



AN INTRODUCTION TO
POPE FRANCIS

*“As a priest, and even as
a pope, I must be at your
service...”*

*“I love to do it because that
is what the Lord has taught
me to do.”*

The road to Rome



When Pope Francis stepped out onto the balcony at St. Peter's Square at the Vatican for the very first time, the huge crowd waiting to see him began to cheer.

“Dear brothers and sisters, good evening,” said the new pope. **“It seems that my brother cardinals picked [a pope] from almost the ends of the earth. But here we are!”**

During his first Mass as pope, on March 14, Francis told the world's Catholics that anyone who wanted to follow Christ and build up the Church must accept suffering and embrace the Cross, like Jesus.

“When we walk without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, and when we profess Christ without the Cross, we are not disciples of the Lord,” said Pope Francis. **“We are worldly: we are bishops, priests, cardinals, popes, but not disciples of the Lord.”**

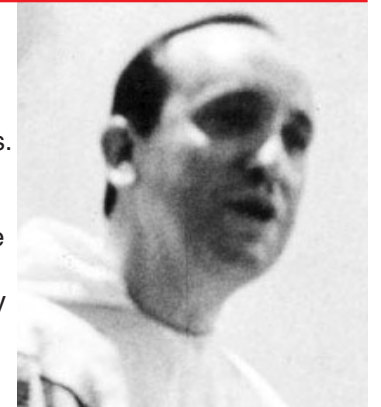


Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born in 1936 in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina in South America. His father was a railroad worker and his mother stayed home to care for their five children.

After school, Jorge Mario believed that God was calling him to become a priest. In 1958, he entered a seminary, where young men are prepared for the priesthood. The seminary was run by a religious order, the Society of Jesus, known as the “Jesuits.”

Eleven years later, in 1968, he was ordained a priest. He continued to study the faith and also helped young seminarians follow the path of Jesus. He became a Jesuit leader, and later was made a bishop in Buenos Aires.

But he was always close to the poor. He lived in a small apartment and took care of a sick friend in his home. He rode the bus and the subway. He told his priests that they should be with the poor and not stay in their rectory waiting for the poor to come to them. “My people are poor and I am one of them,” he said.



In 2001, Pope John Paul II made Bishop Bergoglio a Cardinal, but that didn't change his way of life. He continued to live in his small apartment, and still rode the bus.

In February 2013, many Catholics were shocked when Pope Benedict said that he could no longer be pope because he was not well and could not perform his duties. He would retire to a monastery and pray for the Church.

The cardinals would have to elect a new pope, so they went to the Vatican for another conclave. This time, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected the Vicar of Christ. The cardinals who chose him said they felt the Holy Spirit guiding their decision.

After his election, Cardinal Bergoglio chose the name Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi, whose example Pope Francis follows with a dedication to poverty and serving others. Pope Francis is also the first to be a member of the Jesuit order.



A New Pope, with New Ways

People were surprised that Pope Francis did not move into the Vatican apartment where the popes usually live. Instead, he chose a guesthouse for visiting priests. There he meets a lot of people and says daily Mass. He refused the gold cross that popes usually wear. He still wears the iron cross he used as a bishop in Buenos Aires.

A dedication to those imprisoned

On Holy Thursday of this year, Pope Francis left the Vatican and went to the Casal del Marmo jail in Rome. It was the first time a Pope celebrated a Holy Thursday service outside St Peter's Basilica or the basilica of St John in the Lateran, never mind at a prison.

During this special Holy Week liturgy, in every church across the world, the priest washes the feet of 12 people. In this way we remember that during the Last Supper Jesus washed the feet of his 12 disciples as he prepared to die on the Cross.

Pope Francis chose to wash the feet of 12 prisoners, saying

“Washing feet means I am at your service. And with us too, don't we have to wash each other's feet day after day?” It means, said the pope, “That all of us must help one another.” As a priest, and even as a pope, he said, “I must be at your service... I love to do it because that is what the Lord has taught me to do.”



In observance of the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, March 28, 2013, Pope Francis chose to wash the feet of 12 prisoners.

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Pope Francis brings an energetic new work style to Rome

BY: ANDREA TORNIELLI, VATICAN CITY

Pope Francis' alarm clock goes off at 4:45 every morning in Room 201 in St. Martha's House, when everything is still pitch black. Such an early start to the day means Francis has to have a siesta after lunch. This nap makes it possible for him to fit “two mornings” into his day.

