

Pope Francis dies at 88

Francis leaves behind a church still divided, but radically transformed.

by [Claire Giangravé](#)

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Pope Francis attends services at Croke Park, Dublin, on August 15, 2018, during the World Meeting of Families. (Photo by Maxwell Photography/WMOF2018)

Pope Francis, who sought to be a bridge maker as he led the Catholic Church in a time of deep polarization, died Monday morning at the age of 88—a day after a surprise appearance in Peter’s Square on Easter Sunday.

“He taught us to live the values of the Gospel with fidelity, courage and universal love, especially toward the poorest and most marginalized,” read [a Vatican statement](#) by Cardinal Kevin Farrell, who is charged with overseeing the papal funeral and the election of the next pope.

The pope had been recovering from double pneumonia, for which he was hospitalized in mid-February and released after five weeks. The aging pontiff was initially treated for bronchitis during his hospital stay, but his doctors later said that he had developed pneumonia and was in critical condition at the time. Part of Francis’s lung had been removed at 21 after a life-threatening pneumonia.

As he aged, he had suffered a number of ailments, from sciatica to cataracts to chronic knee pain, and visitors to the Vatican were accustomed to seeing the pope struggle to walk when not using a wheelchair.

With his pastoral style of leadership and his emphasis on mercy, however, Francis restored the credibility of the church in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics after decades of bad news about clergy sex abuse, financial scandals, and decline in attendance at Catholic churches.

“The pontificate of Pope Francis has been a breath of fresh air for the Catholic Church globally. He was loved for his simplicity, humility, and warmth,” said Sandie Cornish, senior lecturer in theology at the Australian Catholic University and a member of the Vatican Dicaster for Integral Human Development.

“The first Jesuit pope, the first Latin American pope, the first pope from outside Europe since the early church, Francis brought a fresh perspective ‘from below’ or ‘from the ends of the earth’ as he put it when he was elected,” Cornish added.

Francis was known for his commitment to welcoming migrants and refugees, the protection of the environment, and support for the poor and marginalized, but he remained a polarizing figure for Catholics who mirror society’s political and ideological divisions. He was elected by his fellow cardinals in 2013 as a reformer who would restore credibility to the church’s troubled finances, restructure the Vatican’s Curial departments, and lead the spiritual reform of the church’s leadership and faithful.

Pope Francis succeeded Pope Benedict XVI as leader of the Catholic Church in 2013, after his predecessor shocked the Catholic world by stepping down as pontiff and

took the title of emeritus pope. While Benedict remained silent, he was still regarded as a champion of conservative views in contrast to Francis' softer approach to Catholic doctrine. His presence weighed on Francis's tenure, despite joint efforts to present a united papacy, until Benedict's death in 2022.

Born Jorge Mario Bergoglio to a family of Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on December 17, 1936, Francis spent his youth as a chemical technician and took occasional jobs as a bouncer and janitor. At 22 he began to follow a vocation to become a priest, and after two years as a novitiate he entered the Society of Jesus, the order known as the Jesuits, on March 12, 1960.

Ordained a priest in 1969, he became the provincial superior of the Jesuit order in Argentina in 1973, at a critical time known as the Dirty War, when the country's military dictatorship relentlessly pursued and imprisoned its critics. Bergoglio was often criticized for not standing up to the regime. His relationship with the global Jesuit order was also strained due to his iron-fist leadership and opposition to liberation theology, which was becoming increasingly popular in Latin America.

He became the archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, quickly earning the title of "slum bishop" for his ministry in the city's poverty-stricken favelas. In 2001, Pope John Paul II made Bergoglio a cardinal and appointed him to a number of Vatican Curial positions. He had an influential role in creating the Aparecida document, a 2007 statement by Latin America's Catholic bishops emphasizing the importance of the family, the environment and evangelization.

At the conclave after John Paul's death in 2005, Bergoglio was one of the cardinals spoken of as "papabile," or a credible candidate for the papacy, but the cardinals chose the continuity of Benedict, who as Joseph Ratzinger had been John Paul's fierce doctrinal chief, sometimes called "God's Rottweiler."

When, in 2013, the cardinals did make Bergoglio St. Peter's 265th successor, he took the name "Francis" in honor of St. Francis of Assisi, known for his devotion to the poor and the environment. The unassuming "Buonasera" (good evening) that he uttered to the waiting faithful in St. Peter's Square after his election foreshadowed his humble approach to the papacy.

Eschewing the grander Apostolic Palace, Francis chose to live in the hotel-like room of Domus Sanctae Marthae and eat with other Curial members. He opted for simple clothing and jewelry, distancing himself from the pomp and regalia of his

predecessors.

He immediately set about making much-needed structural and economic reforms, continuing the work started by Benedict in the Institute for Religious Works, known as the Vatican bank, but more sensationally allowing 10 individuals, including Cardinal Angelo Becciu, to be tried for suspected fraud, embezzlement and money laundering.

Francis stripped the powerful Secretariat of State of its investment assets and injected transparency into the Vatican's acquisitions process. His Apostolic Constitution, *Paredicate Evangelium* (Preach the Gospel), merged many Vatican departments, eliminated redundancies, and promoted more involvement of lay Catholics.

Francis's sometimes tough reforms won him determined opponents inside the Vatican, but he bolstered his position by selecting some 80 percent of the cardinals heading 10 consistories. He gave red hats to prelates from a wide range of countries, including some that never had a cardinal before, creating the most diverse College of Cardinals in the history of the church.

The pope sought to eliminate clericalism—the preferential treatment assumed by priests in the church that is as often awarded by lay Catholics. “The pope's actions had the purpose of purifying the church to a great effect,” said Massimo Borghesi, a philosophy professor at the University of Perugia and author of *The Mind of Pope Francis: Jorge Mario Bergoglio's Intellectual Journey*.

