospectively.

The Catholic Church has never recognized St. Malachy's prophecy as genuine – regarding it more as a historical curiosity. Nonetheless, it has profoundly shaped apocalyptic theories about "the last pope."

Pope Francis, aware of these speculations, once jokingly remarked that he didn't choose the name "Peter II" to avoid fueling apocalyptic fears.

The Vision of Saint John Bosco

Saint John Bosco, a 19th-century Italian priest and canonized saint, is known for a series of prophetic dreams and visions concerning the Church and the world. The most famous is his "Vision of the Two Columns" (1862), often interpreted as foretelling the future tribulations of the Church.

In the vision, Bosco saw a great naval battle: a fleet of enemy ships attacking one massive vessel – the Church, steered by the pope. The attackers attempted to destroy the flagship with cannons, books, and ideologies. Two enormous columns rose from the sea nearby: one crowned by a statue of Mary titled "Help of Christians," the other by a large Eucharistic Host with the inscription "Salvation of the Faithful."

The pope struggled to anchor the Church's ship between the two columns. Enemy vessels repeatedly assaulted it.

At one point, the pope was severely wounded and fell, but he rose again – only to be attacked once more and killed. The enemies rejoiced... but their triumph was short-

lived. Almost immediately, the cardinals elected a new pope – so quickly that the announcement of the previous pope's death coincided with the election of his successor.

The new pope successfully steered the Church's ship between the two columns and anchored it to them, stabilizing it. The enemy fleets fell into confusion, clashed with one another, and sank. A great calm returned to the sea.

Bosco explained to his listeners:

"Heavy trials await us. What we have suffered so far is almost nothing compared to what is to come. Only the double anchor – devotion to Mary and frequent Communion – can save us in the hour of great storm."

This vision is interpreted as foretelling a major crisis in the Church – perhaps persecutions or wars – during which the pope would die a martyr's death. Yet it also promises an eventual triumph: the renewal and stabilization of the Church, anchored in the Eucharist and Marian devotion.

Saint John Bosco's dreams were recorded and are respected, though the Church does not require belief in their literal fulfillment. The "Two Columns" vision is fully consistent with Church teaching, emphasizing the Eucharist and Mary as pillars of survival during the Church's darkest storms.

The Visions of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824)

Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich, a German mystic and stigmatist beatified in 2004, left behind numerous recorded visions (written down by Clemens Brentano). Among them are particularly intriguing prophecies concerning the future of the Church, which many believe resonate with our present times.

On May 13, 1820, Emmerich described a vision where she saw "two churches and two popes" existing simultaneously. She stated:

"I saw a connection between two popes... I saw how detrimental the consequences of this false, dark Church would be. I saw it growing; heretics of every kind came to Rome. The local clergy grew lukewarm, and great darkness spread."

In another vision, she spoke of enormous confusion:

"It seemed to me that demands were being made of the clergy that could not be granted. I saw many elderly priests, weeping bitterly; some younger ones wept too. But others, especially the lukewarm, readily did what was demanded. People divided into two camps."

She also said:

"I saw the Holy Father in great distress. He lives in a different palace than before and admits only a few close friends. I fear the Pope will have much to suffer before he dies. I see that the dark Church is making great progress, exerting a terrible influence over the

people. The Holy Father and the true Church are so oppressed that one must implore God day and night..."

For many, these words seem prophetic in light of recent history: the unprecedented situation of "two popes" (Benedict XVI as pope emeritus and Francis as reigning pope), the depiction of a pope residing elsewhere and limiting contacts fits Benedict's quiet life after his resignation.

The image of the "false dark Church" is often interpreted by traditionalists as referring to modernist trends within the post-Vatican II Church, which they see as diluting doctrine.

Emmerich also mentioned heretics in Rome, a lukewarm clergy, and division into camps – images often compared to today's theological and liturgical disputes.

Some attributed to Emmerich the prophecy that "two papacies must arise: a true one and a false one," along with descriptions of a strange "Church of human making" being built in Rome – interpreted by some as foretelling a schism or apostasy by part of the hierarchy, creating a "new church" more aligned with worldly values.

However, it must be noted that not all of Brentano's recordings are considered perfectly reliable. His editorial practices sometimes introduced interpretive elements, and Emmerich's beatification process deliberately avoided relying on her visions due to questions about their transmission.