The first few hours are dedicated to prayer and meditation on the daily scripture readings. Later the Pope comments on these in the brief homilies he gives in his morning masses in the chapel of the place he likes to call the “boarding school,” commonly known as St. Martha's

House. This simple building where the Pope lives, while decorated with light-colored marble and stained glass, is much less formal than the rooms of the Apostolic Palace where earlier popes lived. Pope Francis, who is the Bishop of Rome, sits in the pews at the back of the chapel to pray.

The Pope is assisted by cardinals, bishops or visiting priests, and the Masses are attended mostly by Vatican staff – from executives to rubbish collectors and their families. Francis greets all of them one by one and then has breakfast in the St. Martha's House “common room.” For Francis, being with people and hugging them one by one is in no way a chore or a waste of time. In Argentina he would spend entire nights listening to confessions. Even though he was a Cardinal, he would dress simply, without wearing his cardinal's robes.

He breaks down the Gospel for the faithful who attend Mass in such a way that Vatican Radio is able to provide a summary of what Francis said just two hours later. This has helped to make these morning celebrations popular across the world. The Pope's simple morning preaching is one of the most important changes at the Vatican since Francis was elected Pope. Every morning Francis comes up with new illustrations to his messages, such as confession not being like a “dry cleaner's,” and terms like “sitting room Christians,” “museum-piece Christians,” and “starch-pressed Christians.”

“Sometimes in our life, tears are the glasses to see Jesus.”
– Pope Francis

The most striking thing about Francis is the simplicity of his words, particularly those about tenderness and forgiveness. For example he said, “The message of Jesus is mercy. For me, I say this humbly, it is the Lord's most powerful message.” These teachings have encouraged people across the world to return to the Church, and to confession after years of staying away.

“The Pope preaches like he did in Buenos Aires and has the ability to explain the Gospel message simply and clearly like no one else. We have still not realized the theological significance of this. People are aware that these are not just abstract reflections,” said one admirer.

Francis quotes his grandmother Rosa in many of his homilies, even the big ones in St. Peter's Square. When he was young, she used to explain to him the importance of Jesus' resurrection. She warned against being too attached to money because “burial shrouds don't have pockets.”

When her Jesuit grandson was about to be ordained, she said to him: “Celebrate Mass, every Mass, as if it were your first and last.” Francis' grandmother testified about the faith of the simple and ordinary people, something that Pope Francis not only has taken to heart, but also has lived in his ministry to God's people.

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A life of poverty and service:

Saint Francis of Assisi

St. Francis was born Francesco Bernardone in 1181 in Assisi, Italy. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant and his mother was a beautiful woman from France. During his youth, Francis was spoiled by his wealth. He left school at the age of 14, a rebellious teenager who drank a lot, partied and stayed out late. The thought of following his father into the family textile business bored him. Instead he began daydreaming of a future as a knight – the action heroes of his day. To prepare, Francis spent his time learning archery, wrestling and horsemanship.

When war broke out between the towns of Assisi and Perugia in 1202, Francis eagerly took his place with the army. The men of Assisi came under heavy attack. In the face of superior numbers, the battlefield was soon covered with the bodies of butchered men, screaming in agony. Most of the captured Assisi troops were put to death. Wearing expensive new armor, Francis was quickly captured by enemy soldiers.

Thinking that he would fetch a large ransom, Francis and the other wealthy prisoners were then taken to dark underground prison cells. After a year in prison, Francis' ransom was paid and he was released. However, during his time of incarceration, the emptiness of his youthful years became clear to him. After his release, Francis met a leper – a very sickly person then regarded as the lowest of the low, an “untouchable.” Before, Francis would have run from the leper. But now he saw the leper as Jesus in disguise. He embraced and kissed him. From this point on, Francis felt he had found the true direction of his life. His earlier life of wine, women and song lost all of its appeal.

Now in his early 20s, Francis began turning his focus toward God. Instead of working, he spent much time at a remote mountain hideaway and in old, quiet churches around Assisi, praying and looking for answers. During this time, while praying before an ancient crucifix at the church of St. Damian, Francis heard a voice saying: "Go, Francis, and repair my house, which as you see is falling into ruin." Understanding this request as referring to the worn out church in which he knelt, Francis immediately went to work on the restoration of St. Damian's. (He would later restore two other deserted chapels in the area.) Meanwhile he increased his works of charity, especially in caring for the lepers.



