

Mourning Pope Francis—and his limits

As a progressive Catholic, I admired Francis. As a woman and a feminist, I was often disappointed by him.

by [Rebecca Bratten Weiss](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

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Pope Francis greets the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square during his weekly general audience at the Vatican in 2017 (AP Photo / Alessandra Tarantino).

In the days following the death of Pope Francis, I opted to avoid the predictable negative coverage from his far-right critics, focusing instead on essays honoring the

memory of the pope whose interpretation of his office was summed up in his [memorable statement](#) that priests should be “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.” But I also read a number of reflections, most of them unpublished, by Catholics and ex-Catholics whose recollections of Francis are laced with disappointment.

The 12 years of Francis’s pontificate were turbulent, marked by war, climate catastrophe, income inequality, civil unrest, forced migration, a global pandemic, ecclesial schism, and the rise of extremist movements in numerous nations. In response to these challenges, Francis remained rooted in the gospel and Catholic social teaching. Hallmarks of his papacy were an emphasis on environmental and economic justice, care for the vulnerable, and a synodal (or listening) church. Even in his final days, he spoke in [defense of migrants](#) and chastised the powerful.

Despite the outcry of traditionalists who fomented for a [smaller but “purer” church](#), Pope Francis was willing to “[make a mess](#),” as he said at World Youth Day in 2023. Regarding the church not as a club for the perfect but as a field hospital for the wounded, he worked to enlarge its parameters to include those on the periphery. This included outreach to LGBTQ Catholics, who early in his papacy were heartened by his now-famous remark, “[Who am I to judge?](#)”

In his personal life, Francis modeled a humility that appealed to those who find the princely ostentation of clerical leaders distasteful. He dressed simply and was known to tend personally to the needs of the poor. While Francis’s humble, humorous, affectionate persona made for a series of captivating [media moments](#), it wasn’t a schtick for the camera. It was real.

Many outside the church admired Pope Francis. He was also one reason some on the brink of leaving opted to give the church one last chance. However, not all of them look back on his pontificate with undiluted gratitude. Many feel he held out a promise of progressive reform and then let them down.

As a Catholic who takes the values of the gospel seriously, I admired Pope Francis, and I genuinely mourn him. But as a woman who has struggled to articulate my identity within a patriarchal church that reduces me to a one-dimensional avatar of fabricated femininity, my feelings about Francis’s legacy remain complicated. On issues relating to LGBTQ identity, Francis undermined his own affirmations of welcome—affirmations that many queer Catholics appreciated—with a pattern of

transphobic and homophobic rhetoric. And when it comes to women's inclusion in the church, not much has changed. Francis, when discussing women and gender issues, often sounded like every patriarchal cleric I have known who failed to take me seriously as a person.

At the time of Pope Francis's election, I was a progressive feminist academic working in a hostile, ultra-conservative environment, trying to convince my fellow Catholics that doctrinal orthodoxy didn't have to mean being sexist and homophobic. I'd mined the writings of St. Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI for teachings that validated women's equality and greater inclusivity, knowing that amid many different ways of being Catholic, there was one at least that could work for feminists like me. But articulating it in a conservative milieu did not win me accolades.

When Benedict abdicated, setting the Catholic world into a flurry, I was both personally and professionally invested in who would fill his shoes. Or, ideally, in who would trade his stylish [red loafers](#) for something more practical. I didn't have a television at the time of the conclave deciding on Benedict's successor, but my father, who lived next door, called me when the white smoke began billowing from the Sistine Chapel, and I ran over to see who our next pope would be.

The name they announced, Jorge Bergoglio, was not one I expected. "Francis," the name the new pontiff chose, was similarly unexpected, though I couldn't miss its significance. When the tentative, almost shy figure stepped onto the balcony and, in contrast to his predecessors' showy entrances, raised one hand in greeting, his pectoral cross crooked on his chest, I suspected the name was well chosen.

St. Francis of Assisi is popularly regarded as a gentle nature lover who embraced lepers and gave his belongings to the poor. But he was also a reformer who summoned the church to return to holy poverty. In my favorite story about St. Francis, his father drags him before the bishop, irate at him for selling his merchant wares to support the poor. "Give back to your father everything that belongs to him," the bishop says. In an act we might call "malicious compliance," Francis obeys, returning even the clothes he is wearing. The man strips naked before a bishop to make his point.