Nevertheless, her prophecies enjoy great popularity in conservative circles. Many see them as a grave warning: that a time may come when, alongside the true Church, a deceptive "Church of shadows" will arise, spreading confusion.

From a Catholic theological perspective, this could refer to the influence of anti-Church movements, secret societies, or pseudo-Catholic factions attempting to seize control in the Vatican. More radical interpretations claim that Emmerich foresaw the current crisis and that the "false Church" corresponds to a drift toward modernism under a "liberal" pope.

Such extreme conclusions, however, conflict with the Catholic doctrine of the Church's indefectibility – the belief that the Church, though subject to crisis and persecution, will never be overcome. Despite the controversy, Emmerich's prophecies inspire many to fervent prayer for the unity of the Church and the strength of the papacy – which was her own fervent desire.

Other Classical Prophecies

It is worth mentioning other visions from saints who also foretold turbulent times for the Church.

For instance, Pope Saint Pius X reportedly had a vision in 1909 of a future pope who would flee Rome amidst the corpses of his priests and be martyred — a prophecy often linked to the visions of Fatima and the prophecies of Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich.

Several blessed figures of the 20th century, such as Blessed Elena Aiello and Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman, spoke of the Church undergoing purification through persecution and the eventual rebirth of faith after a period of great turmoil.

A common thread running through these traditional prophecies is the belief that the Church will undergo a severe trial — whether through external persecution or internal apostasy — but will ultimately be preserved and renewed by divine providence.

Modern Visions and Controversial Mystical Prophecies

In addition to Church-approved apparitions, many private revelations and prophecies have emerged in recent decades, gaining traction among the faithful despite lacking official approval — and in some cases, facing explicit condemnation. These often speak of impending apocalyptic events, warnings for the Church and the world, and even specific predictions concerning the role of future popes during the end times.

Mary Divine Mercy (MDM)

One of the most controversial contemporary visionaries is known as Mary Divine Mercy (MDM), an Irish woman who began publishing alleged messages from Jesus and Mary online in 2010 (*The Warning*, *The Book of Truth*).

Her prophecies caused a massive uproar because they directly concerned the papacy. According to MDM, Pope Benedict XVI was "the last true pope," while his successor (Francis) would be the "False Prophet" of the Apocalypse, paving the way for the Antichrist.

These claims — in direct contradiction with Catholic doctrine regarding the papacy — were swiftly condemned by bishops worldwide. The messages were labeled as "gravely erroneous and destructive to faith."

Bishop Mark Coleridge of Australia noted that the messages contained "theological errors, false millenarian prophecies, and fearmongering masquerading as divine revelations," especially denouncing the "scandalous accusations against Pope Francis" as unacceptable.

The Church officially distanced itself from MDM, and numerous bishops (in Ireland, the U.S., Poland, and the Philippines) banned the distribution of her materials. Despite this, a segment of the faithful formed an underground movement, convinced of an imminent "Warning" (a global illumination of consciences) and believing that the current pope is leading the Church astray.

The case of MDM highlights the dangers of unapproved private revelations: they can create real divisions within the Church, especially when they undermine the pope's legitimacy. Such views are considered schismatic and based solely on private belief in unverifiable "messages from heaven."

According to MDM's apocalyptic scenario:

- The papal throne is occupied by an impostor,
- The true Church must go underground,
- A Great Warning will soon occur,
- Only those loyal to the "true pope" (spiritually remaining Benedict) will survive divine chastisements.

The Catholic Church firmly rejects this narrative, trusting in the Holy Spirit's protection against such deception.

The Apparitions at Garabandal (1961–1965)

Another major modern case is the alleged apparitions in Garabandal, Spain, where four young girls reported a series of Marian visions between 1961 and 1965 (though never officially approved by the Church).

The Garabandal messages are rich in apocalyptic themes: they foretold a coming Great Warning (a global illumination of consciences), a Great Miracle, and a possible Chastisement if humanity does not repent.

A cryptic statement attributed to the Virgin Mary caused much discussion:

"After Pope John XXIII, there will be only three more popes, and then it will be the end of the times."

From John XXIII (d. 1963), the next three popes would have been Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II. After John Paul II, some noted a significant shift in global history (the fall of Communism, globalization).

