

Covering Francis in Asia: Between ecclesial angels and American ghosts



Pope Francis blesses a child as he arrives for a meeting with beneficiaries from charitable organizations, during his apostolic visit to Asia, at the Indonesian Bishops' Conference headquarters in Jakarta, on Sept. 5. (Photo by Handout / VATICAN MEDIA / AFP)

A few days before Pope Francis arrived in Jakarta, the US-centric Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) released a documentary on the upcoming papal trip to Asia-Pacific, “Pope Francis in Southeast Asia.” In less than 32 minutes, Colm Flynn, the Vatican correspondent for EWTNNews, provides a rich introduction to the official schedule of the pope and the four visited countries.

This documentary, available on YouTube from Aug. 13, was widely circulated through social media and media outlets related to the well-funded EWTN, such as the National Catholic Register and Catholic News Agency.

By the time Pope Francis concluded his official program in Jakarta on Sept. 6, the documentary had already been watched more than 200,000 times, with close to 600 comments written under it.

Comments were coming from around the world – and many from Asia. They were largely positive, expressing national pride, devoted support to Pope Francis, and giving thanks to EWTN for its professional service to the Church. One commentator even dared to write: “For once, EWTN was not brazenly and shamelessly criticizing Pope Francis!”

It is true that the television network based in Alabama did not always have an easy relationship with the Argentinian pope. In 2021, while visiting his fellow Jesuits in Slovakia, Francis explained, “There is, for example, a large Catholic television channel that has no hesitation in continually speaking ill of the pope.”



Pushing further, he added: “I personally deserve attacks and insults because I am a sinner, but the church does not deserve them. They are the work of the devil. I have also said this to some of them.” Based on some evidence and clues, experts speculated that Francis was indeed referring to EWTN.

Being described by the pope as the “work of the devil” is a severe challenge for a commercial entity that claims a Catholic identity. But tones have duly evolved, programs have changed, and relations have improved. Last year, Francis gave his blessing to “Faith of Our Fathers,” a movie by EWTN of Ireland.

Media and public communication are serious for the Church. They can promote certain agendas, identify priorities and foster mutual listening. Local and national Churches, as well as the Vatican itself, heavily depend on a wide range of media outlets – public, private, and ecclesial— to ideally nurture ecclesial cohesion and to make the Church publicly recognizable. With its professional standards, ecclesial flavor, and financial strength, EWTN contributes to this complex ecosystem.

The documentary on Pope Francis' visit to Southeast Asia exemplifies this valuable yet situated contribution. In less than 32 minutes, the audience gets an overview of the papal trip and hears direct insights from one president, one Imam, three cardinals, three priests, six nuns, two children, etc.

The diversity of voices and perspectives, carefully articulated together by Flynn and his team, not only illustrates a spirit of synodality and inclusion but also manifests the strength of EWTN, its capacity to fly a whole crew around the globe, and its well-introduced connections.

Nonetheless, from a theological and anthropological perspective, one needs to carefully analyze the subtext of such a documentary to appreciate its value better and reflect on its choices. No statement is merely objective and descriptive.

When one has less than 32 minutes to provide a pedagogical introduction to four highly diverse countries and a historical papal visit, he has to make choices. And these decisions are not only rooted in technical constraints. They also rely on cultural perceptions and socio-political theories of the Church.

No one is free from his or her cultural perceptions and socio-political theories of religion. Our beliefs are necessarily rooted in our individual and collective flesh. At the same time, Christians are called to put words on our faith. Christianity has a unique need for rational thinking. It comes with incarnation. It is a condition to convert abstract intuitions toward the divine into a confident choice toward the unique Son of God.

In the EWTN documentary, one must notice the dissonance between Flynn's overall insistence on poverty and the statement of Father Thomas Ulun Ismoyo, spokesperson for Indonesia Papal Visit

2024. For Ismoyo, “Indonesia is not a poor country” – and more attention is needed to understand Indonesia's poverty question.

For freshly arrived foreign eyes, however, marginalized ways of living are shocking. This is true for an American man visiting some neighborhoods of Jakarta as well as for a French man visiting some parts of New York City.

However, as I have explained in my public response to Cardinal Antonio Tagle, the question of poverty in Asia needs tactful approaches. Pointing fingers at all the poor in Papua New Guinea without saying a word about the massive extraction of natural resources, sometimes predatory, orchestrated by American and other foreign entities is not courteous nor constructive. It creates an unjustifiable and condescending position.

Behind this question of poverty also lays Manichean ambiguities. On the one hand, the world appears to be a problem. It is a space either marked by poverty or materialism. On the other hand, the Church is portrayed as a solution. It is a space of charitable service and virtue. Without dismissing the beauty of the Church and the darkness of the world, Christian theology invites us not naively to oppose the two and to recognize our own sins and failures as well as the beauty of our fellow humans.

As a foreigner, talking about social realities and ecclesial aspects that seem harmful to society and the Church is complicated. Who am I to judge? Finding a suitable venue and opportunity to raise concerns about Asian societies and the Church in Asia is a constant challenge. But Cardinal Joseph Zen has long shown us that, in Asia, there is room for frank and open debates.

With this in mind, it seems difficult to not say a single word about sex abuses perpetrated by Timorese Bishop Carlos Belo - especially when one discusses Catholic orphanages. Even within the Church, giving justice and preserving human dignity is not easy.

Similarly, sharing resources with the marginalized is not always our spontaneous attitude. Poverty is not simply a natural accident – it is produced by socio-cultural mechanisms in which the Church can be involved. And when one wants to respect the majority religion of Indonesia, Islam, he might also consider the majority religion of Papua New Guinea. In Asia, Protestant Churches are a challenging gift that we need to acknowledge.

In conclusion, the rich documentary of Flynn should be an opportunity to deepen our conversations on Asian Catholics. We need to acknowledge and challenge our cultural and theological lenses in our ecclesial encounters. We must put words upon a series of implicit choices to question our ways of looking at our sisters and brothers – whether Catholic or not.

Through this documentary, Flynn is contributing to the ecclesial conversation that Pope Francis is fostering. It deploys the power of encounter that an apostolic journey entails.

But how serious are we about listening to the many people that Pope Francis is trying to bring to international attention? Are we willing to avoid reducing complex situations and testimonies to a single narrative? To what extent are we eager to revisit our socio-cultural and theological assumptions?

**The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.*