

Pope Francis's legacy

Over 12 profoundly consequential years for the Catholic Church, Pope Francis steered it into uncharted territory and did so in ways that will resonate long into the future.

The pontiff worked to soften the face of the Catholic Church for many, loosened the Vatican's grip on power and intervened in some of the major social questions of our time.

Within Catholicism, he certainly had his critics; some traditionalists in particular were often enraged by actions they felt were a radical departure from Church teaching.

Having said that there were also those who felt he should have been more progressive.

But from the moment he was elected in 2013, Pope Francis came with an informality and a smile that put the people he met at their ease. It was symbolic of a principle that guided his belief that the Church should reach people in their daily lives, wherever in the world they happened to be.

One of his first acts as pope was to give up the papal apartment on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace and live in a guesthouse in the Vatican grounds.

Some saw this as a sign he was giving up the ostentatious trappings of papacy, and of the humility he would certainly become known for - he had, after all, taken the name of a saint who championed the cause of the poor – St Francis of Assisi.

But the main reason for surrendering the papal apartment, as he later explained it, pointed to another of his characteristics: that he loved being around people.

To him, the apartment felt detached and a difficult place in which to welcome guests. At the guesthouse he was surrounded by clergy and rarely alone for long.

On foreign trips to more than 60 countries, in his audiences at the Vatican and during countless events, it was very clear that being close to people, and particularly the young, was his lifeblood.

Within Catholicism, he signalled a radical change in tone on some social issues.

"Everyone in the Church is invited, including people who are divorced, including people who are homosexual, including people who are transgender," he wrote in his autobiography.

Given that the Church did not recognise divorce in its canon law and that previous popes stuck to the catechism answer that homosexual acts were 'disordered' Pope Francis emphasised that we must show more pastoral concern for them.

Progressives welcomed the Pope's compassion for what he called "imperfect Catholics". However, there are those who suggest the Pope could have gone further to encourage change in Church teaching.

Homosexual "acts" remain a sin in Catholicism, marriage is only be between a man and a woman, divorce is still out of line with church teaching and the Pope himself remained very firmly against gender reassignment and surrogacy.

Throughout his papacy, and long before that, Pope Francis also always remained firm in his own belief that women should not be priests.

He did start an ongoing process of exploring whether women could take up the role of deacon, assisting in worship services. But this is still 'a work in progress'.

Nevertheless, some reformists were left disappointed that more progress was not made regarding equality for women, in a faith where the majority of churchgoers are women.

During the latter part of his papacy, the Pope launched an ambitious three-year consultation process aimed at gauging the opinion of as many of the world's more-than-a-billion Catholics as possible.

There were tens of thousands of listening sessions across the globe, meant to tease out the issues that Catholics most cared about. It transpired that roles for women and ways in which the Church could become more inclusive to LGBT people were high on the list.

While the process itself did not lead to decisive action on either front, it did speak volumes about Pope Francis' desire that his pontificate was rooted not in Rome and in clerics but in the lives of believers around the world.

Throughout his papacy, there was a particular focus on reaching out to those on the economic and political margins, his words and actions encouraging his priests to be closer to the disadvantaged.

The issue of dignity for migrants was hugely important to him throughout his papacy, but so too was building bridges with other Christian denominations, other religions and those of no faith.

As well as becoming a passionate voice for migrants - once going to lay a wreath on the waters where many had died on their perilous journeys - he also linked the impact of climate change to poverty.

In speeches, including one to US Congress, and in one of his most important pieces of work, the decree *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis talked of environmental damage amounting to rich countries inflicting harm on poor ones.

Vehemently anti-war, the Pope frequently talked of conflict itself equating to failure.

He called the war in Gaza "terrorism" and from early on he implored that there be a ceasefire.

He met the families of the Israelis abducted by Hamas on 7 October 2023, but also spoke passionately about the plight of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, particularly children.

In the eyes of many, he failed to unequivocally call out Russian aggression in Ukraine or tackle China's surveillance and persecution of its Catholics.

A huge part of Pope Francis' legacy is the way in which he changed the face of the upper echelons of the Catholic Church through his selection of new cardinals.

In fact, about 80% of the cardinals that will select the next pope were appointed by Pope Francis. What is striking about those selections is their diversity, with many coming from South America, Africa and Asia.

The posthumous outpouring of tributes to him from across the globe is perhaps one sign that shift is working. The Catholic Church has a 2000 year history. Pope's come and go but the church headed by popes with different priorities will always be the case. However, the message of the gospel and sacred Tradition will always be its defining feature.