

The Wall Street Journal, 22 avril

The Legacy of Pope Francis, 1936-2025

He championed the poor while favoring ideas that keep them poor.



Pope Francis PHOTO: HANDOUT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Full text:

When Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected the 266th pope in 2013, it marked a series of firsts. He was the first Jesuit pope and, as an Argentine, the first from outside Europe. Yet his legacy as Pope Francis, who died on Easter Monday at age 88, was disappointing even on the priorities he set for his papacy.

Pope Francis was best known for urging concern for the poor, in the best Christian tradition. He called for a clergy of “shepherds who have the smell of their sheep”—that is, priests and nuns who shared the suffering of their neighbors. He made support for the weakest among us the rhetorical centerpiece of his papacy. He brought a public informality and openness to the Vatican.

Alas, Pope Francis believed ideologies that keep the poor in poverty. One of those earthly dogmas is radical environmentalism, which isn’t about keeping the earth clean for human beings but keeping the earth for itself and treating man as the enemy.

In one of his first writings as pope, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis cited air conditioning as an example of the “harmful habits of consumption” that will lead to mankind’s self-destruction. He didn’t seem to realize that escaping poverty requires greater energy consumption.

His papacy was marked by anti-Americanism, and not merely against [Donald Trump](#). He seemed to believe that Latin America is poor because the United States is rich. That’s a recipe for stagnation and despair because the real reasons so many in Latin America languish in poverty are at home: Lack of the rule of law, business-government collusion, protectionism, and other barriers to human flourishing.

Some attribute his hostility to free markets to his Latin American background. Born in Buenos Aires, Pope Francis at a young age was made the provincial superior for the Jesuit order in Argentina during the time of the military junta. This was a hard line to walk, and some in his order accused him unfairly of being too friendly with the regime.

Argentina for much of his life was dominated by Peronism, a brand of left-wing populism named for Argentine President Juan Peron. When Bergoglio looked around, he saw corruption and the rich doing very well as their fellow countrymen languished in poverty. Perhaps it was understandable that he confused Argentina’s corporatism with capitalism.

Less forgivable was his deal with Beijing as pope that gave the Communist Party influence in the choice of bishops. Conditions for Catholics in China have worsened, though the Vatican has renewed the kowtow several

times. The Vatican has stayed silent on the plight of publisher Jimmy Lai, who is China's best-known imprisoned Catholic.

Unlike his two immediate predecessors—John Paul II and Benedict—Pope Francis was from the progressive wing of his Church. He punished traditionalist bishops who disagreed with his direction, and he has populated the cardinal ranks with fellow progressives.

The irony is that this progressivism is most popular in places like Europe where the Sunday pews are empty. The Church is thriving in Africa and among younger orthodox Catholics in the West looking for meaning in life beyond material consumption. The cardinals who will choose the pope's successor will help determine which future they want for the Church and the world's 1.3 billion Catholics.