However, "the end of times" was understood not as the end of the world, but rather the beginning of a period leading up to major divine interventions (the Warning, etc.).

The confusion deepened because after John Paul II, two more popes reigned (Benedict XVI and Francis). Garabandal supporters explained that one pope, John Paul I, whose reign lasted only 33 days, might not have been "counted" by Mary. Thus, John Paul II would be considered the last of the three, and the following pontificates belong to the "end times" era.

According to this interpretation, we are now on the threshold of fulfilling Garabandal's promises:

- The Great Warning would occur during the reign of Francis or his immediate successor,
- Followed by a Great Miracle,
- And a time of severe trials for the Church.

Although Garabandal has not been formally approved or definitively condemned, many faithful continue to monitor its prophecies. The tone remains apocalyptic but notably not anti-papal — the girls were always fervent in their prayers for the pope.

Visionary Conchita has even stated that after the Warning, the pope may no longer be able to reside openly in Rome — interpreted by some as a sign of turmoil or persecution within the Vatican.

Overall, Garabandal breathes hope: Mary promises a great miracle to convert the world and protect the Church from total annihilation.

The Apparitions at Medjugorje (Since 1981)

The ongoing Marian apparitions in Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which began in 1981, also touch on the future of the Church. Six visionaries have received "ten secrets," the contents of which have not yet been publicly disclosed but are said to include warnings, divine signs, and chastisements for the world.

At least some of these secrets reportedly concern divine punishment for humanity's sins and the appearance of a visible sign for the whole world. Although details remain unknown, the visionaries insist that the Church and the world will undergo serious events, leading to a time of peace and the triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary – echoing the promises of Fatima.

Importantly, the Medjugorje messages do not directly reference papal succession or the fall of the Vatican. Instead, Mary has repeatedly emphasized the need for prayer for "the Holy Father, bishops, and priests," along with fidelity and obedience to the Church.

Thus, even while speaking of times of tribulation, the Medjugorje messages strongly support unity with the pope and the Church's hierarchy.

The Vatican has not given a final judgment on the authenticity of the Medjugorje apparitions. However, due to the massive influx of pilgrims and widespread reports of conversions and vocations, the Church permits public devotion connected to the site, pending further evaluation.

Regarding the Church's future, Medjugorje's prophecies suggest a nearing time of purification and decisive divine interventions. Following these, the Church is expected to enter a "new era" of peace — but as of now, until the secrets are revealed by the

designated priest (three days before each event), the full scope remains a matter of speculation.

Other Contemporary Prophecies

A number of modern mystics and seers, living or recently deceased, continue to share visions about the Church's destiny. Notable figures include:

- **Luz de Maria de Bonilla** (Costa Rican mystic),
- **Father Michel Rodrigue** (Canadian priest and founder of a new religious order),
- **Jennifer** (an American stigmatist).

All of them speak of an imminent global purification, an illumination of consciences, and a time of trial for the Church — including a prophesied two-month period without a pope following the death of Francis, during worldwide chaos.

They consistently urge spiritual preparation through confession, the Rosary, and Eucharistic devotion, as well as practical preparation such as food storage. Their prophecies share a common theme: a coming global cataclysm followed by a spiritual rebirth of the Church.

Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò

Even Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the former papal nuncio to the United States known for his sharp criticism of Pope Francis, has suggested in his letters that Francis's pontificate represents a "dress rehearsal for the Antichrist."

Such statements from a high-ranking cleric are unprecedented and blur the line between legitimate criticism and conspiratorial thinking. The institutional Church firmly distances itself from such opinions, reiterating that Christ's promise of the Church's indefectibility remains unshaken.

Nevertheless, the sharp polarization within the Church today has fueled the rise of prophetic voices on all sides: some calling for a return to Tradition against modernist trends, others advocating for openness to the Holy Spirit's new movements. As a result, many visionaries have emerged, and the faithful are often bombarded with conflicting prophecies, increasing confusion and division.

The Church reminds the faithful that no private revelation, especially those not officially approved, is binding on Catholic belief. However, the sheer proliferation of visions today reflects a widespread sense of spiritual unease and a yearning for divine guidance amid modern crises.

Theological and Eschatological Analyses of the Church's Future

Beyond mystical visions, the future of the Church after the pontificate of Pope Francis is a subject of serious theological, sociological, and Vaticanist analysis. These experts avoid prophetic imagery, instead attempting to forecast future developments based on historical trends, Church teaching, and biblical promises.

