

A Pontificate of Presence: Pope Francis, Bishop of Rome 2013-2025

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Pope Francis left the world in a very powerful way, crossing Saint Peter's Square after the Easter Mass and greeting the 35, 000 pilgrims present there. He blessed them with his last strength. He couldn't have made a more symbolic farewell gesture if not his will to remain present among his community until the very end. His desire to die not surrounded by the invisibility and the absence of a hospital ward is actually in keeping with the symbolism of this pope's messages and communication style. The presence was a feature even in his last hours as pope. The presence of many faithful was also a feature of Pope Francis' entire pontificate. The last blessing of a crowded Saint Peter Square may recall by contrast another one, the *Urbi et orbi* blessing on the evening of the 27th of March, 2020, during the toughest Covid closure times. That celebration when the Pope faced the completely-empty Saint Peter Square to the sound of the bells mixed with ambulance sounds is the symbol of how the Pope managed to remain present even in difficult situations. It is also a symbol of fragility and, therefore, a powerful one. His charisma lightened those terrible times characterized by news that too often offered images full of coffins and alarming data.

Pope Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio, passed away on the morning of Easter Monday this year. He was 88 years old and had been born in Buenos Aires on December 17, 1936. Though Argentine by nationality, he had Italian Piedmontese roots through his grandparents, who emigrated at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the Catholic numbering of the bishops of Rome, he was the 266th Roman Pontiff, having been elected to the papacy 12 years earlier, on the evening of Wednesday, March 13, 2013, a rainy day.

To better understand who Pope Francis was, what his legacy is, and which elements most strongly shaped his pontificate, we will examine aspects of his biography, selected writings, symbolic gestures as Bishop of Rome, and, last but not least, his most significant statements.

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Looking at Pope Bergoglio's family history, one cannot help but sense how history unfolds with meaning – what theologians would call Divine Providence. His grandparents had planned to emigrate from Italy to Argentina aboard the ocean liner *Mafalda*, a ship that ultimately sank – a tragedy reminiscent of the *Titanic*. Jorge Mario Bergoglio's life was thus saved by Divine Providence before it had even begun. It was only because the family had not yet sold all their possessions in the village that they missed boarding the *Mafalda*. And the chain of providential events didn't end there: his father, Mario, was the only one among his siblings to live long enough to start a family, marrying Regina Sivori and raising children. The eldest of their five children was Jorge Mario, who inherited one of his father's names, Mario Giuseppe Francesco. Later, when he was elected Pope, only one sibling was still alive: a sister named María Elena Bergoglio.

The year 2013 marked a significant moment for the Catholic Church and for Rome. Pope Benedict XVI became the first pope in modern times to resign, echoing in some ways the "prophecy" of Guido Morselli's Italian novel *Roma senza Papa* (*Rome Without the Pope*).¹ Added to this were the wounds caused by the clerical abuse scandals, financial troubles, and, not least, the *Vatileaks* affair. The white smoke that evening was only the first surprise on that rainy March 13.

1. Name and Titles: From the Throne to the Knees

The *Habemus Papam* announcement informed the world that the first Latin American Pope had been elected, the first non-European and the first to bear the pontifical name *Francis*, evoking the saint of holy poverty. At first glance, this might have seemed a contradiction. Saint Francis of Assisi was known for challenging ecclesiastical norms and reforming the Church, while remaining deeply faithful to it and stressing the need to reconnect with the Gospel and with the person of Christ. He was a sort of anti-aristocrat; not an obvious figure to inspire the highest-ranking bishop in the world. Thus, through his chosen name, Pope Francis announced a pontifical and pastoral program that radically reversed traditional expectations. One might even say that a process begun in the 13th century had reached its completion: the journey of the *Poverello* of Assisi from the knees² and poverty to the papal throne. By electing him, the

¹ Guido Morselli, *Roma senza papa. Cronache romane di fine secolo ventesimo* (Milano: Adelphi, 1986).

² I have in mind Giotto's painting depicting Saint Francis of Assisi kneeling before Pope Innocent III as the latter approves his rule. The seventh scene in the mural cycle which

cardinals affirmed that the Church was ready to walk a reverse path, from the throne to the knees.