St. Francis was also a defender of women's vocations. Chiara Offreduccio, an aristocratic young woman, was inspired by his preaching to seek a life of poverty, simplicity, and care for the poor. Her family wanted her to marry, but she ran away

to Francis, who supported her decision, even cutting her hair and helping her take refuge in a convent. When her family sent armed guards after her, she clung to the altar and refused to leave.

Choosing the name “Francis” seemed momentous in several different directions, all of them good. After the new pope’s first address to the world was over, I walked back through the pine grove separating my parents’ house from mine. The thought foremost in my mind was, *This could change everything*. Melodramatic, maybe, but that’s how I felt.

What was I hoping for? At the time, I was not an advocate for women’s ordination to the priesthood, but based on my amateur theologizing, I could see strong arguments for the restoration of the women’s diaconate and for including women in the college of cardinals. In addition, I didn’t think it healthy for women to have to confess their most intimate moral struggles to a man who held the power of the sacraments over their head. I wanted to hear a woman preach in church. And I thought it harmful that teachings on women’s bodies and health were formulated entirely by men.

I was a member of the “[JP II generation](#),” Gen-X Catholics who looked to the charismatic Polish pope as a harbinger of a new era of Catholic culture. Back in the 1990s, I bought the line that the church was my best defender, and the only feminism I needed was the “new feminism” initiated by John Paul—which I now recognize was a faux feminism tailored by a man to keep us in our place.

Fast-forward to 2013 and I’d grown critical of that faux feminism: It was predicated on the concept of complementarity, which the institutional church interpreted as “separate but equal,” with an emphasis on the separate. And I no longer trusted the church to defend me or anyone else. Eleven years earlier, revelations about the clergy abuse scandal shattered the faith of millions. Before the exposé the church was known primarily for opposing abortion, contraception, and gay rights. After the exposé it was still known for those things, but also for enabling child rapists. Our beloved JP II, whom I’d cheered wildly at Denver’s Mile High Stadium, was complicit in the scandal.

According to the story the church told about itself, it had always stood with the marginalized and opposed injustice. As for the abuses, they were regrettable consequences of original sin or the human element in the church. Nevertheless, Catholic institutional leaders knew the church was gravely compromised—not just by

the abuse crisis but by financial scandals. In 2012, a series of leaked documents collectively dubbed the Vatileaks scandal revealed, as *The Week* [put it](#), “the Holy See to be an unholy nest of conspiracies, backstabbing, and ambition.”

From a top-down perspective, Pope Francis was elected to reform a corrupt organization. And while his legacy remains to be determined, he did the work and laid the foundations, cleaning up the Vatican’s financial messes and reorganizing the Curia.

At the center of Francis’s program for expanding the church was the concept of synodality. A synodal church is a listening church, one that wants to hear from all its diverse members, and Francis implemented this by organizing global sessions to discuss matters of importance to the church: synods on the family, on young people, on the Pan-Amazonia region, and on synodality itself.

Just a year before Francis’s election, the Vatican took [disciplinary action](#) against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the group representing most of the nation’s nuns and sisters. The reason for the crackdown? The women were apparently being too feminist, and they were insufficiently vocal in denouncing gay marriage and abortion. Many of these women religious—who had worked tirelessly and often thanklessly in education, health care, and support of underserved communities—were dismayed to be chided by male ecclesial authorities. Sister Simone Campbell, then executive director of the Catholic social justice lobbying group Network, [described it](#) as a “sock in the stomach.”

This was part of a broader pattern of institutional intolerance toward women. The institution that couldn’t bring itself to do anything about predator priests or embezzling bishops was quick to crack down on feminist theologians who pushed the doctrinal envelope or asked for greater inclusion.

Catholic women are used to working in the shadows. Some embrace this, in a gesture I can’t help but interpret as internalized misogyny. Others shrug and carry on, knowing the work of the gospel often leads to the opposite of worldly glory. But the idea of a church that actually listens—what an exciting concept for people who have been silenced so often.

