



Pope Francis

Pope Francis: outsider whose reforming mission made him an ally of progressives

The pontiff took on church traditionalists and rightwing populism, making powerful enemies on the way

[Pope Francis, groundbreaking Jesuit pontiff, dies aged 88](#)

[Latest updates: tributes paid after Pope Francis dies](#)



Julian Coman

Mon 21 Apr 2025 10.25 CEST

In his first words from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica in 2013, the newly elected Pope Francis, [told the packed square](#) below: "You all know that the duty of the conclave was to give a bishop to Rome. It seems that my brother cardinals have come almost to the ends of the earth to get him."

The wry observation struck a winning self-deprecatory note. But the Argentinian pope's allusion to his outsider status was telling: having been chosen by his peers, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio intended his to be a far more radical and reforming papacy than the conclave had bargained for. In the 13th century, St Francis of Assisi is said to have received the divine instruction: "Go, rebuild my house." The first Pope to take the saint's name viewed his own task in similar terms.

Under the scholarly and traditionalist Benedict XVI, a bunker mentality had developed in Rome. Increasingly, the German pope had defined the church through its hostility to ongoing secularisation and alleged relativism in the west. The [Vatileaks affair](#), evidence of high-level financial corruption and, above all, public outrage at [revelations of clerical sexual abuse](#) plunged the church into a reputational nadir. Within the Vatican itself, poisonous cliques fought to preserve and extend their power bases, with the increasingly frail Benedict only nominally in charge.

Francis's approach was to follow in the footsteps of one of his heroes, Pope John XXIII, who said on the eve of the modernising [Second Vatican Council](#) in 1962 that he wished to "open the window and let in some fresh air". In a memorable dressing down of the Vatican's civil service, the first non-European Pope of modern times railed against a "pathology of power" and excoriated insiders who "feel themselves 'lord of the manor' - superior to everyone and everything". The Roman Catholic church, he said, needed to "come out of herself and go to the peripheries"; to become "a church of the poor for the poor" and a "field hospital for the faithful". Over the next decade, traditional Franciscan themes of poverty, humility, solidarity with the poor and with the natural environment dominated the style and substance of the new papacy.



📷 Pope John XXIII, a hero of Francis, who called the Second Vatican Council to 'let in some fresh air'. Photograph: Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone/Getty Images

His decision to live simply in a clerical guest house in [Vatican](#) City, rather than the papal palace, made for a dramatic contrast with Benedict's grander lifestyle and taste for ceremonial splendour. A plain white cassock and black boots, and a blue Ford Focus for getting around instead of a papal limousine, sent a message regarding what a "poor church" should look like. Financial structures that were all but unregulated began to be reformed, as the Vatican bank was required to conform to Council of Europe anti-money laundering rules, and an independent auditor general was appointed.

Initially, much of this was so novel and, to a progressive eye so beguiling, that some western liberals were tempted almost to view Francis as one of their own. [Time magazine made him its man of the year](#), the Gawker celebrity website hailed him as "our new cool Pope", and on what used to be Twitter, some hailed him "[#BestPopeEver](#)". A piece of street art in Rome portraying the pontiff as Superman was enthusiastically tweeted out by the Vatican.

The intensity of that love affair was never going to last. An early informal conversation with journalists caused widespread astonishment when the pope replied "Who am I to judge?" to a question about gay people in the church. But well over a decade later there is [no question of the Roman Catholic Church endorsing same-sex marriage](#). A more compassionate approach was being signalled, but in doctrinal terms [Francis remained firmly](#) within the letter of existing canon law.

Francis's great ecclesiastical listening exercise, the [synod on synodality](#), also underwhelmed progressives, having been viewed as a chance for bottom-up reform. While [women have been given significant new roles](#) and powers as Francis sought to reform the church's decision-making processes, the question of female priests remains firmly off the agenda. On abortion, Francis strongly championed the church's pro-life stance, and [shared platforms with Italy's Giorgia Meloni](#) and Hungary's Viktor Orbán to lament falling European birthrates.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to view Francis's papacy as a liberal one, but in significant areas it exerted a major progressive influence beyond the church, especially in relation to the climate emergency and the treatment of people migrating between countries.

The 2015 papal encyclical, [Laudato Si'](#), subtitled 'On Care for Our Common Home', made headlines around the world and offered a powerful critique of unregulated capitalism's destructive effect on the planet. Delivering the church's weightiest and most trenchant analysis of the implications of global heating, Francis's call to hear "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" linked the causes of social and environmental justice. At Cop climate summits - which in 2023 he missed due to poor health - the pope repeatedly [emphasised the responsibility of the developed world](#) to mitigate the impact on poorer nations of its unsustainable consumption of resources.

As the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina, Francis invested personal passion into his advocacy on behalf of migrants. [Laudato Si'](#) noted that, for economic and climate-related reasons, mass migration would be a permanent 21st-century phenomenon. As

western governments have increasingly batted down the hatches and adopted draconian short-term responses to the new reality, the pope at times appeared a lonely and isolated ally of millions of vulnerable people on the move.



