



Most Reverend George Leo Thomas, Ph.D.
Archbishop of Las Vegas

April 25, 2025

Memorial Mass
for
Pope Francis

Most Reverend George Leo Thomas, Ph.D.
April 25, 2025
Memorial Mass for Pope Francis

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born on December 17, 1936, the eldest of five children, the first born son of Mario Jose and Regina Maria Silvori.

His father was an immigrant from the Piedmont region of Italy, trained as an accountant and employed as a lifelong factory bookkeeper. His mother was a humble homemaker, a first-generation Argentinian, also of Italian extraction.

They were married on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, under whose maternal care they commended their family and their future life together.

The Bergoglios were a close-knit Catholic family, hard-working and intrepid, devoted to each other, and equally dedicated to Christ and Church.

They raised their children in the culturally diverse Flores District in Buenos Aires. Jorge Bergoglio's playmates were Armenians and Ukrainians, Southern Europeans, and Eastern European Jews, a close-knit neighborhood of struggling lower-class immigrants. It was a cultural potpourri that helped to explain the future pope's ease and rapport with diverse peoples and cultural traditions not his own.

The Bergoglio children were educated in the public schools of Buenos Aires while their parents struggled to keep bread on the table and a roof over their heads.

At an early age, Jorge's parents inspired in him a love for music and dance, a taste for international cooking, a fanatic passion for soccer, and a deep appreciation for poetry, the arts and humanities.

At the age of 20, having completed his course of studies in chemistry and science, Jorge entered the local diocesan seminary under the sponsorship of the Society of Jesus. Within the year, he transferred his allegiance to the Jesuit community, all transpiring as Pope John XXIII rose to the Chair of Peter -- October 28th, 1958.

Jesuit novice Bergoglio remained sequestered in the protective cocoon of Jesuit formation, while the Universal Church underwent the seismic changes that followed on the heels of the Second Vatican Council.

Father Allan Deck, SJ, noted, "It was a time of seemingly endless change that marked his earliest years of religious formation." Eleven years after he entered the Society, he was Ordained to the priesthood -- December 13, 1969.

Professor Massimo Borghesi noted that, "In Argentina, the decade of violence began in 1969, the year Bergoglio became a priest...when the army killed dozens of students and workers during a massive protest demonstration in Cordoba."

Just six years after his Ordination, the young, talented, but inexperienced Father Jorge Bergoglio was elected Provincial Superior of his local Jesuit community.

By his own admission, his tenure was marked by tumult and resistance, and in some instances, outright rejection by certain members of the Jesuit community.

Much of the future Pope's spirituality and his identity with the suffering and struggles of people were formed in this crucible of conflict, cultural upheaval, civil unrest and personal rejection.

In 1992, highly gifted Father Bergoglio was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires. Seven years later, he was named by Pope John Paul II as the new Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

At that juncture of his life and leadership, the Church across the Southern Hemisphere was at a critical crossroads, battered by challenges both within and outside their walls.

The bishops of Latin and South America were witnessing unprecedented attrition among the ranks of their Catholic faithful, caught sleeping while other faith communities aggressively proselytized under their noses.

In each of the countries, without exception, the bishops watched in disbelief as drug cartels and human traffickers rent the fabric of once stable family life in their respective dioceses.

Without exception, Church leaders witnessed a growing chasm between the rich and the poor, with whole segments of the population relegated to lives of squalor and human misery.

Waves of immigrants were on the move, desperately seeking new ways to feed their children and to secure dignified work to support their anguished families.

In 2007, the Episcopal Council of Latin American Bishops gathered at Aparecida in Brazil to forge a blueprint to address these challenges facing the Church in the Southern Hemisphere. Jorge Bergoglio, now Cardinal Bergoglio, was chosen by his peers to draft the concluding document of the Aparecida Conference.

The Aparecida charter served as the basis for the new pope's vision for the future and the pastoral plan for the Bergoglio papacy. Echoing Aparecida, he wrote, "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus." This was his clarion call to mobilize the laity and to set the wheels of evangelization in motion in every corner of the world.

On March 13, 2013, Jorge Bergoglio emerged onto the world stage as the Church's 266th Pontiff, first pope from the Southern Hemisphere, and first Jesuit pontiff in the history of the Church.

We remember well his humble and profound bow, his informal greeting -- "*Buona sera*," his choice of the name "Francis," his predilection for public transportation, and his decision to move from the papal palace into the Casa Santa Marta, all portending a very different kind of papacy.

Papal biographer Austen Ivereigh described the newly minted Pope as "having the rare combination of the political genius of a charismatic leader and the prophetic holiness of a desert saint."

From the outset of his pontificate, he enjoined all the faithful to embrace the Beatitudes as the spiritual lodestar of their daily lives.

