

Running toward Jesus

Raised Pentecostal, I was wary of Catholicism. Pope Francis gave me the final nudge I needed.

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Century illustration (source images: Wikimedia commons)

I never met Pope Francis.

For most people, not meeting the supreme pontiff of the Catholic Church would not be significant. I guess it's not in my case either. But I *really* wanted to meet him. He held a special place in my heart. He was down-to-earth and gritty and spoke with

folksy wisdom. There are pictures of him hugging babies and embracing disabled people and kissing the feet of prisoners. Unlike some of his predecessors, Pope Francis shied away from the pomp of the Vatican and the allure of designer shoes. (No judgment; I've probably got more shoes than Benedict XVI.) Francis spent his birthdays with homeless people. He smiled in selfies with teenagers. He hopped off his popemobile to embrace people who couldn't come to him. He donned a red clown nose on at least one occasion.

And through all of it, he reminded us to “run toward Jesus.” In what would be his final homily, delivered by Cardinal Comastri on Easter Sunday due to Francis's illness, he told us to imitate the first Easter witnesses:

“Like Mary Magdalene, every day we can experience losing the Lord, but every day we can also run to look for him again, with the certainty that he will allow himself to be found and will fill us with the light of his resurrection.”

I started writing about Francis when I became a journalist in 2014, a year into his office. I was fascinated by everything I learned about him. Although many of his official positions were not much different than his two predecessors, he was nevertheless unique. He prized synodality—journeying together—and believed that many church issues ought to be solved at local levels. He gave special attention to Indigenous people and invited worshippers to bring their own local flavors to the [liturgy](#), saying “God wants every person to praise him in their own language.”

Francis did not, like Benedict, talk like an academic theologian—his theology is rich, but it is written ultimately for laypeople. Nor did Francis hail from Europe, like most of the other men who have occupied the Chair of St. Peter. He was born in Buenos Aires to Italian parents who emigrated to Argentina to escape Mussolini. Ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1969, he went on to become Archbishop of Buenos Aires before being elevated to Cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 2001.

Much has been written about how Francis's time in Argentina shaped his papacy. While he was not born into poverty, Francis spent a good deal of his time in villas, or slums, and it's here that many believe his closeness with the poor was fomented. “To all, and especially to the poor and the marginalized,” he said in a 2021 message, “I express my spiritual closeness and assure them of the Church's loving concern.” In his 2023 message for the World Day of the Poor, Francis said, “Our daily efforts to

welcome the poor are still not enough. A great river of poverty is traversing our cities and swelling to the point of overflowing.” He urgently renewed his call one year later, pleading with the world not to forget the poor:

“While one part of the world is condemned to live in the slums of history, while inequalities grow and the economy punishes the weakest, while society devotes itself to the idolatry of money and consumption, it so happens that the poor and marginalized have no choice but to continue to wait.”

Francis’s advocacy was based on his devotion to Christ. “Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group,” he wrote in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Charity, for Francis, was not an abstract principle. “But what is God’s love? It is not something vague, some generic feeling. God’s love has a name and a face: Jesus Christ.”

It was during Francis’s papacy that I came into full communion with the Catholic Church. Raised Pentecostal and educated at a Baptist college, I started flirting with liturgy in my twenties, and by the time I hit 30, my eyes were fixed on Rome. Francis gave me the final nudge I needed. While I never really paid attention to Catholicism before Francis, I held the (wrong) idea that’s fairly standard in American evangelical circles—that Catholics don’t have personal relationships with Jesus. There was no way I could make that argument against Francis, a man who centered Jesus in all he did. In a [message](#) early in his papacy, Francis warned that “There is no Christian without Jesus.” There are some people who pretend to be Christian, he said, but “there is something missing.”

“Where is Jesus?” he asked rhetorically.

Well, it was easy to find him when you saw Francis. He is all over this man's papacy. Jesus was present every time Francis stood before powerful politicians and told them to take care of the poor, every time he called for an end to conflict, every time he called on nations to open their borders to migrants and refugees. He was there when Francis washed people’s feet and hugged those who found themselves on society’s peripheries, when he embraced and advocated for the poor and the unlucky. You could hear Jesus in Francis’s cries for an inclusive church, a church open to all. “Todos, todos, todos!” Papa would say.

Like Jesus, Francis was a man of peace, and like many people of peace, he earned the scourge of the powerful who wish to maintain the status quo. People didn't like when Francis reminded LGBT people they were welcome in Church; they hated him when he said we could even be *blessed*. People didn't like when he condemned the death penalty, or when he invited Indigenous people from the Amazon to the Vatican and welcomed their *pachamama* statues. They didn't like when he spoke on behalf of the unborn and the elderly. They took umbrage when he spoke about the evil excesses of capitalism and [called the wealthy](#) "slaves to sin." And yet he did it. When nationalism began to surge and hatred took to the world stage, Francis calmly but tirelessly spoke out in favor of mercy, encounter, and dialogue. In this and more, we saw him running after Jesus.

Since news of Francis's death broke, my social media has been filled with pictures of many of my friends and colleagues smiling next to Pope Francis. Many of them are reporters and theologians and scholars, and have been lucky enough to get close enough to Francis to snap a photograph. I thought maybe one day, perhaps after my book came out, I'd get to meet him. Sadly, I won't.

I have met Jesus, though. And I know Pope Francis would be the first to tell me that of the two of them, I met the right guy.