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POPE FRANCIS

Leaders and believers around the world pay tribute to 'everyone's pope'

As the Vatican announces that the funeral of Pope Francis will take place at 10am local time, world leaders, representatives of other religions and the Catholic faithful around the world have been reacting to the death of the pontiff on Monday, 21 April.

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A woman kneels before a portrait of the late Pope Francis in the parish of Cascajas, which he often visited and preached in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 21 April, 2025. AP - Natacha Pisarenko

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Pope Francis will be laid to rest on Saturday after lying in state in St. Peter's Basilica, where the faithful are expected to flock to pay their respects from Wednesday. The funeral will take place outdoors in St. Peter's Square.

His Vice-President JD Vance, who met with Pope Francis on Sunday, the day before his death, wrote on X: "My heart goes out to the millions of Christians all over the world who loved him. I was happy to see him yesterday, though he was obviously very ill."

Former US president Joe Biden, a devout Catholic, also posted on X, writing that Pope Francis was "unlike any who came before him" and "will be remembered as one of the most consequential leaders of our time". His fellow former president Barack Obama wrote on the social media platform: "Pope Francis was the rare leader who made us want to be better people."

Kosovo's Yeddan Catholics' baptised as Pope Francis mourned

Leaders around the world

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni posted a message on her official Facebook account that read: "Pope Francis has returned to the Father's house… I have had the privilege to enjoy his friendship, his advice and his teachings, which never diminished even in times of trial and suffering."

King Charles III, who is the head of the Church of England, released a statement saying: "His Holiness will be remembered for his compassion… Through his work and care for both people and planet, he profoundly touched the lives of so many."

Meanwhile UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer posted a statement on X calling Pope Francis' leadership of the Church "courageous".

"Pope Francis was a pope for the poor, the downtrodden and the forgotten. He was close to the realities of human fragility, meeting Christians around the world facing war, famine, persecution and poverty. Yet he never lost the faith-fuelled hope of a better world," he wrote.

What happens now after the death of Pope Francis?

These were themes echoed in the tributes of many, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who posted on X: "We diligently served the poor and downtrodden. For those who were suffering, he ignited a spirit of hope."

Christians shower a portrait of the late Pope Francis with flower petals in Amritsar, India on 22 April, a day after his death. AFP - NARINDER NANU

The leader of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, a party rooted in Ulster Protestant culture, Gavin Robinson took a different approach, telling the BBC: "[Pope Francis] injected a level of humility that we don't often recognise within the Catholic Church, that you don't see through the opulence of St Peter's Basilica, Rome, the Vatican, the trials that it is. No flashy cars, no flashy suits, no flashy shoes.

"He brought the sort of early principles of Christian faith that I would recognise into a role that I see quite far apart from that. So he wanted to do things differently. He seemed a more gentle, humble, engaging, caring individual."

Africa has seen some of the Catholic Church's biggest growth in recent years, and leaders from the continent have added their tributes, with Kenya's President William Ruto saying Pope Francis "exemplified servant leadership through his humility, his unwavering commitment to inclusivity and justice, and his deep compassion for the poor and the vulnerable".

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa noted the pope's "extraordinary life story" and said: "Pope Francis advanced a world view of inclusion, equality and care for marginalised individuals and groups, as well as responsible and sustainable custody of the natural environment."

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, where in the east of the country the government is locked in conflict with the M23 armed group, worshipper Justin Kambale pointed to Francis's advocacy for peace. "When he spoke to the world, he never failed to mention the war in the DRC, the war in Sudan, the war in Palestine, the war in Ukraine – he never stopped talking about that."

'I think he was a rebel'

Javier Milei, president of Francis's home country of Argentina, with whom he had often clashed in recent years, wrote on X: "Despite differences that seem minor today, having been able to know him in his kindness and wisdom was a true honour for me."

"Like every Argentine, I think he was a rebel," said 23-year-old Catalina Favaro, who had come to pay her respects to the Buenos Aires church where Francis discovered his priestly vocation. "He may have been contradictory, but that was nice, too."

A man wearing a T-shirt depicting the late Pope Francis stands outside the Cathedral in Buenos Aires on 21 April, 2025 AFP - JUAN MABROMATA

At the school in Buenos Aires where he started his religious journey at the age of five, the nuns spoke of the boy who would later become Pope Francis – a boisterous child who played football with his friends in the courtyard and sprinted up and down the marble stairs. "They say he was rather mischievous," said Teresa Rivota, a teacher at the Nuestra Senora de la Misericordia kindergarten. "One is not born a saint, one becomes a saint," she laughed.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has confirmed he will not attend the funeral, but sent a message of condolence to Cardinal Kevin Joseph Farrell, acting head of the Vatican in the interim between the death of Pope Francis and the election of a new pope. The Kremlin head called Pope Francis "a consistent defender of the high values of humanism and justice".

'A friend of the Palestinian people'

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas paid tribute to Francis, Palestinian news agency Wafa reported, saying: "Today, we lost a faithful friend of the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights," He added that Pope Francis "recognised the Palestinian state and authorised the Palestinian flag to be raised in the Vatican".

Hamas too issued a statement on Pope Francis, which read: "On numerous occasions, he expressed his sympathy and solidarity with the Palestinian people and the world, and he was among the prominent religious voices that condemned the war crimes and acts of genocide being committed against our Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip."