The more conservative forecasts focus on how the Church will navigate its current crises — involving faith, synodality, and globalization — over the coming decades.

From a Catholic eschatological perspective, we know that the Church continually advances toward the fulfillment of God's plan, but this journey will not be a triumphant march free of suffering.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches clearly:

"Before Christ's second coming, the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers, in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth." (CCC 675)

The greatest deception will be the appearance of the Antichrist — a false messiah who will seek to usurp God's place and deceive humanity. Thus, Catholic theology expects a great crisis of faith, a "final apostasy," before the end times.

However, the Catechism also emphasizes that before the end, there will be no earthly political triumph of the Church. Instead, the Church will follow her Lord in His Passover — His Passion and Resurrection — culminating in victory through God alone at Christ's return.

In other words, Catholic theology dismisses visions of either earthly glory or total annihilation for the Church: she will be purified through trials but endure until the end through divine protection.

What Happens After Pope Francis?

As the pontificate of Francis draws to a close, several pressing questions arise:

- Will the next pope continue Francis's pastoral vision, or mark a significant shift?
- Will the Church experience greater unity or deeper division?

Some observers suggest that the upcoming conclave could become a critical turning point. Although a majority of current cardinals have been appointed by Francis, a strong minority remains that favors a return to more traditional discipline.

Some commentators even speculate about the possibility of a schism — for example, if an African cardinal with highly conservative views were elected, certain liberal sectors in Germany or Western Europe might refuse to accept his decisions. Conversely, if a progressive pope embracing doctrinal change were chosen, some traditionalists might denounce him as a heretic.

The Church strives to avert such extreme scenarios through dialogue and unity in the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis himself has said he is not afraid of a schism but prays that it will not happen — acknowledging the delicate balance he must maintain.

Regardless of the next pope's identity, the Church faces undeniable challenges:

- Rapid secularization,
- Moral relativism,
- Declining Mass attendance and vocations in the West,
- Scandals involving abuse and financial mismanagement.

Many theologians believe the Church is moving away from her post-Constantinian privileged status in society toward becoming a "creative minority," smaller but more fervent.

Already in 1969, the young theologian Joseph Ratzinger (the future Benedict XVI) predicted:

"The Church will pass through a time of trial. She will become smaller and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes... she will lose many of her social privileges."

Far from pessimistic, Ratzinger emphasized that the Church would emerge from this crisis purified, more spiritual, and centered on holiness rather than worldly power.

Later, as pope, Benedict XVI reaffirmed this vision, and Pope Francis has also agreed that the Church's future will involve becoming humbler and poorer — but more faithful.

Thus, we can expect that regardless of who the next pope will be, the Church will likely continue to lose influence and numbers in Europe and perhaps the Americas, while growing dynamically in Africa and Asia.

The next pope could even be the first non-European in centuries — a reflection of the Church's global nature. (Francis himself is Argentine but of Italian descent.)

In today's interconnected world, the papacy increasingly functions as a moral authority for global issues such as climate change, migration, and peace. Any future pope will likely be expected to continue this "global shepherd" role, as Francis has elevated the expectations for papal social engagement.

Tradition, Synodality, and the Risk of Schism

There are already voices suggesting that the next conclave could be highly polarized:

- Some cardinals advocate a return to stricter traditional discipline,

- Others call for the continuation and even expansion of the pastoral "synodal way" championed by Francis.

Examples of tension have already surfaced:

- Restrictions placed on the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass (*Summorum Pontificum* being effectively overturned by *Traditionis Custodes*),
- Debates around civil unions, the discipline of sacraments, and the approach to LGBTQ Catholics.

Several high-profile cardinals — including Cardinal Raymond Burke and Cardinal Gerhard Müller — have publicly criticized the "synodal path" as a risk to doctrinal clarity. The famous *dubia* submitted to the Vatican regarding the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* only heightened awareness of doctrinal divisions within the hierarchy.

Theologians point out that the Church has an internal corrective mechanism: each council and pontificate responds to the challenges of the previous one. Thus, it's possible that the next pope may issue documents reaffirming orthodoxy and clarifying contested issues, helping to ease tensions.

