

Reflections on Pope Francis and his legacy



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The divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet.

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 9

The entire material universe speaks of God's love, God's boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God.

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 84

I shed a tear on hearing the news of the death of Pope Francis. He was someone who spoke my language, someone who echoed in words, such as those quoted above, my experience of the Divine and the way that experience can be mediated through the gift of this beautiful planet.

In *Laudato Si'* he showed how our caring for the planet is not just as an act of self-survival, though it is certainly that, but that it is also a sacred act of love; one way for us to caress in turn the one who caresses us.

Laudato Si' will, I think, be Pope Francis' greatest legacy as it continues to give many people of faith the language they need to express something that was already deep in their hearts. His follow up call in Laudate Deum, in which he expressed frustration at our incapacity to deal with the climate crisis in any meaningful way, will remain a challenge to humanity well into the future.

Other aspects of Francis' character that inspired me were his humility, his commitment to peace making, his pastoral heart and his bravery. He lived in a modest flat instead of the Papal Palace and carried his own suitcase when traveling. On being elected Pope he chose the name Francis, which not only revealed his love of and devotion towards the saint who is truly a saint for our times, it also signaled that he was committed to breaking down division. Francis was a member of the Jesuit order, one of the most powerful orders in the Catholic Church. The other powerful order is the Franciscans. Rather than choose the name of a Jesuit saint, Francis chose the name of the founder of the rival order, making his Office as Pope a sign of unity.

One of the great strengths of the Catholic Church is its sense of continuity. As with every strength, the commitment to continuity also has its shadow side in that it can be very difficult to incorporate new learnings and change attitudes when the commitment to continuity pushes against such evolution. Francis sought to navigate this complex space by inviting the church to be pastoral in its relating to LGBTIQA+ people rather than doctrinal.

Finally, I want to honour Francis' bravery and the way that bravery combined with his pastoral heart. Francis was able to call for end to both antisemitism and islamophobia while at the same time calling out the barbaric policies of the Israeli Government in Gaza, suggesting that it qualified as genocide. At the same time, his pastoral heart had him ringing the parish priest in Gaza each and every day to let him know that while much of the world had turned a blind eye to what was happening to the people there, he had not. And while other world leaders were falling over themselves so as not to offend the new regime in Washington, Francis was sending envoys to challenge that regime's methods and narratives. He also appointed a bishop to Washington who would stand up for the gospel values in the face of the regime's capriciousness.

I will miss him dearly.