Francis's efforts “led to the great oppositions and contrasts that he faced within the church,” Borghesi added.

To reconcile these tensions, Francis took a keen interest in calling summits of bishops, known as synods, to address key challenges facing the church, and stirring new conversations and discussions about female ordination and a married priesthood, inevitably drawing vocal opposition. The three-year Synod on Synodality, ending in October 2024, aimed to take the pulse of Catholics all over the world and to expand the people and views that go into the church's decision-making.

Yet Francis made few changes to Catholic teaching itself. He enshrined the church's opposition to the death penalty within the catechism and opened the door for divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the Eucharist with the spiritual guidance

of a priest. He took a stronger stance against nuclear weapons and restricted the definition of just war that had been used by politicians to justify foreign interventions.

But when it came to questions of sexuality, the female priesthood, abortion or euthanasia, “Bergoglio didn’t change a thing,” Borghesi said. “Conservatives thought he was a progressive pope, but from a traditional and dogmatic view, he was a conservative,” the professor said. Francis spoke candidly in opposition to abortion and criticized gender theories as a form of “ideological colonization.”

Instead, Francis took a pastoral approach, setting aside theology in favor of personal encounters with gay couples and their advocates in the church. He invited trans sex workers to Vatican events and encouraged the appointment of women to lead Vatican departments.

“It will be difficult to return to a harsh and severe pope who only insists on rules and doesn’t walk the path of mercy, which Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI had already laid out, and is the way of the church in modern times,” Borghesi said. “I think there is no turning back from this.”

Francis took the reins of the Catholic Church at an all-time low in its popularity after years of bad news about bishops’ mishandling of clergy sexual abuse, capped by the *Boston Globe’s* 2002 *Spotlight* investigation showing countless cases of sexual abuse by clergy in the United States. The pope took on the abuse crisis by creating new laws obligating clergy to report abuse to the authorities, removed the pontifical secret from abuse cases, and applied accountability measures in dioceses. At the Vatican, he created the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors with the goal of advising the church on how to prevent abuse cases in the future.

Francis’s efforts had mixed results. The Vatican commission was stymied by political wrangling and the pope himself seemed to lower his disciplinary standards for those close to him, such as Bishop Gustavo Zanchetta, who was found guilty of pedophilia by an Argentine court, and Bishop Juan Barros, who covered up for the infamous Chilean pedophile priest Fernando Karadima.

Francis also enacted restrictions on the Traditional Latin Mass with his 2021 decree *Traditionis Custodes*, which was perceived as an attack on the most conservative factions in the church and in opposition with Benedict XVI’s opening toward the old rite.

Despite Francis's failures, he did much to restore the church's credibility in the world. "He was a pope who opened doors, leaving behind a church that speaks to all without fear," Borghesi said. "This pope made the church acceptable and admirable once again after the grave scandals that marked the time that preceded his pontificate."

Francis left a powerful mark in the way the Catholic Church interacts with other religions. He promoted interreligious dialogue by focusing on what global faiths shared, rather than their theological differences, and pursued interfaith charitable efforts for the poor and the environment. In 2016 he signed a joint declaration against Christian persecution in the Middle East with the Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and in 2019 signed a historic document on Human Fraternity with Sunni Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar.

In his multiple foreign trips, Francis favored "the global peripheries," choosing to visit countries in the Global South and those distant from the Western power centers.

Diplomatically, he juggled difficult relationships with Russia, China, and the United States. He will be remembered as a pope who withdrew from the Atlantic alliance favored by his predecessor John Paul II while attempting to mediate a bridge with Beijing and the Kremlin. Under his papacy, the Vatican signed and renewed a controversial deal with China that gave Beijing a voice in the appointment of bishops, which critics say limited the pope in condemning human rights violations by the People's Republic.

Francis also strived to make the Vatican a mediator for peace in what he described as a "Third World War fought piecemeal" in Syria in 2013, Ukraine in 2022, and the 2023 war in the Holy Land. He also advocated for peace in South Sudan, Yemen, and Myanmar.

"Pope Francis served the world, not just the Catholic Church," said journalist Victor Gaetan, author of the book *God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy, and America's Armageddon*. "From the first months of his papacy, he worked quietly, and diligently, to promote peace. His engagement often made a difference, as in Syria in 2013 or Colombia in 2016. Other times, geopolitics undermined his diplomacy of dialogue and encounter."

Francis successfully prioritized relations with the Arab world, Gaetan explained, leading to the first-time-ever invitations to visit the United Arab Emirates (2019) and Bahrain (2022), then to mutual recognition between Oman and the Holy See (2023).

“Pope Francis showed us that Christ-like diplomacy can be real, not just aspirational, and this differs from how global powers are running the world,” he said.

The pope’s refusal to take sides in a time of war, to double down on doctrine amid mounting secularism and to provide quick solutions in a fast-paced world contributed to making Francis a highly divisive figure in the history of the church. His opponents called him authoritarian and a heretic, some even asking that he step down as pope.

His supporters praised him for fostering a climate of dialogue and frankness that allowed forms of criticism to be fearlessly expressed in the first place.

“He is a pope who opened the doors,” Borghesi said. “In little time, the pope was able to restore credibility to the church in the world. This pope cleared the air, allowing Catholics to meet the world of today with their head held high and with the desire to communicate the beauty of the Christian truth to the world.”

Francis leaves behind a church still divided, but radically transformed. Cardinals meeting at the conclave to elect the next pope will have the task of deciding what identity the church should pursue from now on, knowing that the expectations of 1.3 billion Catholics and the world are forever changed. —Religion News Service