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## **The works of mercy : Pope Francis changed the Catholic church, but not as much as he hoped**

The most open-minded pope for many years died on April 21st—Easter Monday—aged 88



PHOTOGRAPH: EYEVINE

### Full text:

The moment when the great doors of St Peter's balcony swing open, announcing a new pope, seems to call for trumpets and drums. Instead, on March 13th 2013, the figure in white said: "Good evening." Though he spoke in Italian, his parents' language, he was Argentinian, the first non-European pope for almost 13 centuries. That in itself was interesting. Then, before the traditional *urbi et orbi* blessing, he asked the huge crowd for their blessing on him. Interest turned to patent surprise.

Francis did not stop there. There would be no papal cape or red slippers, just a plain white cassock and his ordinary black shoes. (He would as happily have worn the shirt of his football club, San Lorenzo, or his national blue-and-white with Messi, his favourite player, on the back.) No crest-embellished dinner plates, no new pectoral cross; he kept the iron-plated one he had worn, from 1998, as archbishop of Buenos Aires. No 12-room apartment in the Vatican, but a two-room suite in the guests' hostel, and meals in the dining room with everyone else. "We'll see how long it lasts," said one aide, uncomfortable. It lasted until he died; for in Buenos Aires, after all, he had cooked his own meals and travelled by bus.

Humility did not drive these changes. For him, ostentatious displays of sanctity were "osteoporosis of the soul". He just wanted to be among the people, out in the open, with his flock. In the Vatican apartment, he would have been alone. In the bullet-proof Popemobile, which he also discarded, he would have been unable to hug, embrace, get himself into selfies, tickle children and laugh with besotted nuns. From the hostel, too, he could sneak out with little formality, turning up at hospitals, prisons and hospices to the huge surprise of inmates and workers. On Holy Thursday he visited such places to kneel before people in trouble, wash their feet, towel them dry and kiss them. Good shepherds, he said, should get their hands dirty.

The saint whose name he had taken, Francis of Assisi, had said the same. Following him (though he was not a Franciscan but one of the sterner, more institutionalised Jesuits, the first to become pope), he opened up heart and hand to the travails of the poor. In Buenos Aires he was called the "Slum Bishop" for insisting that he, and his priests, should go out in the streets and on the margins. He was no fan of liberation theology, and fell out with some Jesuits over that; his vague political instincts were tinged with Peronist populism and scorn for capitalism. His immense encyclical "Laudato Si'" of 2015, advising care for the Earth, fiercely attacked consumerism and the profit motive; he even gave a copy to Donald Trump when he visited, and later challenged the president's heartless views on immigration. Convinced that when people closed in on themselves, their greed increased, he made a point of reaching out, feeding hundreds of homeless with pizza at the Vatican and adopting several families of Syrian refugees.

His openness also had another, extraordinary, dimension. Turning the Roman Catholic tradition of centuries on its head, he refused to defend doctrine for doctrine's sake. Some teachings—on abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage—were still non-negotiable in his mind. Sin was sin. Other issues brought out the solid streak of conservatism in him: he could clearly not yet deal with married priests or women deacons. On many matters, though, he left room for nuance and understanding. He would walk beside people and look on them as Jesus would have done. Of homosexuals, he said: “Who am I to judge?” His “exhortation” on married love, “*Amoris Laetitia*”, seemed to leave open the possibility that the divorced and remarried could receive communion. In his church there were no pariahs, save capitalists and those whose greed despoiled God's gift of Earth: a passion encapsulated in the synod he held for his “*Querida Amazonia*”, and one he recapitulated often. His greatest ire (and he could be fearsomely angry and authoritarian, as the Argentinian Jesuits, of whom he was briefly provincial, discovered), was aimed at the “lying spellbinders”, “bloodsuckers” and “hypocrites” who, though nominally pastors, cared mostly for their curial careers.

They were among those who hampered his efforts at reform. A synod on the family made negligible progress. Francis's efforts to address child abuse by clergy were often clumsy, and his apologies made little impression on the press or on the victims. His attempts to sort out the black hole of Vatican finances, though partly successful, left him open to accusations of high-handedness. The old guard found him impatient, too keen to get his way by simple exhortation, when the church required slow, careful consultation, over centuries if need be.

Many, especially within the American church and at the court of Benedict, the frail pope emeritus, were actively hostile to him. Some presented *dubia*, serious doctrinal doubts, about the teaching of “*Amoris Laetitia*”. He disregarded them, stubbornly appointing to the cardinalate the sort of men he liked, third-worlders and the open-minded. He too could play a long game. Meanwhile gratifying successes came from outside ventures, such as his brokering of a new relationship between the United States and Cuba.

Some wondered what truly motivated this broad-backed, smiling figure, a joyful tweeter who also used silence as eloquently as words. He admitted to “hundreds” of errors and sins in his past, referring perhaps to misjudgments in Argentina's dirty war of 1976-83. Possibly (though nothing was proved) he felt he had much to make up for. If so, repentance was turned to one end: mercy. A merciful church could not shrink inwards, because its duty was to offer care, love and grace to all in need: not only to baptised members, but to every soul created in God's image.

So Francis believed and acted, every day of his pontificate. But after him, the great doors of the balcony of St Peter's may yet creak slowly shut again. ■