



Introduction: A Solemn Hour for the Church

On the morning of April 21, 2025, the Catholic Church awoke to news that marks the end of an era: Pope Francis has died. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the first Jesuit pope and the first from the American continent, leaves behind a profoundly transformative pontificate, full of light but also of tensions. His legacy speaks to all of us: pastors, lay faithful, and those still searching for God from the margins.

This article is not merely a historical review or theological reflection. Above all, it is a spiritual guide to help understand what Francis' pontificate meant and how his gestures, decisions, and teachings can continue shaping our lives of faith—today and in the future.

I. A Pope “from the end of the world”: The Context of His Election

The year was 2013. Benedict XVI, in unheard-of humility, renounced the papacy. The conclave elected the Archbishop of Buenos Aires—a humble pastor, plain-spoken and with a direct gaze. Upon greeting the world from the balcony of St. Peter's, Francis said simply and disarmingly: “Buona sera.” No mitre, no golden cross, no pomp. From that very first moment, he set the tone for a papacy seeking to strip away privilege and draw close to the people of God.

But who was Francis? A Jesuit formed in Ignatian spirituality, deeply shaped by spiritual discernment, a preferential option for the poor, and hard pastoral experiences during the dark years of Argentina's dictatorship. These roots would influence everything about his pontificate.

II. Theology of Mercy: The Heart of His Magisterium

If there's one word that defines the soul of Francis, it is *mercy*. His episcopal motto, “*Miserando atque eligendo*” (“He looked upon him with mercy and chose him”), was the compass of his life and teachings as Peter's successor.

The bull declaring the Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Misericordiae Vultus* (2015), is perhaps the most



representative document of his thought. There he reminds us that “the Church has the mission to announce the mercy of God, the beating heart of the Gospel.” Francis invited us to return to the sources—not to abstract doctrine, but to the living experience of love that heals, forgives, and restores.

Key Scripture Quote:

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)

In light of this passage, the Pope taught that the Christian life is not a morality of mere rule-keeping but a loving response to the One who first loved us.

III. Structural Reforms and Synodality: A Church on the Move

A major pillar of his pontificate was reforming the Roman Curia. With the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022), Francis reshaped a less bureaucratic structure, more mission-oriented toward evangelization.

However, his boldest initiative was *synodality*: a Church that walks together, that listens to the Spirit through the voice of the People of God. The synods on the family (2014–2015), the Amazon (2019), and the ongoing global synodal process (2021–2024) reflect this desire for decentralization, active listening, and communal discernment.

Rightly understood, synodality is not ecclesial democracy but a living expression of the Trinitarian mystery in communion. Yet it also sparked tensions: how do we reconcile listening to the people with fidelity to the deposit of faith?

IV. Lights of His Pontificate: Closeness, Ecology, and the Culture of Encounter

1. Option for the Poor

Francis strongly denounced “an economy that kills” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013), showed



solidarity with migrants and the discarded, and visited the world's peripheries. His simple lifestyle and direct speech restored evangelical freshness to the papacy.

2. **Integral Ecology**

Laudato Si' (2015) is a prophetic text that fuses faith with care for creation. Francis draws on Franciscan spirituality to remind us that "everything is connected."

3. **Interreligious and Cultural Dialogue**

From his embrace with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar to his gestures toward Jewish, Evangelical, and non-believing leaders, Francis promoted a "culture of encounter" in contrast to the "globalization of indifference."

4. **Liturgical and Pastoral Reform**

Without changing doctrine, he sought to welcome the wounded: the divorced and remarried, LGBT persons, those alienated from the Church. Through *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), he proposed case-by-case pastoral discernment.

V. Shadows and Tensions: The Open Wounds

Not everything in his pontificate was peaceful or unanimous. Francis met resistance, even within the episcopacy.

1. **Doctrine vs. Pastoral Approach**

His pastoral focus was seen by some as doctrinal ambiguity. The *dubia* raised by certain cardinals regarding *Amoris Laetitia*, controversy over blessings for irregular couples, and his non-dogmatic style sparked confusion among some faithful.

2. **Practical Centralization vs. Theoretical Decentralization**

While promoting synodality, he often retained strong personal control over key decisions.

3. **Relationship with the Traditional Rite**

His motu proprio *Traditionis Custodes* (2021) restricted use of the Tridentine Mass, causing deep pain in sectors attached to liturgical tradition. For many, it was a difficult wound to understand from a pontificate proclaiming openness.

4. **Ambiguity in Doctrinal Clarity**

His spontaneous and informal communication style often led to misinterpretations, confusing headlines, and unnecessary controversies.



VI. Practical Applications: What Does Francis Leave Us for Living Today?

Francis' spiritual legacy is not merely a set of reforms, but a radical invitation to live the Gospel authentically. Here are some keys for everyday life:

1. Practice Mercy

Forgive, welcome, refrain from harsh judgment. Seek to understand before condemning. See each person as God sees them: with compassion.

2. Listen to the Spirit in Community

Be active in your parish, group, or movement. Listen to others' voices. Be humble enough to learn.

3. Live with Simplicity and Ecological Commitment

Reduce consumption, respect nature, educate your children in ecological spirituality. Make your home a small monastery of care.

4. Evangelize with Tenderness

Whether online, on the street, or at work—show Christ not through ideology but through concrete acts of love.

5. Love the Church, Even in Its Contradictions

Don't run away. Don't criticize from the outside. Accompany, pray, offer your suffering. As Francis said: "The Church is not a customs house, but the Father's house where there is a place for everyone, with their lives on their shoulders."

VII. Conclusion: "Pray for Me"

Francis often repeated these words: "Don't forget to pray for me." Today, the Church prays for him, entrusting his soul to the mercy of the Father.



Francis, the Pope on the Edge of Mercy: Light, Shadow, and the Spiritual Legacy of a Pontificate that Shaped the 21st Century | 5

His was a prophetic, unsettling, profoundly evangelical pontificate. Not without flaws, but filled with pastoral zeal. He leaves us with the task of continuing to build a Church that goes forth, one that is poor for the poor, Samaritan, prayerful, and courageous.

May his memory inspire deep spiritual renewal, and may the Holy Spirit prepare the Church's heart for what lies ahead. May each of us respond, as he did, to the Lord's call:

"Rise, take up your mat, and walk." (John 5:8)