France pays homage to Pope Francis' 'a tireless artisan of peace'

George Antone, 44, head of the emergency committee at the Holy Family Church in Gaza, told Reuters: "We lost a saint who taught us every day to be brave, to love, to keep patient and stay strong. We lost a man who fought every day in every direction to protect this small land of his."

Pope Francis called the church hours after the war in Gaza began in October 2023, Antone said, the beginning of what the Vatican News Service described as a nightly ritual. He would make sure to speak not only to the priest but to everyone else in the room, Antone added. "He used to tell each one, I am sick, don't be afraid."

Francis's phone a final time on Saturday night, the pastor of the Holy Family parish, Rev. Gabriel Romanelli, told the Vatican News Service.

Pilgrims carry a cross and a portrait of Pope Francis, on the Via della Conciliazione at the Vatican on 22 April. AFP - DIMITAR DILKOFF

For his part, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, said of Pope Francis: "He rightly saw great importance in fostering strong ties with the Jewish world and in advancing interfaith dialogue as a path toward greater understanding and mutual respect. I truly hope that his prayers for peace in the Middle East and for the safe return of the hostages will soon be answered."

Jerusalem patriarch hails pope's commitment to Gaza

Dialogue with other faiths

Senior figures in Judaism echoed this sentiment, with Pinchas Goldschmidt, the president of the Conference of European Rabbis, also praising the pope's efforts to strengthen Catholic-Jewish relations.

The chief rabbi of Rome, Riccardo di Segni, said Francis' pontificate was an important new chapter in relations between Judaism and Catholicism, "with openings to a dialogue that was sometimes difficult but always respectful".

Representatives of other faiths and other Christian denominations also praised Francis for seeking dialogue. The late pope said on trip to Singapore in September last year: "All religions are paths to God. I will use an analogy, they are like different languages that express the divine."

Pope Francis, first Latin American pontiff dies, aged 88

The Dalai Lama said: "The best tribute we can pay to him is to be a warm-hearted person, serving others wherever and in whatever way we can," while the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said he was among the Church of England, said he was "witty, lively, good to be with, and the warmth of his personality and interest in others shone out from him".

LGBTI faith groups have also joined in paying tribute. Francis DeBernardo of New Ways Ministry, a US group advocating for greater LGBTQI+ inclusion in the Catholic Church, said: "Francis was not only the first pope to use the word 'gay' when speaking about LGBTQ+ people, he was the first pope to speak lovingly and tenderly to them."

Global mourning

The reaction of ordinary believers around the world to the death of the man being called 'the people's Pope' resonates particularly strongly.

The death of Pope Francis has sent shockwaves through Iraq's Christian community. His 2021 visit to the country, the first by a pope, came just a few years after many Iraqi Christians had fled their homes as Islamic State militants swept across the country.

Locals gather at a newspaper stall in downtown Nairobi to read front pages announcing the death of Pope Francis on 22 April. AFP - LEXI TAFFI

Sofiullah Rassoam, who was among the Christians who fled from Mosul, recalled meeting the pope during a visit to a church in Minbir. As the convoy was leaving the church, Rassam stood outside watching, tears streaming down his face. Suddenly the car stopped, and Francis got out to greet him.

"It was the best day of my life," Rassam said. The pope's visit "made us feel loved and heard, and it helped heal our wounds after everything that happened here".

Pope Francis' special, sometimes conflictual, relationship with Africa

In the Philippines, hundreds gathered for a mass at Manila Cathedral on Tuesday to bid goodbye to the late pope, whom they remember for his outreach to the poor and survivors of natural disasters, which often devastate their country.

"He's a rare progressive pope, who took up a lot of causes and showed a deep concern for the poor," said Cynthia Esquilona, a 50-year-old mother of two.

Shirley Amaban, also 50, said she was hoping for another pope in Francis's mould. "We're praying for his soul and hoping that the one who replaces him is the same – or if not, can really better govern the Catholics."

'He encouraged us migrants'

At New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, 70-year-old worshipper Peter said Francis's 'cared about [people] most of us forget about – the poor, the downtrodden, the forgotten'. He was a president and an administration that's turning the country in a direction that is in complete contradiction of the values that this pope espoused."

In the US capital, well-wishers gathered outside Washington National Cathedral. "He was much more Christian than... for example, the way he and his office now wants claim to be Christian, especially our president, whose name I will not say," said 71-year-old retiree Mark Smerkanich.

A woman prays while mourning Pope Francis at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York on 21 April. AFP - DAVID 500 DELGADO

For Venezuelan migrant Marisela Guerrero, Pope Francis's repeatedly stated support for migrants was a meaningful gesture. "He encouraged us migrants a lot; he gave words of encouragement to all who left their countries," said the 43-year-old, who now lives in Chile.

"He prayed a lot for us migrants," Yulieth Cuellar, a 39-year-old Colombian, told French news agency AFP at a church soup kitchen in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juarez, and "[his prayers] touched us to the core".

On Monday in Lourdes, a place of pilgrimage for Catholics, the faithful prayed for Francis upon hearing news of his death. For Stephanie Vergara, a 42-year-old woman from Bordeaux, the date – Easter Monday, when Christians celebrate Jesus's resurrection – held significance.

"It's a symbol... When people say they can't choose the day they die, they're wrong," she said. "He did choose the day of his death."

For Sandrine Tenier, 51, Francis "did everything right, up until the end". "He spoke beautiful words and believed in a better world," she said, smiling.

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