De Europa
Vol. 9, No. 1 (2026), 151-154
ISSN 2611-853X
www.deeuropa.unito.it

Geopolitical prophecies compared: Francis's confederal Europe and Leo XIV's federalist Europe

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In an era when Popes hold press conferences and answer journalists' questions on all current geopolitical issues, two statements about Europe, made almost 10 years apart by two non-European popes, point in opposite directions for the continent's future.

Both statements were made in the aftermath of historic events: the first by Pope Francis on June 26, 2016, three days after the Brexit referendum. The second by Pope Leo, on December 9, 2025, following the publication of the U.S. National Security Strategy.

These events led the two pontiffs to opposing reactions and solutions regarding Europe. In fact, while Bergoglio called for a slowdown and, paradoxically, a "healthy dis-union" (Pope Francis 2016) as a remedy for saving the integration process, Prevost instead advocated for its acceleration and implementation as the only means to achieve the same goal.

At the root of this are the two different, divergent visions that the North American Pope and the South American Pope have of the European Union: two conceptions that, in terms of constitutional models, can respectively be defined as federalist and confederative.

So, after this introduction and conceptual premise on the aims of the article, it is appropriate to proceed in order and go back to 2016 and the surprising result of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom.

"Something is not right in that cumbersome Union […]" (*ibid.*): addressed to journalists on the plane upon returning from the papal trip to Armenia, Francis's words – one in particular, cumbersome - had the effect of an earthquake, modifying the landscape of Vatican geopolitics as it had been formed and consolidated during the European pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

> The step that the European Union must take to recover the strength it had at its origins – continued Francis - is one of creativity and also of a healthy dis-union. In other words, giving independence, granting greater freedom to the countries of the Union. Thinking of another form of union, being creative (*ibid.*).

After the adjective, "cumbersome," comes the apparently antinomic formula of the "healthy dis-union", which calls into question many of the certainties built up over years of pro-European commitment.

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/14011

More than a simple "step", the invitation to be creative and to think "of another form of union", starting from a "healthy dis-union," clearly proposes a transition. Not only a step, but a transition from one model to another, pushing for a rethink and repositioning on a confederal-type system.

Translating it to a constitutional level, "dis-union" indeed refers to a confederal rather than federalist community, where sovereignty remains predominantly a prerogative of the single States.

From this perspective, Francis' dream seems no longer to be that of the founding fathers, but rather that of a re-founder. And it also differs from the thinking and dreams of the pontiffs who preceded it, given that the unexpected proposal of a "healthy dis-union", formulated after Brexit, does not belong to the magisterium of the two popes who came from the heart of Europe, that is, from Krakow and Bavaria, and who had placed the political unity of the continent, on a federal basis, at the center of their Weltanschauung, like a "dogma".

Francis's gaze - or "Magellan's gaze" (Spadaro 2016), with the suggestive image he used to describe his way of looking at the world - is more oriented towards a Europe of Homelands rather than towards the United States of Europe. A painting inspired by the South rather than North America, without blurring or softening but rather highlighting national boundaries.

In Bergoglio's eyes, five centuries later, Brexit must have somehow evoked the schism of Henry VIII. A disciplinary dispute degenerated into doctrinal heresy. A metaphorical preview of what could happen to Europe if widespread intolerance for the excessive burden of its rules and institutions were exploited by populist movements, degenerating into renationalization and eroding the ties between the members of the Union.

This is why-to continue and conclude with the metaphor-faced with the risk, of further divorces, after that of the United Kingdom, Francis in the aftermath of Brexit has changed his position on the European integration process and appeared inclined to recognize the nullity of the first, federalist marriage, due to a defect of form and consent of the contracting parties, and to indicate the path to a healthy and confederative dis-union: a path opposite to the one suggested ten years later by Pope Leo, as a consequence of an equally impactful event.

This decisive, impactful event, at the end of 2025, was the Russian-Ukrainian peace plan developed by the Trump Administration, which together with the new U.S. National Security Strategy (SNN), in the judgment of the first American Pope, sanctions a huge (see Vatican News 2025) ("huge", with the same emphasis with which Francis had pronounced the adjective "cumbersome" ten years earlier) change in the relations between Europe and the United States.

On Tuesday 9 December, after receiving the Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelenskyy and before returning to Rome from his weekly "day off" spent in the papal villa of Castel Gandolfo, in what has now become a frequent appointment with the journalists waiting for him at the gates (in a mix of confidentiality, in the style, and solemnity, in the topics, which recalls the famous Roosevelt's fireside chats) Leone

has verbatim declared, “Unfortunately, I believe that some aspects of what I have seen would bring about a huge change in what has, for many, many years, been a true alliance between Europe and the United States (*ibid*.).”

A statement in which every word has its own weight and contains a political judgment, as well as expressing the Pope's disappointment and concern: from the aforementioned "huge" to the opening adverb, "unfortunately," which immediately gives Prevost's answers a pessimistic imprint. From "many," referring to the number of years and repeated twice, to underline the strong discontinuity with a very long past and the rupture of an alliance that has stood the test of time and therefore constituted in its essence a "true alliance”: where "true," in the vocabulary of a pope, alludes to that symbiosis of values, cultural and spiritual, that are deeper and more rooted than any strategic interest, whether economic or military.

But it is on Ukraine that the American Pope takes an even more clear stance, siding with Europe in the dispute with the Trump administration and dissenting from the attempt "to reach a peace agreement without including Europe in the discussions." This is "unrealistic," for the simple fact that "the war is in Europe (*ibid*.).”

Although negative for Europe, the shift in US foreign policy could nevertheless have a positive institutional outcome, according to Prevost, pushing the continent's countries toward political unity:

> […] the unity of European countries is truly significant, especially in this case...not everyone understands this, but I believe there is a great opportunity for the idea of Europe to come together and seek solutions collectively (*ibid*.).

Crises therefore represent an opportunity for the idea and unity of Europe, which, however, is not the same for Bergoglio and Prevost. Indeed, in the face of crises, Francis believes that unity is preserved by restoring, and Leo, on the contrary, by reducing, the sovereignty of states. For the above reasons and solutions, it is possible to conclude that the two schools of thought, which Mario Draghi classified as federalist and confederative in his lecture at the Catholic University of Leuven (Draghi 2026) on February 2, 2026, exist and are represented, at the highest level, also in the Vatican.

The coming years – and perhaps even the coming months – will reveal whether the school of thought of Leo XIV and the “European campaign” he launched on the ground - through visits to capitals ranging from Madrid to Paris, as well as symbolic cities like Metz in tribute to Schuman – will turn the American Pope into an unexpected and proactive “influencer” of the European integration process.

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