

# Pope Francis, servant of a 'poor Church for the poor'

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Following the sad news on Easter Monday that Pope Francis has died at his residence at Domus Sanctae Marthae at the Vatican, we look back at his inspiring life and papacy, giving thanks for his example of humility and service, and for his legacy, which speaks powerfully of the Easter message of mercy, hope, joy and renewal.

## A simple pastor in turbulent times

Pope Francis was born Jorge Mario Bergoglio to Italian migrant parents in Argentina on 17 December 1936.

Bergoglio's first career was as a chemical technician. In his prayer video for February 2025, he said he had never considered the priesthood as a possible vocation until the age of 17. 'But one day, I went into the church ... and God was there, waiting for me!' he said.



He entered the Diocesan Seminary of Villa Devoto, then in 1958 entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus, completing his studies in Chile and Argentina.

He was ordained a priest in 1969 and served as Provincial of the Jesuits in Argentina from 1973 to 1979—a time of political upheaval under a brutal military dictatorship.

By the time Bergoglio was appointed Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, and made a cardinal three years later, Argentina was going through another upheaval, this time financial.

Archbishop Bergoglio was known for his simple, almost frugal way of life. He lived in a modest apartment, cooking his own meals and using public transport. Under his leadership, the Argentine Church began to focus on its work in the slums of Buenos Aires, and the Archbishop used his meetings with government officials to lobby for poverty relief.

The Vatican's biography of Pope Francis reports the then Archbishop saying, 'My people are poor and I am one of them.'

## A pope for the poor

Following the unexpected resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, Cardinal Bergoglio was elected pope on 13 March, in the fifth ballot of the papal conclave.

The papacy of Francis was one of firsts: he was the first pope from the Americas and from the southern hemisphere, the first Jesuit to be elected as pope, and the first pope to take the name Francis.

From the outset, Pope Francis maintained the simple, 'no-frills' approach he had taken as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. On the night of his election, the new pope took the name Francis, after St Francis of Assisi—'the man who gives us this spirit of peace, the poor man'—and joined the other cardinals on a bus back to their hotel rather than being driven in the papal car.

His decision to live in a Vatican guest house rather than the official papal residence in the Apostolic Palace also set the tone for a papacy that would prioritise humble service and the common touch. Francis would often say that the Church's shepherds must have the 'smell of the sheep', always staying close to the People of God.

An early and striking demonstration of Pope Francis' vision for 'a poor Church, and for the poor' was on the first Holy Thursday after his election, when he washed the feet of juvenile offenders in a Rome jail, including two young women—the first time a Pope had washed the feet of women as part of the traditional Holy Week ritual.

Early in his papacy, in 2015, he made a historic formal apology to victims of sexual abuse by the clergy, saying he was 'deeply sorry for the times when you or your family spoke out, to report the abuse, but you were not heard or believed.' He pledged to hold clergy and bishops accountable and to 'follow the path of truth wherever it may lead'.

From the time of his election in 2013, Pope Francis shaped his papacy through a series of encyclicals that addressed contemporary challenges with a focus on mercy, justice and care for creation. *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) set out his vision, calling for a renewed missionary spirit and an inclusive Church that prioritises the poor. In *Laudato si'* (2015), he expanded Catholic social teaching to include ecological concerns, urging a deep respect for the environment as part of humanity's moral responsibility and promoting an integral ecology that addressed the social and spiritual implications of the environmental crisis as well as its scientific and economic aspects. *Fratelli tutti* (2020) built on this vision, advocating for universal fraternity and a rejection of divisive politics, while *Lumen fidei* (2013), which he completed after Benedict XVI's resignation, reflected on the transformative power of faith. Most recently, *Laudate Deum* (2023) reiterated the urgency of addressing climate change.

As a Jesuit pope, Francis encouraged each member of the faithful to discern their unique call to spread 'the joy of the Gospel'.

Francis' papacy was marked by efforts to reform the Vatican bureaucracy, celebrate local expressions of popular piety, tackle a culture of 'clericalism' that prioritised priestly status and authority, promote dialogue on issues like climate change, migration and economic inequality, and draw all Catholics into a more 'synodal' and 'co-responsible' approach to the Church's mission.

Francis also consistently sought to build bridges with other faiths and Christian traditions, including making the first-ever papal visit to Iraq to visit the Christian communities of Mesopotamia, who had been stricken by years of conflict.

From 9 October 2023 right up until his final days, Pope Francis called the Holy Family Parish in Gaza most evenings at 7pm sharp, staying connected with the bombed parish and offering his prayers and encouragement to a community that sheltered more than 600 people—Christians and Muslims—at the height of the war.

Pope Francis' papacy was marked by an emphasis on dialogue, solidarity and a joyful faith in Jesus, lived out in service. He challenged both individuals and institutions to move beyond complacency, calling the Church to embody Christ's love in a fractured world. These themes continue to influence global conversations on justice, peace and care for the marginalised.