Francis, standing second left, with his two brothers, two sisters and parents, both Italian immigrants who settled in Argentina. Photograph: API/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

Soon after taking office, he visited the Italian island of Lampedusa where he condemned **European “indifference”** to the drowning of people crossing the Mediterranean in small boats. In subsequent years, there were numerous visits to camps for such people, where millions live what the pope described as “ghost” lives in limbo. On two occasions, the papal plane returned from the Greek island of Lesbos with migrating Muslim families onboard. Visiting a camp of 600,000 Muslim Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh in 2017, Francis spelled out the gospel imperative to see Christ in the stranger and the outsider, **asserting that “the presence of God today is called Rohingya”**.

In an era in which politicians such as Donald Trump, Meloni and Orbán have weaponise Christian identity, this dimension of Francis’s papacy was a corrective and a crucial act of witness. It was supplemented by an effort to improve inter-faith dialogue with Islam, symbolised by a **remarkable meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani** during a historic papal visit to Iraq.

The rationale behind such initiatives was outlined in the 2020 encyclical, **Fratelli Tutti** (Brothers All), and Let Us Dream, a short reflection on the Covid pandemic. In both texts, the notion of a “common home” was deployed as a counter to the polarising politics of xenophobic nationalism. In Let Us Dream, Francis argued that the pandemic taught us that “no one is saved alone”, pointing the way to a new humanism, in which “we ... let ourselves be touched by others’ pain” and act to alleviate it. Attacks on right-wing populism were accompanied by a savage indictment of western selfishness, consumerism and self-absorption. Francis’s extraordinary **locking of horns** with the United States’ Catholic vice-president JD Vance after Vance attempted to theologially justify the Trump administration’s **drive** towards mass deportations in the first weeks of the president’s second term was a high profile salvo in this battle.

Such interventions naturally ensured the bitter enmity of the the Roman Catholic right. In the US, a narrow focus on reproductive rights and sexuality came to define Catholicism’s presence in the public square during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict. Francis’s emphasis on mercy rather than judgment and his scorn for laissez-faire capitalism was treated with outright hostility by traditionalists. After he opened the door for divorced and civilly remarried Roman Catholics to receive communion in 2016, the US cardinal Raymond Burke, a Trump supporter, publicly ruminated over the grounds on which the **validity of Francis’s election as pope** might be disputed. The late Australian cardinal, George Pell, whom Francis had appointed to oversee his anti-corruption strategy, **wrote** in an anonymous memo that **Francis’s papacy had been a “catastrophe”**.

The traditionalists now have their chance. The next conclave will be defined by a struggle between those who want to turn the clock back to the time of John Paul II and Benedict, and those fighting to defend Francis’s essentially progressive legacy.

Did Francis successfully “rebuild” the church? In 2018, he lamented that “reforming Rome is like cleaning the Sphinx of Egypt with a toothpick”. Evidence of clerical sexual abuse and attempted cover-ups has continued to emerge in recent years. But new “zero tolerance” policies towards offenders are in place, along with measures holding bishops and prelates to account over how they deal with instances of abuse. On corruption, the record has been mixed, largely because of stubborn internal resistance.

Francis did his best to make the church a less Eurocentric institution, using his powers to increase the proportion of cardinals from Asia, Africa and Latin America. He enjoyed a deep reservoir of support among the laity, and was a source of optimism and hope for many disillusioned Roman Catholics. In challenging times, he was an influential ally to secular liberal movements.

For a pope intent on finding a way back to the more open spirit of Vatican II, after a long conservative interregnum, it is an imperfect record, but not a bad one. The outsider from Buenos Aires used his power and charisma effectively, in order to shape a more outwards-facing, generous-spirited and socially-engaged church. We will now find out how durable that influence will be.

There is a lot at stake

~~The world’s most powerful man is using his office to punish journalistic organisations that won’t follow his orders or who report critically on his policies. Donald Trump’s actions against the press include bans, lawsuits and hand-picking his own pool of reporters.~~

~~But the global threat against the press is bigger than just Trump.~~

~~Economic and authoritarian forces around the globe are challenging journalists’ ability to report. An independent press, one that those in power can’t simply overrule, is crucial to democracy. Figures such as Trump and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán want to crush it through exclusion and influence.~~

~~The Guardian is a global news organisation that will stand up to attacks on the free press. We have no interest serving those with immense power or immense wealth.~~

~~We are owned by an independent trust devoted only to protecting and defending our journalism. That means we don’t have a billionaire owner dictating what our reporters can cover or what opinions our columnists can have, or shareholders demanding a quick return.~~

~~The global situation is shifting hour by hour, making this an extremely challenging moment. It will take brave, well-funded, committed, quality journalism to call out what is happening.~~

~~Our job is to make sure we do not get overwhelmed as Trump floods the zone. We must focus on the stories that will make the biggest impact on people’s lives, while holding the powerful to account. We’ll also continue to focus on the ideas people need to create a better world, a reason for hope.~~

~~As the writer and Guardian columnist Rebecca Solnit says, “authentic hope requires clarity ... and imagination”.~~

~~The Guardian can provide both and, with the help of readers like you in Italy, we can drive hope by reporting truthfully on what is happening and never pulling our punches.~~

~~A lot is at stake.~~