

Pope Francis walks in the shadow of namesake saint in Assisi

by [Eric J. Lyman](#)

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ROME (RNS) Pope Francis on Friday (Oct. 4) traveled to Assisi, the central Italian hill town made famous by the pope's namesake, St. Francis, where he renewed his call for Christians to forsake the pursuit of worldly possessions.

The medieval saint lived in poverty in order to dedicate his life to Christ, and the pope said Christians — not just Catholics — should seek to emulate the venerated patron saint of the poor, calling the pursuit of wealth a “cancer of society and the enemy of Christ.”

The pope warned that seeking worldly possessions leads to “vanity, arrogance, and pride.”

When he was elected pope last March, then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio surprised Vatican watchers by becoming the first pope in 2,000 years to pick the name Francis, and he has since looked to emulate the saint's footsteps by keeping much of the luxuries of the papacy at arm's length.

The pope also seems intent on reforming the church, following the work of St. Francis, who received a vision from God telling him to “rebuild my church.”

It was Francis' second trip outside Rome in less than two weeks, following a Sept. 22 day trip to the Italian island of Sardinia, where he addressed the issue of worldly wealth and criticized what he called the “idolatry of money.”

Francis arrived in Assisi, about 120 miles north of Rome, at dawn at the Serafico Institute, a charitable organization that offers treatment to disabled children. While there, he greeted each of the more than 100 children gathered in the institute's

chapel, stopping to kiss several of them on the head or whisper into their ears.

Later in the day, Francis addressed a group of poor people in the same room where St. Francis is believed to have stripped off his clothes and given away his worldly possessions. The pope expressed anger at a “savage world” that “doesn’t help, doesn’t care if there are children in the world who die of hunger.”

His message of Christian charity comes at a poignant time in Italy, where the Italian government declared a day of mourning after more than 100 African migrants died in a shipwreck trying to reach the southern Italian island of Lampedusa, the site of the pope’s first trip outside Rome.

The pope said in Assisi that the victims and others affected by the tragedy were in his prayers. “Today is a day of tears,” Francis said. “These things go against the spirit of the world.”