Pope Francis quickly confirmed, during an audience with representatives of the media, that he had chosen the name to honor Saint Francis of Assisi, having the poor in mind. It is well known that Cardinal Claudio Hummes, immediately after the conclave, whispered to him: “Don’t forget the poor!” Bergoglio later recalled, “Those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi.”³ Saint Francis, by his very life, embodies an entire missionary and pastoral program through his choices marked by poverty, evangelization, peacebuilding, and reforming the Church from within.

This Franciscan preference also touches on the issue of primacy. The papal office is intrinsically tied to the concept of primacy, but Saint Francis of Assisi never sought, nor desired, to be *primus* in the Church. Often ignored by the ecclesiastical authorities of his time, he referred to himself and his followers as *Fratelli Minori*, Lesser Brothers. Thus, on the evening of March 13, 2013, Pope Francis inaugurated a pontificate that redefined primacy. From his very first speech, he identified himself not as *Pope*, but as the Bishop of Rome, emphasizing a moral, rather than hierarchical, understanding of leadership. In his own words, “There is no other primacy than to the primacy of the last.”⁴ Quoting Saint Ignatius of Antioch’s *Letter to the Romans*, he described the Church of Rome as the one “which presides in charity,” thereby affirming a primacy based on moral witness. He would go on to use this expression frequently and would consistently refer to himself as the Bishop of Rome.⁵

Through his style and even through some of his mistakes he humanized the papacy, making it more accessible, particularly from an ecumenical perspective. This was especially meaningful for the Orthodox Church. One year before his death, in 2024, Pope Francis reinstated the papal title “Patriarch of the West”, a move widely interpreted as a gesture of goodwill toward the Orthodox. Nikos Tzoitis, analyst for the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and former spokesperson for Patriarch Bartholomew I, wrote on April 6 that this decision was “part

illustrates the Life of Saint Francis in the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. In a certain sense, the pontificate of Pope Francis could be seen as a reversal of this image.

³ Pope Francis, “Audience to the Representatives of Media. March 16, 2013,” vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013, accessed on June 13, 2025.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Hope. The Autobiography with Carlo Musso*, trans. Richard Dixon, ebook version (New York: Random House, 2025), 12.

⁵ For example, in an Address to the Eastern Churches, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june, accessed on June 13, 2025.

of the rediscovery of confraternity.” He added: “In this way, he wants to emphasize the importance of the lost synodality in the Lord’s Church, which expresses His Body and has synodality as a tool.”⁶

The *Autobiography* of Pope Francis introduces us to another “Francis” who played a significant role in Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s identity, his great-grandfather. Francesco Bergoglio (1857–1903), his paternal great-grandfather, was the last of the Bergoglios from the paternal lineage to die on Italian soil. Although the Pope never met him, his grandfather, *Nono* Giovanni, often spoke to the young Jorge about this ancestor who had died in the family’s village after generations of living there. Francesco represented a vital link to the Pope’s roots, something every migrant needs. Notably, Francesco was the most common name in Bergoglio’s family tree: it belonged to his maternal grandfather and also to his father. It is fair to assume that “Francesco” was, for the Pope, also an emotional choice and an act of homage rooted in his family’s refugee background. By taking this name, Jorge Mario Bergoglio returned to the land of his forebears bearing the name of the last ancestor to die in Italy.

Every migrant has a place they hold dear, and for the Bergoglio family, that place was the farmstead at Portacomaro, with its steep slopes and hazel woods. As the Pope recalled:

That was why, in February 2001, just a few hours before being created cardinal of Buenos Aires by John Paul II, I went up for the last time on the road to Bricco Marmorito. I saw the hills, the vineyards, and the large house. I buried my hands in the soil and collected a handful of it. It was there that my grandfather was born, there that his father, Francesco, died, there that our roots lay.⁷

Therefore, the declaration “*Qui sibi nomen imposuit Franciscum*” must be understood in multiple keys: a reference to the poor, to mission, to peace, to synodal ecclesiology but also to compassion and attention toward immigrants.