In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer described a highly beloved village parson in six simple words: "First he wrought, then he taught." So too, Papa Francesco first taught by example, modeling for us a life of radical simplicity, gospel humility, fervent prayer, and solidarity with the poor, the downtrodden and the dispossessed.

His first pastoral visit outside of Rome was to the Island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily on the Mediterranean Sea. Lampedusa was the point of entry for desperate immigrants fleeing genocide and famine, civil unrest, unemployment and unspeakable poverty in their respective homelands.

On Lampedusa, the newly elected pope embraced the immigrants as their pastor and spiritual father, expressing his solidarity with them, and giving their cause voice and visibility on the international stage.

This trip was intentionally and masterfully designed to awaken the conscience of Christians and people of goodwill, most especially the leaders of the first world nations.

There he called out our collective slide into "the globalization of indifference" toward those whose daily bread is suffering, misery, and unthinkable poverty. This first visit helped to set the tone and agenda for the Holy Father's twelve-year tenure as pastor and chief shepherd of the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1975, Pope Paul VI wrote an apostolic exhortation entitled *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, in which he observed, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to preachers"

Pope Francis understood and mastered the power of public witness through lived example.

His annual visit to the youth detention facility Casal Del Marmol stood out as a living homily for the world to see and to emulate.

Who can forget the first time we saw the Holy Father washing and kissing the feet of young inmates, male and female, Christian and Muslim, in an act of profound humility and affection?

His message was clear and convincing. In the eyes of God, there are no cast-off people, no throwaway souls, and no second-class citizens. All people are precious in the eyes of God, all are beloved, and all are redeemable.

Another theme that permeated the Holy Father's pontificate flows directly from the heart of the Second Vatican Council. It is best described as the "universal call to holiness," characterized by Avery Dulles as the single most distinguishing feature of the Second Vatican Council.

The Holy Father insisted that holiness of life is the vocation of every person, flowing from the grace of Baptism as the shared DNA of clergy, religious and lay spirituality alike.

Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* -- The Joy of the Gospel -- is patterned after *Apaprecida*, and written as a personal letter addressed to every one of the faithful, regardless of our state in life or level of education.

Its language is invitational, aimed at ordinary people, and intentionally devoid of theological jargon and arcane phraseology.

Pope Francis wanted people to know that they needed no special education or qualifications to follow Jesus and to lead others to follow Him.

"By virtue of their Baptism, all members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization" (Ibid ¶120.)

The document is vintage Francis. He wrote, "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from clinging to its own security." (Ibid ¶ 49.)

Evangelii Gaudium enjoins the clergy to leave the security of the sacristy and the sanctuary and bring the Gospel to the margins of society-to hospitals and prisons, nursing homes and soup kitchens. "I dream of a missionary option," he wrote, "a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything ..." under the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Ibid ¶ 27.)

Throughout his pontificate, he implored us to become a more synodal Church, a Church that listens intently, discerns deeply, plans intentionally, always with an attentive ear toward the unpredictable urgings of the Holy Spirit.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, written in May 2015, Holy Father used his capacity as universal teacher to draw attention to another major initiative of his pontificate -- the degradation of the environment.

True to form, this encyclical focuses on the complex interrelationships between economic development, climate change and their impact on the poor.

Laudato Si emphasizes that the protection of the poor and care for the earth are inexorably interconnected, as the poor suffer the most when the earth is abused.

Finally, it was Saint Augustine who wrote, "Our words speak, but our example cries out."

The Holy Father's embrace of our Jewish brothers and sisters, his vocal opposition to antisemitism, his valued friendship with Muslims, Hindus, and the leaders of Orthodox and Mainline Protestant communities stand out among Francis' most enduring legacies.

Las Vegas Rabbi Sanford Akselrad and cantor Jessica Hutchings wrote powerful words in the *Las Vegas Sun*, which I share with you today. They wrote, "Throughout his Papacy, he stood firmly against antisemitism, nurtured meaningful interfaith dialogue, and extended a hand of friendship to the Jewish people...he modeled respect, justice and bridge-building between faiths." In doing so, Pope Francis left the world a better place.

In the fifth century, Saint John Chrysostom instructed his people that on the day of our death, the poor and needy we have assisted in our life will gather around us and plead our cause before the throne of the eternal judge.

I can scarcely imagine the legions of people who surrounded our beloved Pope Francis as he stood before the throne of God. They must have been singing his praises, raising him up as an apostle of the poor, and accompanying him as he entered the gates of everlasting life.

Dear Pope Francis, may you now hear the voice of our Father announce those precious words reserved for those who have known, loved, and served the Lord so faithfully and well on earth. "Well done, you good and faithful servant. ... Come and join in your Master's happiness," (Matthew 25:23.) where Jesus is Lord forever and ever. Amen.