



Pope Francis: The great servant who championed humility, mercy, parity

Vale Pope Francis 17 December 1936 – 21 April 2025

As a pope who sought to restore the Church's role as a faithful servant to the poor and protector of Creation, Pope Francis will be remembered for his humility, mercy and parity.

Shunning the splendour typically associated with the office, his papacy broke down many barriers and sought to open the Church's door to all corners of society.

Born Jorge Mario Bergoglio on 17 December 1936, he worked as a bouncer, janitor and food technician before joining the Jesuits in 1958. He was ordained to the priesthood on 13 December 1969.

He held a variety of roles within the Society of Jesus, including provincial superior, while also serving in various schools of higher education. He was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires in 1992 and Coadjutor Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1997. He became metropolitan Archbishop in 1998 following the death of Cardinal Antonio Quarracino. He was created a Cardinal in 2001 by Pope John Paul II and elected Pope in 2013 following the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI.

A champion of humility, simplicity was a hallmark of his papacy. Well before his election to the head of the Catholic Church, he was well-known for his simple lifestyle, living in a small apartment when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, cooking his own meals and using public transportation.

He also sought to open the Church's arms wide to embrace people from all walks of life, particularly those who had historically felt neglected by it. He was a fierce champion of social justice and made it one of the defining characteristics of his papacy.

He also made mercy a hallmark of his papacy, emphasising the importance of Christ's mercy and the endless capacity for God to show mercy for all. He also encouraged more dialogue within the Church and changes within its governance, empowering laity and women to take on roles previously held exclusively by clergy.

He had actively urged the College of Cardinals not to vote for him in the 2005 papal enclave, in favour of electing Joseph Ratzinger, who would go on to be Pope Benedict XVI. His eventual election to the papacy in 2013 was considered a surprise to many.

Francis was the first pope to be a member of the Society of Jesus, the first from the Americas, the first from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first pope from outside Europe since the 8th century, when the Syrian-born Gregory III was elected as bishop of Rome.

He rejected the sartorial opulence of some of his predecessors and opted for a plainer look which dispensed with the usual excessive adornments. It was a symbolic nod to his papal name, following in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi who abandoned the fine clothes he was accustomed to as the son of a silk merchant, in favour of a simple habit.

Like his 12th century namesake, Pope Francis was noted for his humility and concern for the poor, even opting to reside in the Domus Sanctae Marthae guesthouse rather than in the papal apartments of the Apostolic Palace.

Just a few months into his papacy he released *Evangelii Gaudium*, an apostolic exhortation which urged the entire Church "to embark on a new chapter of evangelism" and embrace a permanent state of mission.

A more liberal theologian than Benedict XVI, Francis drew criticism from the most conservative corners of the church. But his willingness to embrace new ideas drew acclaim from the Church's more progressive corners and parts of secular society as well.

He initiated dialogue on the possibility of deaconesses and increased the role of women within the Roman Curia. However, he still maintained the Church's firm stance on the ordination of women to the priesthood, despite ever mounting pressure from both within and without the Church.

He embraced members of the LGBT community, maintaining a desire for the Church to be more open and welcoming. He clarified the Church's teaching on the blessing of those within same-sex relationships, allowing the blessing of individuals in a non-liturgical environment, while forbidding any blessing of the union.

He maintained a rigid line on marriage and criticised the corruption of the institution of marriage through same-sex unions, saying it disfigured God's plan for creation.

He was a champion of the infinite dignity of every human being, opposing the death penalty and slamming surrogacy and abortion as moral evils.

Francis will also be remembered as a critic of unbridled capitalism, consumerism and overdevelopment. He was the first pope to push for aggressive action on climate change and made it a focus of his papacy, calling on all the people of the world to take “swift and unified global action” in his defining second encyclical, *Laudato si’* in 2015.

But his willingness to engage with progressive dialogue was coupled with a fierce defence of traditional views of the Church regarding abortion, clerical celibacy, and the ordination of women, which could sometimes draw criticism from secular supporters who championed more progressive aspects of his papacy.

His work in international diplomacy will also be remembered. He helped restore diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, and supported the cause of refugees during the European and Central American migrant crisis. He was a vocal supporter of peace in the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Gaza War. He also embraced refugees with a fond heart and encouraged global leaders to do more to protect those forced to flee their homelands.

He received praise from many circles for his work in continuing the Church’s work in responding to sexual abuse by clergy, in keeping with a strong theme of his papacy to care and listen to the most vulnerable of society. He was not completely free from criticism however, particularly when he was seen to be intervening in individual cases.

He guided the faithful through the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the greatest periods of economic and liturgical disruptions to ever beset the Church, urging clergy not to forget the sick and poor during the crisis. He was also seen as one of the most influential drivers of COVID vaccination, while maintaining it was a moral obligation to have respect for the health of others.

He also made mercy a hallmark of his papacy, announcing an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy held from 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, to 20 November 2016, the Feast of Christ the King. Following this, he instituted World Day of the Poor, noting that Christ often identified himself with the poor: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

Francis was also eager for more dialogue within the Church, to identify how the Church could better live out its mission. He announced the Synod on Synodality, which included women and laity in the Synodal process in a way which had never been done before. He demonstrated a desire for the Church to “journey together” and not simply be dragged along by the Holy See, or even be left behind.

Keen to reform the Roman Curia, he established the Secretariat for the Economy to oversee the economic activities of the Holy See and Vatican City. He appointed Cardinal George Pell to be its first Prefect.

While falling short of the extraordinary level of travel of Saint John Paul II, Pope Francis was still among the most widely travelled Popes in history. In his travels, he again made a point of going to the margins. He became the first Pope to enter an active warzone when he visited the Central African Republic in the midst of a civil war. He was also the first Pope to visit Mongolia, Iraq, Myanmar and the Arabian Peninsula.

In his final year of life, he made “hope” a key theme of his papacy. He announced and opened the 2025 Jubilee, with the motto “Pilgrims of Hope”, and released his autobiography at the beginning of 2025, simply titled “Hope”, the first time a sitting pope has published a memoir.

By the end of his pontificate, he had created 163 cardinals from 76 countries, 25 of which had never been represented in the College of Cardinals. He also canonised 942 saints over his 12-year papacy, nearly double the number Saint John Paul II had done over his 27-year tenure.

At the heart of Pope Francis’ legacy will be his emphasis on humility and mercy. The two qualities shone through almost every aspect of his pontificate and his life, casting its light onto a world that was sorely in need of both.

He recaptured the hearts of many who might have felt the Church had turned its eye away from the poor and vulnerable. His fondness for those at the periphery of society will be repaid in these coming days, as many mourn the loss of someone who showed them the intense and enduring love of the Father.

It’s fitting that his last encyclical was centred on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It was a heart he was eager for the Church to show to everyone, but particularly those on the margins. The demand on the Church to keep showing that heart will be intense under the next Pontiff, and the enduring legacy of Pope Francis will not be easily forgotten.

Requiescat in pace