2. A Pontificate Full of Clear and Visible Gestures

From the very beginning, Pope Francis’ pontificate communicated through clear and visible signs and gestures that were easy to observe

⁶ Matthew Santucci, “Pope Francis reinstates papal title ‘Patriarch of the West’ in Pontifical Yearbook,” <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/257360/pope-francis-reinstates-papal-title-patriarch-of-the-west-in-pontifical-yearbook>, accessed June 13, 2025.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Hope*, 16.

and interpret. The early months were full of surprises. One of the most striking was his decision not to reside in the Apostolic Palace, creating the unusual situation of having two Popes living in Vatican City (one emeritus, of course) and the traditional papal apartment left vacant. The message was powerful: the Pope had chosen a guesthouse over a palace. His simplicity and preference for poverty quickly became influential among clergy and laity alike. It served as a Christian witness, a rejection of the temptation to attach the heart to wealth.

Some have pointed out that residing in the Santa Marta guesthouse may have been more costly, due to increased security needs and the number of rooms permanently reserved by the papal administration, preventing the facility from hosting other guests. This may be true, but the choice nonetheless enhanced the credibility of Christian witness. It allowed Pope Francis to live among visitors and pilgrims, making him more visible, more accessible, and ultimately more popular.

Pope Francis clearly understood the symbolic power of such signs. One illustrative example comes from journalist Paul Vallely, who witnessed a seemingly minor event that left a lasting impression. Just before the Pope's first trip overseas, he insisted on carrying his own briefcase. When he learned it had already been brought aboard the plane, he asked that it be returned so he could carry it himself in front of the press:

"Where's my briefcase?" asked Pope Francis. The papal entourage had arrived at Fiumicino Airport in Rome for his first trip abroad. He had been Pope for just four months. He was bound for Rio de Janeiro, where 3.5 million young people from 178 countries were waiting to greet him at World Youth Day, which in 2013 was to be held in Brazil. The Pope and his assistants had arrived from the Vatican by helicopter. And Francis could not find his briefcase. He looked preoccupied.

"It's been taken on board the plane," a helpful aide explained.

"But I want to carry it on," said the Pontiff.

"No need, it's already on," the assistant replied.

"You don't understand," said Francis. "Go to the plane. Get the bag. And bring it back here, please."

As Francis climbed the white aircraft steps, with surprising steadiness for a man of 76 who suffered from sciatica, one reporter exclaimed: "*Look, he's carrying his own bag!*" An excited ripple ran through the press as they craned forward to glimpse the Pope through the airplane windows, sensing a story.⁸

⁸ Paul Valley, *Pope Francis. The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), XVII.

Popes had never before carried their own luggage. With this simple act, the first Pope from Latin America was once again breaking with long-standing expectations of how a Pontiff should behave.

Naturally, the press quickly picked up on the gesture. Later, Pope Francis would have the chance to comment on it when asked by Catholic journalist Andrea Tornielli what he carried in the briefcase. It gave him the opportunity to speak about his personal devotion to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and to emphasize his desire to embody normalcy.

But perhaps the most dramatic gesture of his pontificate came when he knelt and kissed the feet of South Sudanese leaders, urging them to make peace and end a civil war that had claimed far too many lives.⁹ The moment was electrifying. He said to them: “There will be struggles, disagreements among you, but keep them within you, inside the office, so to speak. But in front of the people, hold hands united. So, as simple citizens, you will become fathers of the nation.”¹⁰

Pope Francis was capable of such gestures, profound, disarming and unforgettable. He made several of them throughout his pontificate, each one helping to convey his message more powerfully than words alone ever could.

3. Theological Directions of the Pontificate of Pope Francis

3.1. *The Peripheries, the End of the World, and the Last-Ones*

The theology of Pope Francis is deeply rooted in his personal experiences, Jesuit formation, and Franciscan inspiration. Several biographical and spiritual factors shaped his theological vision. His family’s migrant experience made him particularly sensitive to the plight of refugees.¹¹ His first pastoral visit as Pope was to Lampedusa, where he honored those who had died attempting to cross the Mediterranean, describing the sea as an *underwater cemetery*.¹² He also visited the island of Lesbos twice, in 2016 and 2021; firstly, alongside the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the Archbishop of Athens, Ieronymos, adding an ecumenical dimension to efforts aimed at supporting refugees.

⁹ Philip Pullella, “Pope Kisses Feet of South Sudan Leaders, Urging Them to Keep the Peace,” <https://shorturl.at/cgnK4>, accessed June 13, 2025.

¹⁰ A video of the moment could be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3W-1mG38IX4>, accessed June 13, 2025.

¹¹ This becomes very clear when reading the first chapter of this text.

¹² Pope Francis, *Hope*, 16.