St. Francis, from a mural by Giovanni Cimabue, circa 1275

To raise money to rebuild St. Damian's church, he stole a bolt of cloth and a horse from his father. Furious upon learning of his son's crimes, his father dragged Francis before the local bishop, who told Francis to return his father's money. Francis' reaction was extraordinary: he stripped off his clothes and passed them, along with the money, back to his father. Francis then declared that God was now the only father he recognized. This event is said to be Francis's final conversion. Dressed in humble clothes given to him by the bishop, Francis left Assisi. Sadly, the first people he met on the road were a group of dangerous thieves, who beat him badly. He recovered from his wounds, forgave them and from then on, he lived according to the Bible.

Francis was never ordained a priest. In early 1208, he heard the Gospel reading at Mass explain how the disciples of Christ were not to own gold or silver, more than one coat, shoes or a staff (likely Mt 10: 5-15). They were to simply urge sinners to repentance and to announce the Kingdom of God. After Mass was over he threw away what few goods he had, including his shoes, coat, and empty wallet. He then obtained a coarse woolen tunic, the kind worn by the poorest of the local peasants, and tied it round himself with a knotted rope. Francis then went forth calling the people of the countryside to penance, brotherly love and peace. His example now drew others to him, starting with some of the leading citizens of Assisi. He led his companions to the public square, where they gave away all their belongings to the poor. After this, they dressed like Francis and built themselves small huts near his. They then went about in pairs, making such an impression by their words and behavior that before long several other disciples grouped themselves around Francis, eager to share his poverty.

Francis was soon preaching in up to five villages per day. Some people regarded Francis as a madman or a fool, but others viewed him as one of the greatest Christians ever. The church founded by Jesus was vastly strengthened by Francis' “ministry of example.” In 1210, his Order – later to become known as the Franciscans – was authorized by Pope Innocent III. Soon after that, Francis established the Order of Poor Clares for women, and the Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance for those who couldn't devote full time to life in a religious order. In 1219 he traveled to Egypt, to try to put an end to the bloodshed of the Crusades. While there, he impressed the Muslim leaders with his holiness and simplicity.

In 1224, Francis received a vision that left him with the stigmata of Christ. Stigmata are marks resembling the wounds that Jesus Christ suffered when he was crucified, including the nail wounds through his hands and the gaping lance wound in his side. Francis was the first person to ever receive the holy wounds of the stigmata. He died on October 3, 1226, at the age of 44, in Assisi, Italy. In his humility, he had expressed a wish to be buried on a hill outside of Assisi that was well known as the place where criminals were executed and buried. However, his remains were instead placed in the church of St. George where the saint had learned to read and had first preached. Many miracles have since taken place at his tomb. Francis was canonized as a saint just two years after his death.

The First Jesuit Pope

Pope Francis is a member of the Society of Jesus, the largest religious order for men in the Catholic Church. There are 17,287 Jesuits in the world. Founded in the 16th century by Ignatius of Loyola, a Basque soldier who had a religious conversion after he was wounded in battle, the Jesuits have been called "God's soldiers." They take an extra vow of obedience to the pope. Over many centuries they became known for their courageous work to spread the Gospel in new lands.

Members of the order include many holy men, like St. Francis Xavier, as well as famous thinkers, teachers and scientists. The Jesuits have started many schools and universities in the United States and across the globe. St. Ignatius of Loyola wrote the Spiritual Exercises to help Catholics grow closer to Jesus Christ.

In the 1970s, after the Second Vatican Council, the Jesuits focused more on "the promotion of justice," believing that the Gospel is clear that people of faith should follow Jesus' example and work for justice in this world. Continuing in this tradition, Pope Francis has said: "If we are not active about living our faith and sharing it, we will be museum-piece Christians." He has also spoken out against the "cult of money" that dismisses God as a "nuisance" and treats human beings like "consumer goods which can be used and thrown away." He urges us "Do not be a 'part-time' Christian – at certain moments, in certain circumstances, in certain choices – be Christian at all times!"

"To gossip is to slap Jesus."

– Pope Francis



This publication is a Special Edition of the "The Serving Brother" newsletter that offers Catholic spirituality to the incarcerated. The Reverend George T. Williams, SJ MC, is its Editor. Correspondence may be directed to Steven G. Caron, KM, Publisher, The Serving Brother Newsletter, 43 Essex Street, Andover, MA 01810.

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