Alternatively, a future pope might double down on pastoral reforms:

- Increasing lay involvement in Church governance,
- Promoting decentralization,
- Strengthening ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

The Synod on Synodality (2021–2024) has already introduced discussions about expanded roles for women, greater inclusivity of marginalized groups, and new models of decision-making — topics the College of Cardinals will have to weigh carefully.

Even without invoking mystical prophecies, it is clear the Church stands at a crossroads. Much will depend on whether unity can be preserved amid legitimate diversity.

Theologians remind us that schism — the formal breaking of communion with the pope — would be the darkest possible scenario, one that goes against Christ's explicit desire for unity.

Church history offers sobering examples:

- The Great East–West Schism of 1054,
- The Western Schism of the 14th century with rival claimants to the papacy.

Thus, although unity is the ideal, it cannot be taken for granted.

If a schism were to occur, Catholic doctrine teaches that the See of Rome would remain

the true See of Peter — while those who break away would form separate, irregular communities (much like the Lefebvrist movement after 1988).

Many Catholic theologians today reflect on the "purification through suffering" motif: the idea that the Church may need to endure her own Passion — betrayal, persecution, even apparent defeat — before emerging renewed.

Private prophecies (Fatima, Akita, Emmerich) depict this dramatically, but theology supports the fundamental pattern based on Christ's own Passion and Resurrection.

Above all, the Church clings to the dogma of her **indefectibility** (*indefectibilitas Ecclesiae*):

- The Church as a whole cannot fall into heresy,
- The pope cannot officially teach heresy in matters of faith and morals,
- Christ himself preserves His Church through the Holy Spirit.

Thus, despite all crises, the Church will endure until the end of time.

Conspiracy Theories and Apocalyptic Narratives

Separate from theological and mystical reflections is a growing body of conspiracy theories and esoteric speculation about the end of Pope Francis's pontificate.

These narratives blend ancient prophecies, biblical apocalyptic symbolism, and popular culture myths.

Among the most common themes:

The Last Pope

Many conspiracy theories assert that Pope Francis — or his successor — will be the last pope before the end of the world.

This idea is fueled by:

- The alleged prophecy of Saint Malachy (concerning "Peter the Roman"),
- Nostradamus's enigmatic verses,
- And folk beliefs surrounding physical signs in the Vatican (such as the limited number of papal portraits at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls).

The fact that only one or two spaces remain for papal portraits has been interpreted by some as a sign that the end is near — although, realistically, the gallery could simply be extended.

Nostradamus and the "Black Pope"

Nostradamus's writings are frequently cited whenever a papal transition looms. According to some interpretations, he predicted:

- The death of an "old pope" around 2025,
- The rise of a successor who would "weaken his throne,"
- A "young, dark-skinned pope" emerging — sparking enormous turmoil.

The term "Black Pope" has traditionally referred to the Superior General of the Jesuits (due to their black cassocks). Since Francis is the first Jesuit pope, some speculate that Nostradamus's warning already applies.

Others suggest that a literal "black pope" could soon be elected — pointing to prominent African cardinals like Peter Turkson (Ghana) or Robert Sarah (Guinea).

In the view of Nostradamus enthusiasts, this would fulfill the prophecy of a dark-skinned pope ushering in the end times.

However, scholars caution that Nostradamus wrote in deliberately obscure language, allowing multiple, often contradictory interpretations. Most "hits" attributed to him are cases of retrospective fitting rather than clear predictions.

The Church does not recognize Nostradamus's quatrains as a legitimate source of prophecy.

Nevertheless, the media often dramatizes conclaves by referencing these myths — feeding public fascination with apocalyptic imagery.

Masonry in the Vatican

A popular strand of conspiracy theory claims that the Catholic Church has been infiltrated by anti-Christian forces.

Proponents point to documents like the **Alta Vendita** (a 19th-century Freemasonic plan allegedly aiming to morally corrupt the clergy) or the words of **Pope Saint Pius X**, who warned of the "smoke of Satan" entering the Church.

According to these theories, the post-Vatican II era (after 1965) marked the partial realization of that plan:

- A rise in modernism,
- Declines in priestly vocations,
- Liturgical abuses,
- Moral scandals.

More radical traditionalist groups (such as sedevacantists) go further, claiming that Pope Francis himself is either an imposter or a puppet of globalist or Masonic forces.