The images captured during the 2016 visit are especially powerful: desperate mothers with children kneeling before the three Church leaders, weeping and handing letters to the Pope. The Churches, facing a complex geopolitical and humanitarian crisis, could do little in terms of concrete solutions. But Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew did what was possible for clerics: they drew the world's attention to the suffering of refugees.

I have come here with my brothers, Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos, simply to be with you and to hear your stories. We have come to call the attention of the world to this grave humanitarian crisis and to plead for its resolution. As people of faith, we wish to join our voices to speak out on your behalf. We hope that the world will heed these scenes of tragic and indeed desperate need, and respond in a way worthy of our common humanity.¹³

These gestures were intended as a response to what Pope Francis often called “the globalization of indifference.”¹⁴ His attention to *the last ones*, to those living on the peripheries of society, was a constant thread throughout his pontificate. In his autobiography, he identifies these “last ones” explicitly:

The “last” who cry out to the Lord each day, begging to be freed from the sufferings that afflict them. The last in the fringes of our cities. The last deceived and left to die in the desert; the last tortured, abused, raped in detention camps; the last who defy the waves of a pitiless sea.¹⁵

This pastoral focus was inaugurated in Lampedusa through the biblical question posed by God to Cain: “Where is your brother?” Pope Francis used this question repeatedly in sermons and speeches. During his second visit to Lesbos, he criticized the European Union for doing too little to

¹³ Pope Francis, “Visit to refugees,” <https://shorturl.at/obttw>, accessed June 13, 2025.

¹⁴ Pope Francis powerfully described “the globalization of indifference” as a condition in which people have become increasingly desensitized to the suffering of others. Despite living in an age of rapid communication and technological progress, we find ourselves paradoxically more connected, yet more detached from the hardships faced by those beyond our immediate surroundings. From poverty and war to forced migration and environmental degradation, the cries of the vulnerable are too often met with indifference, bureaucracy, or silence. To confront this reality, Pope Francis calls for “a revolution of tenderness” – an invitation to perceive others through the lens of compassion, to respond with empathy, and to restore a human face to those rendered invisible by systems that prioritize productivity over people.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Hope*, 12.

address the ongoing migrant crisis.¹⁶

Beyond gestures, Pope Francis also dedicated writing to this theme of social pastoral care for the marginalized. His third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (*All Brothers*), subtitled *On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, is a direct appeal against war and a call to rediscover human fraternity and solidarity. Inspired by the words and witness of Saint Francis of Assisi, the document also carries an ecumenical and interreligious character, as the Pope himself acknowledged. In the encyclical, he refers to his February 2019 meeting in Abu Dhabi with Ahmad al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, during which they signed the *Document on Human Fraternity*, as one of its key inspirations. He also credits several non-Catholic figures:

In these pages of reflection on universal fraternity, I felt inspired particularly by Saint Francis of Assisi, but also by others of our brothers and sisters who are not Catholics: Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi, and many more. Yet I would like to conclude by mentioning another person of deep faith who, drawing upon his intense experience of God, made a journey of transformation toward feeling a brother to all. I am speaking of Blessed Charles de Foucauld.¹⁷

For this reason, it is fair to say that Pope Francis inaugurated what could be called *the theology of the peripheries*. He recalled the influence of a parish priest named Padre Pozzoli, who baptized him and all his siblings. Pozzoli had gone on mission to the *true* peripheries of the world, in Ushuaia, the southernmost city in Argentina and, arguably, the world. The name Ushuaia, meaning “bay toward the end” in the native language, inspired the priest to sign his postcards: “Greetings from the end of the world.” The young Bergoglio retained this expression. During his first papal speech address, he introduced himself as the Bishop of Rome chosen by the cardinals “almost from the end of the world.” In his eyes, he came **from** the peripheries and was sent **to** the peripheries, to serve *the last ones*.

3.2. Peace and War

On August 18, 2014, during an in-flight press conference while returning from South Korea, Pope Francis coined the phrase “the Third

¹⁶ The Associated Press, “Pope Francis Returns to Lesbos, Greece and Pleads for Action on Migrant Crisis,” <https://shorturl.at/PFGGr6>, accessed June 13, 2025.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, <https://shorturl.at/WRVRv>, accessed June 13, 2025.

