



## LETTER FROM ROME

With **Robert Mickens**

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# Our very human and evangelical pope

Pope Francis reaches the 8-year mark of an extraordinary pontificate



Pope Francis wiping dry the foot of a young offender during service commemorating the Last Supper of Christ in which he washed the feet of prisoners at the "Casal del Marmo" institute for young offenders March 28, 2013. (EPA/OSSERVATORE ROMANO/MaxPPP)

By [Robert Mickens](#) | [Vatican City](#)

It is probably hard for many Catholics to remember what a state of disarray the Church was in -- especially at the Vatican -- back on March 13, 2013 when an Italo-Argentine Jesuit named Jorge Mario Bergoglio stepped out on the central balcony of St. Peter's

Basilica as the newly-elected pope.

Most people probably only remember the cheers of euphoria when it was announced that this 76-year-old man who was the new Bishop of Rome had taken the name Francis, something none of his 265 predecessors over the course of more than 2,000 years had ever done.

Perhaps those other popes never dared to take this name because of its immediate association with arguably history's most beloved and radical saint, the Poor Man from Assisi.

Maybe they thought it was unfitting for the Supreme Pontiff to choose a name that conjured up a romanticized and idealistic vision of a Church that is poor, weak and vulnerable, utterly simple and dangerously free; one that constantly seems at risk of being unmoored from the centuries-old behemoth that is the institutional Church of Rome.

It is said that Bergoglio thought he probably would have called himself John XXIV had he been elected at the 2005 conclave that produced, instead, Benedict XVI. And maybe John was the name he was pondering when the votes were being tallied and it became apparent that he would be elected this time.

### **A name that was a programmatic choice**

But he chose Francis instead. It was seemingly through a sudden inspiration he had when Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes told him, immediately as the election was concluded, not to forget the poor.

Perhaps the fact that Hummes is a Franciscan friar also prompted Bergoglio to make the association with Francis of Assisi.

No matter what the full reason, the first pope ever to call himself Francis has shown over the past eight years that taking this name was indeed a programmatic choice.

Even at 84, slowed by the "baggage" of increased physical limitations that come with age, the pope continues to chide the Church, like an Old Testament prophet, to leave the comfort and false security of its anachronistic structures and ways of doing things.

Like a teacher in a high school classroom, he has used the pedagogy of repetition to slowly convey his simple, yet radical program of changing the mentality or ethos within the Church.

He has tried to liberate Catholics from the clericalists and elitists who don't want anything significant to change that might loosen their control or lessen their influence over the direction of the Church.

### **The reform of the papacy and the "poor Church for the poor"**

A number of the cardinals who were at the 2013 conclave have said they were looking for a pope who would clean up the financial mess and alleged corruption in the Vatican that had come to be a huge embarrassment for the Church and a hindrance to its global mission.

But Francis has done much more than seek to reform the finances; he has been reforming the papacy. That is something, it seems, few cardinals expected him to do.

And it is clear that many clerics -- from young priests in the latest ordination class to elder prelates in the upper echelons of the hierarchy -- are not happy with this pope's efforts to bring about "a poor Church for the poor".

They are alarmed that he prefers a Church that stumbles along asking new questions and engaging in dialogue with those who are on the margins, rather than one that has all the answers and pontificates to those who are expected to just follow the well-established rules.

Francis' critics are also troubled by his willingness to meet other religious leaders, even those who are not Christians, not in order to defend the Catholic Church's claim that it is the "true" faith, but to show in a disarming way that even if we have different creeds we are still brothers and sisters, all children of the One God.

### **Global friendship and world peace**

The pope's tireless efforts to promote global friendship and peace in a spirit of brother- and sisterhood, or a spirit of fraternity and sorority, are his unique contribution to a world that

teeters dangerously on the brink of self-destruction due to unhealthy nationalism, selfishness, greed, mistrust of those who are different and a belief that it is legitimate to conquer or annihilate those perceived as a threat.

Pope Francis has done much in the past eight years to help make our Church and world more welcoming, compassionate and peaceful. He's raised issues like the urgent need to "care for our common home" and the necessity to come up with a viable alternative to an "economy that kills".

He has been one the most credible leaders on the global stage, to champion the rights and dignity of the poor and forgotten, such as refugees and immigrants. And he has called his fellow (Catholic) Christians to engage more deeply with the evangelical essentials of their faith, rather than obsess with man-made rules.

The pope is not perfect. For as many forward-thinking, bold and prophetic decisions he has made, he's also disappointed us at times for not being bold or prophetic enough. He's done things that have upset and confounded people all across the broad spectrum of what is legitimately Catholic.

But perfection is not something one should expect from a pope. Rather, it is goodness and kindness and abiding faith. And one should rightly expect the pope to show what it means to be a disciple of Jesus -- how to "love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength... and your neighbor as yourself".

In all this, Francis has been a compelling example and source of encouragement for so many. He's shown us how we can really live the joy of the Gospel.

His **pontificate** has been a gift to the Church and to the world. May we be worthy heirs of the legacy that, hopefully, he will continue to forge in the months and years to come.

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