

ON THE DEATH OF POPE FRANCIS (4/21/2025)

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday, an observance established by Pope John Paul II in May of 2000. However, we have also today just completed the funeral rites for Pope Francis whom God has called to his eternal reward. So, I think it appropriate to say something about our late Pope.

Throughout Lent and now into the Easter Season, we have considered the two great themes of human existence, life and death. In Lent, we have considered the death of the Lord and now in Easter, His resurrection to new life. On this last day of the Easter Octave, we also saw these great themes played out in the life and death of our Holy Father, Pope Francis.

Pope Francis was born on December 17th, 1936 in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. He was baptized Jorge which is the Spanish name for George. Jorge was the oldest of five children born to Mario and Regina Bergoglio. His mother was born in Buenos Aires, but his father's family emigrated from Italy to Argentina to escape the dictatorship of Benito Mussolini who would later become an ally of Adolph Hitler.

In 1955, our future pope began his studies for the diocesan priesthood. However, after a time, he discerned a call to join the Jesuit Order. So, in 1958 he transferred from the Archdiocesan seminary to the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. From that point, he continued his studies and on December 13th, 1969, he was ordained a priest.

He then taught in various institutions, mainly in Argentina. He also served in various capacities in Jesuit houses of study.

On June 27th, 1992, he was named auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires by then Pope John Paul II, and in February of 1998, he became the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. In 2001, Pope John Paul named him a Cardinal.

During his time as Archbishop, our future pope established new parishes, led pro-life efforts and ministered to the poor in the slums of Buenos Aires. It was a part of the City that had been neglected by the Church in previous times. His work with the poor inspired in him a simple lifestyle. He often used public transportation and cooked his own meals.

Pope Francis was also deeply affected by what was called the "Dirty War" in Argentina. It occurred from 1974 to 1983 when a military junta ruled Argentina and often resorted to death squads and state terrorism to maintain control. What he saw led him to later on speak out on the evils and folly of war which reaps only death and destruction.

After the resignation of Pope Benedict on February 11th, 2013, Francis was elected pope. He was the first Pope from the new world, the first to be a member of the Jesuit order and the first to take the name Francis; he said he was inspired by Saint Francis who loved holy poverty.

In Rome, Pope Francis continued to live a simple lifestyle, not living in the papal palace but rather in the Vatican guest house, Domus Sancta Marthae, and riding in a used car.

During his twelve years as pope, Francis inspired many with his personal humility. He continued to call attention to the world's poor and to the plight of immigrants who are often fleeing war and famine and hopelessness in their native countries.

Pope Francis also sought to reach out to what he called the peripheries of the Church. He went to many countries where Catholics are only a small part of the population such as Brunei and Iran. He also chose bishops from those countries to be cardinals so as to broaden the perspective of the College of Cardinals to include countries beyond Europe and North America.

Each pope God chooses has his own particular emphasis and perspective on things. Pope John Paul came from a communist country that imposed severe restrictions on the Church. He also experienced the brutality and horror of the Second World War. Yet he proclaimed the hope and love we have in Christ. He said do not be afraid to follow Christ where ever he leads you.

Pope Benedict experienced many of the same things as did John Paul. He was a deep thinker and a great theologian. He realized that ideas are more powerful than armies because ideas shape how we think and how we act. Pope Benedict sought to combat the false ideas of materialism and nihilism and atheism all of which lead to hopelessness and sorrow and despair.

Pope Francis sought very much to uphold the dignity of the human person. He opposed the throwaway culture of our modern times. It's a culture which sees those who cannot produce, the poor and the elderly and the unborn as useless and of no importance. He reminded us often that everyone is made in the image and likeness of God and that we all share a dignity and worth because of that. This dignity is just as much in the poor as it is in the rich and powerful.

One thing I would mention about Pope Francis is this. He had a habit of speaking off the cuff, and the press would often take these remarks and run with them. I think the Pope could have been more careful here because his words were often distorted and taken out of context.

The thing is when you look at his overall writings and words, they are consistent with Church teaching as is to be expected. When I would hear about something the Pope said, I used to look up his actual words and the context, and in nearly every case, what was reported had been taken out of context or mistranslated. So, after a while, I didn't bother anymore because I figured it was just some editor trying to promote his own agenda and not that of the Church.

This past Monday, after Pope Francis had been able to mingle with the crowds at Saint Peter's on Easter, God call him from this life. Eternal rest grant unto him O Lord ...

The death of Pope Francis leaves the Catholic Church, our Church, without a shepherd for the present. So what happens next?

Next will be a gathering of the Cardinals who are under the age of 80. Cardinals are men chosen by the Pope primarily for the task of electing the next pope. They are often bishops of large or important dioceses. For example, here in the United States, the Archbishops of Chicago, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. are all cardinals.

However, cardinals don't have to be bishops. Sometimes the pope chooses men who have given great service to the Church or men who are great theologians. Most of these are simple priests, but they could also be deacons.

Of note is the fact that Pope Francis has made a number of Cardinals from small countries or from Dioceses where there are very few Catholics. For example, Iran, Mongolia and Ghana now have their own cardinals. In fact, there are now 70 countries with their own cardinals. 10 Cardinals come from the United States.

There are 135 cardinals eligible to vote in election of a new pope. The rule is that they are to gather together 15 to 20 days after the death of a pope to elect a new pope. Their gathering is called a conclave. So, this will be in the next two weeks.

The conclave will take place in the Sistine Chapel. To prevent outside influence and political pressure, the cardinals will meet and vote behind closed doors in the Sistine Chapel. Before entering, they will listen to a sermon and once they have entered and the doors closed. This is to isolate them from outside pressure.

Before they enter, they will celebrate Mass together in Saint Peter's Basilica. Then they will process to the Sistine Chapel while singing the hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* which is also normally sung on Pentecost and invokes the intercession of the Holy Spirit.

The cardinals also take an oath to maintain secrecy with regard to the election. No letters can go out or in. No cell phones are allowed, and punishment for violating the oath is automatic excommunication.

A maximum of four votes can take place each day. If a candidate receives two thirds of the votes, he becomes the next pope. Voting continues with time for prayer and reflection until someone is elected.

One famous feature is that after each vote, the ballots are burned in a small stove kept for that purpose. Black smoke from the stove's temporary chimney means no one has been elected. White smoke means someone has been elected pope.

Upon election, the candidate is asked if he accepts the office. If he does, he then traditionally takes a new name. The new pope then goes to the porch on Saint Peter's Basilica where he is announced and where he gives his first papal blessing to those gathered in the square and to the world.

Whoever is elected will become the 267th pope of the Catholic Church.

As Catholics should be grateful to God for the office of pope. He is called to be the chief shepherd of Christ's Church on earth. Like Jesus, he must be a great teacher. Let us pray that our new pope will be a holy man who loves God and who wants to help each of us grow in God's love and to inherit eternal life. Let us pray that God bless us with such a pope. Amen.