World War fought piecemeal.”¹⁸ With this expression, he aimed to capture two defining features of our era: conflicts that overflow into open confrontation, and instability that degenerates into chaos.

But turning to these instances of martyrdom and suffering, and these women: these are the fruits of war! Today we are in a world at war everywhere! Someone told me, “You know, Father, we are in the Third World War, but it is being fought “piecemeal”. (...) I would like to reflect on two words. The first is cruelty. Today children don’t count! We used to speak of conventional wars; today, this does not count. I’m not saying that conventional wars are a good thing, of course not. But today a bomb is dropped and kills the innocent with the guilty, the child and the woman with him, his mother... They kill everybody. (...) The other word on which I would like to reflect, and which is related to this, is torture. Today, torture is an almost, I would say, ordinary means used in intelligence work, in trials... And torture is a sin against humanity, it is a crime against humanity.”¹⁹

From the Syrian civil war to the Islamic State’s attacks in Europe, from North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic threats to the deepening fractures in the Middle East, from Russian cyberattacks on Western democracies to nationalist tremors shaking both sides of the Atlantic, the Pope had in mind, even then, a global atlas of crises. He lived to witness the emergence of two more major conflicts – both still ongoing – with the potential to escalate into a full-scale global war: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian war over Gaza.

To understand why Pope Francis devoted so much of his pastoral energy to the *last ones* and the cause of peace, one must look at his biography. Beyond his family’s status as refugees, he received an intimate education on the horrors of war from his grandfather, Giovanni: “It was my grandfather, Nono Giovanni, who taught me what war is, when I was a child. It was from his lips that I first heard those sad stories.”²⁰ Giovanni was a soldier in the First World War. He had left behind a wife and young child to fight at the front. From him, the future Pope first heard the phrase: “*War is the cemetery of youth.*”²¹

¹⁸ Marco Orioles dedicated a book to this expression analysing the 2019 ongoing military conflicts. See: Marco Orioles, *La Terza Guerra Mondiale a pezzi. La grande turbolenza globale: cronache e commenti* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2019).

¹⁹ Pope Francis, “In-flight press conference of His Holiness Pope Francis from Korea to Rome, 18 August 2014,” <https://shorturl.at/jfGVH>, accessed June 13, 2025.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Hope*, 18.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 18.

Nono Giovanni's view of war sharply contrasts with the romanticized narratives often found in history books. There were no tales of glory, no admiration for generals or kings, only a sober, disenchanted realism. Giovanni, an anti-royalist Italian immigrant and soldier, told his grandson: "Wars are fought for kings, but it's the simple peasants who die." He described how common soldiers subsisted on dried chestnuts while generals dined lavishly and sent men to their deaths without remorse. The image that Giovanni impressed on young Jorge Mario Bergoglio was that of war as "*a beast always demanding new flesh*."²² Even in the so-called victorious nations, it was the poor who paid the price of "victory."²³

Pope Francis remained remarkably consistent in his sermons and speeches with this inherited image of war's futility. In the final years of his life, beginning around 2023, he repeatedly declared: "War is always a defeat, for everyone."²⁴ He openly expressed discomfort with the term "just war." Naturally, he faced criticism: some accused him of not condemning Russia strongly enough over the invasion of Ukraine²⁵; others labeled him a leftist for focusing too much on social issues or rejecting aristocratic privilege. But the stories of Nono Giovanni shaped his moral imagination, giving him a grounded perspective on war. Combined with the centrality of the Gospel in Jesuit formation, the Pope's stance becomes much clearer. As early as 2018, in response to these criticisms, he began repeating a pointed clarification: "Caring for the poor is not communism."²⁶

3.3. Women and Homosexuality

A significant woman who influenced the faith of young Jorge Mario Bergoglio was his grandmother, Nona Rosa, a devout Catholic deeply involved in the spiritual and social movements of her time. She personally knew Saint Pier Giorgio Frassati, her contemporary, and was active in social initiatives inspired by *Rerum Novarum*, the social encyclical of Pope Leo XIII. (It is worth noting that this very encyclical also inspired Pope Leo XIV – Pope Francis' successor – to adopt the name Leo.)

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, 19.

²⁴ Francesca Sabatinelli, "Francesco: la guerra è sempre una sconfitta, fermatevi!" <https://rb.gy/neimmt>, accessed June 13, 2025.