Ironically, it was at one of the synods convened under Francis that I was [almost arrested](#). I was in Rome in October 2018 for a global women’s symposium organized by the group Catholic Women Speak, just when the Synod on Young People was

opening. Following the symposium, some of the members, who were active in the Women's Ordination Conference, organized a protest to demand voting rights for women in the synod. That year, two non-ordained religious brothers had been permitted to vote, but women were only allowed to be there as observers.

The protest organizers explained that if law enforcement accosted us, anyone who preferred not to risk arrest should disperse. In theory I was willing to be arrested, but I couldn't figure out how I'd explain to my family that I wouldn't be home as planned because I was incarcerated in the Eternal City. So when the police showed up, I slipped into the nearby crowd and captured the scene on camera. Police hemmed in the protesters, confiscated passports, and manhandled one of the organizers. No one was arrested, though about a dozen women were detained for nearly half an hour. Meanwhile, the cardinals gathering for the synod slipped past, studiously ignoring us. As one participant commented, they didn't call the cops on predator priests, but they did call them on women protesters.

This was only one of several similar protests. And they eventually bore fruit. Less than three years later, in a historic move, Pope Francis made Sister Nathalie Becquart undersecretary to the Synod of Bishops, granting her voting rights in the synod. And in 2023, when the Vatican publicized its list of delegates to the Synod on Synodality, more than 50 women were included.

Women who have been working for inclusion recognize that simply having women present at these discussions is a milestone. But, like other milestones under Francis's papacy—such as [allowing women](#) to oversee departments in the Vatican, or [including women](#) in the Holy Thursday footwashing—it is, compared to what we had hoped for, a tiny one. And when balanced against Francis's habit of using [sexist language](#)—like talking about women as “old maids” and calling women theologians the “strawberries on the cake”—they look tinier still.

The biggest disappointment is probably that Francis never restored the women's diaconate, for which there was clear historical precedent. The group Discerning Deacons saw it as a step in the right direction that Francis even hosted the conversation. [A recent National Catholic Reporter article](#) by Heidi Schlumpf, on the topic of Francis's legacy on women, quoted the group's co-directors, Casey Stanton and Ellie Hidalgo: Francis “modeled an open posture, fostering a space of encounter, dialogue—and encouraged us to continue in our work to be diaconal women, ministering around the world.”

I appreciate this hopefulness. But I tend to agree with the Women's Ordination Conference, [which called](#) Francis's rejection of the idea "not just out of step with the needs of the church today, but a betrayal of the synodal project of 'journeying together.'"

A lot has changed, after all, since that day in 2013 when I walked through the pine woods dreaming of a better church. Most of it is change for the worse. More than 7 million people died in the COVID-19 pandemic. Wars and genocidal violence rage. Here in the United States, immigrants are dragged from the streets and sent to concentration camps. National and global structures of aid are being dismantled. We've had fires, floods, and ice storms. Personally, I've cut ties with almost all the communities I valued back in 2013. But as for women in the church? Our situation remains largely the same.

My father, with whom I listened to Francis's first address as pope, is also gone; he died on Easter Sunday 2020. Reflecting on the odd coincidence of losing my earthly father and the church's father on two Easters five years apart, I have a better sense of how to process my relationship with a pope who was loving, prophetic, and holy but also sexist and intolerant. My father, whom I remember with deep affection but also comic exasperation, was also such a patriarchal product. And this is what it means to be a woman within a patriarchal system (that is, most Western systems): Many of the men we love or admire will never see us fully for who we are.

To be a woman who follows Jesus, however, means holding onto the truth of our dignity and self-ownership, even when institutional leaders tell us otherwise. I expect that the institution will go on telling itself the same version of church history it has told itself for generations, always casting itself as the hero—what Erna Kim Hackett refers to as "[Disney Princess theology](#)." Pope Francis will likely play a starring role in that story, and I won't begrudge him that. He was a good man.

But I prefer a different story. In this story, the work of the church continues not because of but despite its institutional power. This often unacknowledged work is done every day by people of every race, gender, and ethnicity. It is done, too, by reformers like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Ávila, Óscar Romero, Dorothy Day, and Thea Bowman. And yes, Pope Francis. I may not agree with everything he said and did, but I can be inspired by his opposition to injustice—including the injustices enshrined in doctrine by the institution he led.