They often cite an alleged prophecy of **Saint Francis of Assisi** describing a "destroyer pope" not canonically elected.

The alleged prophecy reads:

"At the time of this tribulation, a man not canonically elected will be raised to the pontificate; he will, by his cunning, lead many into error and death... Scandals will abound, our Order will be divided... there will be such diversity of opinions and schisms that even the elect would be led into error — were those days not shortened."

However, historians have demonstrated that this text does not originate from Saint Francis but from a dissident faction of Franciscan Spiritualists in the 14th century — a medieval "fake news" repurposed in 2013 to attack Pope Francis.

The Church maintains that God will not abandon His Church to a false shepherd.

Even if a pope is personally sinful (as many popes have been throughout history), he will not officially teach heresy.

Nonetheless, conspiracy narratives abound on the internet, portraying Francis (or a future pope) as the "False Prophet" of the Apocalypse.

Will the Vatican Be Destroyed?

Some apocalyptic theories predict not just spiritual corruption but the literal destruction of Rome or the Vatican itself.

Certain prophecies — such as parts of Fatima's Third Secret, the secrets of La Salette, or visions from Blessed Elena Aiello and Saint John Bosco — describe cities in ruins, corpses in the streets, and divine punishments.

In the age of weapons of mass destruction, such visions feel chillingly plausible. A global conflict could indeed threaten Rome.

Some 20th-century mystics (like Servant of God Marta Robin) allegedly foresaw the physical destruction of the Vatican but also spoke of miraculous divine protection for the Church.

Biblical apocalyptic imagery — particularly Revelation 17–18, which depicts the fall of "Babylon the Great" — has been linked to Rome by some interpreters, especially outside the Catholic Church.

From a Catholic standpoint, however, even if Rome were physically destroyed, the Church would not perish. Just as the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD did not end the faith of Israel, so too would the Church survive beyond any material devastation.

Catholic theology affirms that the Church is universal and indestructible.

Even if the Vatican were reduced to rubble, the Church would continue elsewhere, awaiting the final triumph of Christ.

Nonetheless, popular imagination — fueled by visions of a pope fleeing a burning city — continues to animate apocalyptic narratives.

Final Reflections: What Lies Ahead for the Church?

As we can see, the spectrum of prophecies and theories about the Church's fate after Pope Francis is broad:

- From approved revelations calling for conversion and prayer,
- Through saints' warnings of trials and purification,
- To controversial visions predicting apostasy or collapse.

Traditional Catholic prophecies (such as those from Fatima, Akita, and Saint John Bosco) generally agree on one point:

The Church will face severe suffering but will ultimately triumph — either through a period of peace on Earth (the Triumph of the Immaculate Heart) or through her final glorification in heaven.

Modern private revelations continue these themes — sometimes with a tone of deep loyalty to the papacy (as in Medjugorje), and sometimes with open rebellion (as in the case of Mary Divine Mercy).

Theologians ground these apocalyptic expectations in a sober reading of Church doctrine:

- The Church will undergo trials,
- She will be purified,
- But she will endure until the end of time.

Meanwhile, conspiracy theories paint much darker scenarios — often based on dubious sources or theological misunderstandings.

There is no doubt that our times are marked by profound crises and upheavals.

Pope Francis himself embodies this era of transition:

- Some view him as a reformer leading the Church to the "peripheries" of the world,
- Others see him as a harbinger of confusion.

Private prophecies help us recognize that such tensions were foretold:

- Akita predicted "bishop against bishop,"
- Emmerich spoke of "two camps within the Church."

Yet nearly all prophecies end with hope:

- A faithful "remnant" will survive,
- Christ will ultimately triumph.

As Our Lady assured at Fatima:

"In the end, my Immaculate Heart will triumph."

What exactly will happen after Pope Francis's death?

We will find out soon enough.

Perhaps the next conclave will elect an African or Asian pope, fulfilling long-held dreams of the Global South — and possibly confirming some ancient prophecies (Malachy, Nostradamus).

Or perhaps the next pope's greatest challenge will be preserving unity in a deeply divided Church — fulfilling the mission of Peter in its deepest sense: **strengthening the brethren.**

Whatever the future holds, Catholics can face it with confidence, trusting that Christ remains with His Church until the end of the age.