²⁵ See for example: <https://rb.gy/l6u75c>, or <https://rb.gy/y8xyw8>, accessed June 13, 2025.

²⁶ Gerard O'Connell, "Pope Francis: To Care for the Poor is Not Communism, It is the Gospel," <https://rb.gy/72fijy>, accessed June 13, 2025.

I was very fond of my Nona Rosa, and she gave me much love. For me, she bore daily witness to common holiness, the holiness of the *Iglesia militante*, the Church Militant, of which Saint Ignatius speaks. She was a woman who suffered much, even mentally, but always moved forward with courage. She faced what life brought her, even its most painful moments, and managed to continue on her path, and that of her family, with patience and perseverance, day after day. It is from her that I received the first Christian message and it was beautiful.²⁷

The place of women in Pope Francis' theological thought is more complex than it may first appear. What is certain is that the role of women in the Church was a constant concern for him. On one hand, Francis showed a clear desire to increase the participation of women in Church leadership, even if not through sacramental ordination. For example, in an address to members of the International Theological Commission, he lamented the fact that only five women had been appointed to the body.²⁸ He sought to rectify this imbalance by distinguishing between *spiritual power* and *administrative power*,²⁹ in order to avoid giving women ordination. In a significant move, he appointed a woman to head the Vatican Governorate, an administrative post traditionally held by a cardinal, thus elevating a woman to a decision-making position while sidestepping the thornier debate over women's ordination.

Yet, we also find in Pope Francis another, more traditional approach to women's role in the Church. In the foreword to one of his books, he makes a theological distinction between the *active Petrine principle* and the *Marian contemplative principle*, stating clearly: "The Petrine principle does not belong to women, but rather the Marian principle – which is more important. Therefore, the fact that she does not enter ministerial life is not a deprivation, because her place is much more important."³⁰ The Marian principle, defined as silent service and humble acceptance, seems, at least initially, incompatible with decision-making authority. This dual stance reveals a degree of tension or inconsistency in the Pope's overall attitude toward the role of women in the Church.

The same observation can be made with regard to Pope Francis' approach to the LGBT community. Famously, during an in-flight press

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Hope*, 20.

²⁸ Pope Francis, "Discorso del Santo Padre Francesco ai Membri della Commissione Internazionale," <https://rb.gy/9bgz8b>, accessed June 13, 2025.

²⁹ This division is more specific to Protestant realities which consider the parish as the full *local Church* and where lay people enjoy more decision-making power.

³⁰ Papa Francesco, "Prefazione," in *Non sei solo. Sfide, risposte, speranze*, eds. Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin (Milano: Salani, 2023).

conference after World Youth Day in Brazil, he made the widely quoted statement: “Who am I to judge gay people?”³¹ However, in a private meeting with the Italian bishops, the Pope was reported to have said: “C’è già troppa frociaggine”³² (“There’s already too much faggotry”), and reiterating a longstanding Vatican policy of barring men with “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” from entering seminaries.

This contrast points to a deeply human side of Francis, a man not always consistent in speech or policy. It may also reflect a difference in *ad extra* communication (directed outward to the public and media) and *ad intra* communication (within ecclesial structures), or perhaps a distinction in treatment between laypeople and clergy. Ultimately, Pope Francis’ efforts to open pastoral and theological conversations around gender and sexuality reflected his broader mission to make the Church more welcoming, though not without tensions and contradictions that will continue to provoke discussion long after his pontificate.

3.4. Open Processes and Unfinished Construction Sites

Perhaps no document better synthesizes Pope Francis’ pontificate than the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. Alongside the theme of joy, so characteristic of his style, the notion of processuality³³ occupies a central place. The idea of initiating processes within the Church recurs throughout the text: for instance, in chapter 24, it is referred to as *initiative*; in chapters 30 and 31, as *missionary impulses*. Participatory processes and reform are emphasized in paragraphs 39, 129, and 222–225. For Pope Francis, starting processes and opening spaces mattered more than completing or controlling them. He famously prioritized time over space, valuing gradual, patient change over immediate dominance.

Francis launched or unblocked many such processes, much like Pope John XXIII when he convened the Second Vatican Council. He did so with the awareness that he might not live to see their completion. As he said in *Evangelii Gaudium* (§223):

Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no

³¹ See: <https://short-link.me/10dvB>, accessed June 13, 2025.

