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## Farewell Francis : The pope's last coded message

Trump and Zelensky attend in Rome with 250,000 others



Photograph: AP

### Full text:

AMID THE pomp, pageant and politics surrounding [Pope Francis's](#) funeral—an extraordinary meeting between Presidents Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky in St Peter's Basilica, the lines of flamboyantly televisual cardinals in their scarlet robes—a simple fact risked being overlooked. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, “the pope of the last”, as Italians called him, had arranged to be buried as far as decently possible from the Vatican.

His funeral cortege had to cover six kilometres along streets lined with applauding crowds to cross Rome to the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. As the presidents and prime ministers headed for their return flights, a group of some of Rome's poorest residents were waiting to greet the arrival of Francis's body, encased in a plain wooden coffin. Out of media sight, it was to be laid in a tomb of marble from Liguria, the region in north-western Italy from which his migrant forebears left for Argentina. The tomb bears a single engraved word: *Franciscus*.

It was to be a last stop appropriately distant from the Vatican for a pontiff who once told its prelates that getting them to change their ways was like trying to clean the Sphinx with a toothbrush. Maybe that is what Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, the ultimate Vatican insider, but one trusted by Francis, was alluding to in his homily in St Peter's Square. “With his characteristic vocabulary and language, rich in images and metaphors,” the cardinal said, Francis had “always sought to shed light on the problems of our time.”

Santa Maria Maggiore is a few hundred metres from the main railway terminus, in a part of Rome dotted with internet points and cheap hotels. It sits on the edge of a district that is starting to be gentrified but still has a high proportion of immigrants.

Santa Maria Maggiore is no mere parish church. It is one of Rome's four papal basilicas. Other popes have been interred outside the Vatican. But the last was another liberal pontiff, Leo XIII, the father of Roman Catholic social doctrine. And he died in 1903. One reason why the basilica had a special appeal for Francis was because it holds the *Salus Populi Romani*, an icon from around the year 1000 that is a focus of local, Roman religiosity. He prayed to it before and after foreign journeys. A supremely pastoral priest, Francis never forgot that popes were bishops of Rome long before they had a global church to lead.

He shrank from the worldly trappings of the papacy. He refused to move into the Apostolic Palace, choosing instead to live in a two-room suite in the Vatican's guest house. He was never seen in the traditional, shiny red papal slippers beloved of his predecessor, pope Benedict XVI, preferring to wear (and be buried in) clumpy, scuffed, black orthotics.

The two ceremonies on April 26th—one spectacularly ostentatious, the other simple and private—reflected the tensions within the world’s largest Christian church, tensions that will decide the choice of Francis’s successor. Catholicism can be found in the Vatican with its colonnades and conspiracies, its museums housing treasures of inestimable value. But it can also be found in some of the most wretched places on earth where its priests, monks, nuns and lay people care for the sick and needy.

The message that shone through Francis’s provisions for his departure was that the true place of his church was on the margins of society. Shortly before his death, he used nearly all the money he had left, some €200,000 (\$225,000), to pay down the mortgage on a pasta factory that operates in a juvenile prison in Rome.

But the late pontiff also embodied a faith with room for doubt and uncertainty. Perhaps his most famous comment was when, asked about homosexuality, he replied “If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?”

His legacy included plenty of room for differing interpretations, notably over whether Catholics who divorce and remarry can receive communion. The uncertainty infuriated conservatives and others who craved the clear moral guidance of Benedict, and Benedict’s predecessor, Saint John Paul II.

The choice facing the cardinals who will assemble in a week or so in the Sistine Chapel for the [conclave](#) will be whether to choose a man ready to go deeper into the areas that Francis opened up to scrutiny or return to the more familiar Catholicism of those who came before him. Even before his funeral, conservatives and liberals were setting out their stalls.

With diplomatic understatement, Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the guardian of theological orthodoxy under Benedict, said Francis had been “a bit ambiguous at certain moments”, whereas in the time of his predecessor there had been “perfect theological clarity”. One of the questions around which doubt lingers is whether priests may bless gay couples. The next pope would have to clear that up, said Cardinal Müller.

By contrast, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, a Jesuit like Francis and the archbishop of Luxembourg, was looking for “a pope who watches Netflix series”: someone in the mould of Francis who “knew how to communicate with the young” and realised that the world was changing at breakneck speed.

It will be no surprise that Cardinal Hollerich was given his red cardinal’s hat by Francis. But so too was Cardinal Müller. The Catholic church does not always work in the way secular commentators would assume—and may not do so when it comes to choosing the man who replaces “the pope of the last”. ■