³² Gian Guido Vecchi, “Papa Francesco: C’è già troppa frociaggine. Il no ai seminaristi gay nell’assemblea con i vescovi italiani,” <https://short-link.me/14k2j>, accessed June 13, 2025.

³³ More about the theme of processuality here: Vincenzo Rosito, “Francesco dopo Francesco: processualità,” <https://short-link.me/14k3a>, accessed June 13, 2025.

possibility of return. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events – without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity.³⁴

One of the most emblematic of these open-ended initiatives is the Synodal Way in the Catholic Church, which Pope Francis launched in 2021. This theological and pastoral process was structured over four years and divided into three phases: listening, discernment, and implementation. At the time of Francis' death, the Church found itself in the final, implementation phase.

In many ways, the Synodal Path may represent the true ecclesiological implementation of the Second Vatican Council, an implementation delayed by the lack of theological momentum in the immediate post-conciliar period, during which the Council's legacy was still being interpreted and assimilated. This pattern of delayed reception, sometimes marked by contestation, is not unique to Vatican II; it mirrors the reception of the great Ecumenical Councils of the first Christian millennium. Pope Francis seemed fully aware that synodality was just the beginning of a much larger ecclesiological project, one destined to extend well beyond his own pontificate and likely that of several successors.

The same dynamic applies to his theological reflections on the Eucharist for remarried divorcees, initiated with the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, and on the blessing of gay believers (not couples), as addressed in the 2023 declaration *Fiducia Supplicans*. These topics, by their very complexity and pastoral sensitivity, resist immediate resolution. They are processes, not policies, initiatives that cannot be fully "possessed" or concluded within a single pontificate.

In this sense, the legacy of Pope Francis may continue to speak to the Church and the world for generations. And, paradoxically, though he claimed not to "possess" the future of these reforms, his pontificate may come to shape those of his successors more than he ever anticipated.

Conclusion. In the Shadow of Mary and Among the Poor

Somehow, we are always drawn to the final moments of a person's life: their last words, their last deeds, their last will. In the case of Pope Francis, those final acts were rich with meaning, each one echoing the deeper

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, <https://short-link.me/14k3E>, accessed June 13, 2025.

themes of his entire pontificate. His last letter, written on February 14, 2025 – just before his hospitalization – was addressed to the Catholic bishops of the United States. In it, he urged the faithful to uphold the “infinite and transcendent dignity of every human person,” in response to the renewed deportation of immigrants during the second presidency of Donald Trump. Even in his final hours, he remained a voice for the voiceless, defending the “last ones” with unwavering clarity.

But this was not yet his final testimony to the Gospel. On Holy Thursday, just days before his death, he visited Rome’s central prison. As he left, his car stopped briefly, and he gave an impromptu interview – one sentence capturing the core of his spirituality and legacy: *“Every time I enter these gates, I think: why them and not me?”* Still, even this was not his last message.

Pope Francis died four days later. In accordance with his will, he was laid to rest in the shadow of a woman, the Basilica of *Santa Maria Maggiore*, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Significantly, the basilica stands near Rome’s Termini Station, a place surrounded by the homeless, those who sleep, suffer, and often die in the streets just outside its walls. Any pilgrim seeking the Pope’s tomb must confront this uncomfortable proximity to poverty. It is a deliberate gesture, making the tomb itself a final parable. This is his last witness to the Gospel.

His entire papacy had been one long embodiment of *presence*, not only as an ecclesiastical figure, but in proximity to the forgotten. From the empty square of March 2020 to the crowded square of Easter 2025, he stood with the people, especially the poor, the refugees, and the wounded. His gestures, carrying his own briefcase, living in a guesthouse, kissing the feet of war leaders, spoke louder than decrees. His reforms were not conclusions, but open processes, seeds sown in time, entrusted to the slow work of the Spirit and the discernment of the Church.

He redefined leadership not by domination, but by service. He challenged the Church to walk not in triumph but in humility. And in choosing to be buried where the poor lie in plain sight, he made his final resting place a call to conscience.

Pope Francis’ voice may now be silent, but his legacy speaks on: in the questions he raised, the paths he opened and the peripheries he prioritized. In this way, contrary to what he often claimed, his pontificate will possess the future, not through control, but through the enduring power of the Gospel he lived.