



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
appointed to be read
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on the Second Sunday of Easter (27th April 2025).

MAY POPE FRANCIS REST IN PEACE.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is with enormous sadness that we bid farewell to Pope Francis, commending his soul to the mercy of the Lord. The Holy Father passed away on the morning of Easter Monday 21st April 2025, after a battle with pneumonia and other problems. May he rest in the peace of the Risen Lord.

The Holy Father, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, came from Buenos Aires. The eldest of five children, he was born to an Italian immigrant father and an Argentinian mother on 17th December 1936.¹ In his early years, he worked in a bar, as a janitor and as a chemical technician, but at the age of twenty, decided to become a priest. He entered the seminary but left a year later to join the Society of Jesus.² His Jesuit formation extended across a period of great change in the Church during Vatican II and he was ordained to the priesthood in December 1967. He served as a novice master, a professor of theology and later as the provincial superior. In 1992, he was appointed auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires and in 1998 he became the archbishop. He dedicated himself to the faithful, especially to those who lived in the favelas and he became known as the 'Bishop of the Slums.' In 2001, Pope Saint John Paul II made him a Cardinal. He was a man of simplicity and humility, strongly committed to social justice. On 13th March 2013 he was elected Pope. He chose the name Francis, in honour of St Francis of Assisi, because, as he said, Francis "was a man of peace, a man of poverty and a man who loved and protected creation."³

During his twelve years as Pope, Francis began a major reform of the Roman Curia to make it more service-oriented and professional, free from careerism.⁴ In his first Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* of 2013, he focused the Church on evangelisation. He dreamt of a Church filled with "a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of

doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her own self-preservation." ⁵ His second Encyclical *Laudato Si'* captured the world's attention. In it, he expressed a deep concern for God's creation and issued a call to action.⁶ He followed this up a few years later with another document *Laudate Deum*. In 2015 he established an Extraordinary Holy Year dedicated to God's Mercy, stressing how God wished to reach those on the margins of the Church and of society with His love.

Throughout his pontificate, Francis has emphasised mercy, outreach, social justice and care of the poor. As much as any Pope before him, if not more, he spoke out against the injustices of our time, calling for an end to war and for the care of migrants and refugees. He worked tirelessly for human fraternity and for peace. This was the Pope who famously washed the feet of convicts in Regina Caeli prison and who moved the world when in St Peter's Square he tenderly embraced a young boy with cerebral palsy⁷. He also promoted the internal reform of the Church, calling for an end to clericalism, combatting the abuse-crisis and working for a more synodal Church in which every member has a greater role in decision-making.⁸ This work of reform - the Synod on Synodality - is still ongoing.

I met Pope Francis a few times. On one occasion, soon after I became a bishop, I remember his address to the newly ordained, warning us not to give scandal by being 'airport bishops,' forever travelling outside the Diocese.⁹ We should remain close to the flock, shepherds with "the smell of the sheep."¹⁰ Pope Francis had some wonderful down-to-earth phrases; indeed, in many ways, he made the papacy more human. As the Bishop of Rome, the Pope is essential for the unity of the Church.¹¹ Despite the longstanding challenges to his health, he bravely soldiered on for the love and sake of us all.

On dying, he once remarked, that when we lose a loved one, the conviction arises spontaneously in the heart that things surely cannot be over. "There is powerful instinct within us" he once said, "which tells us that our lives do not end with death. This thirst for life finds its true and reliable answer in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, [Who] ... gives us the certainty of life after death."¹² This is our faith: that we live with Christ; we die with Him, and we will rise with Him.¹³ It is this faith that makes us pray with confidence today: "Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him."

So let us give thanks for this great and generous man and for his outstanding contribution. Let us pray for his well-earned repose. During this season when we celebrate the Resurrection, let us pray that Francis will rise with Christ in joy. And let us commend him to the prayers of Our Lady, the *Salus Populi Romani*, ('The Salvation of the Roman People') to whom he had a great devotion, and to his patrons, St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Francis of Assisi. Indeed, may he hear the Lord Jesus say to him: "Well done, good and faithful servant; come and join in your Master's happiness."¹⁴

In Corde Iesu,

+Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ For his early life, see A. F. Deck SJ *Francis Bishop of Rome. The Gospel for the Third Millennium* (New York, Paulist: 2016) 7-16.

² Deck 14f.

³ 'Pope Francis reveals why he chose his name,' *The Catholic Herald* 16th March 2013:

<https://catholicherald.co.uk/pope-francis-reveals-why-he-chose-name/> (February 2025)

⁴ Pope Francis: *Praedicate Evangelium on the Roman Curia and its Service to the Church in the World* (March 2022): online at www.vatican.va

⁵ Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* (London, CTS: 2013) 29

⁶ Pope Francis *Laudato Si On Care for our Common Home* (London, CTS: 2015).

⁷ R. Snizek 'Pope's embrace of boy with cerebral palsy touches world's faithful' *The Catholic Herald* (5th April 2013): <https://catholicherald.co.uk/popes-embrace-of-boy-with-cerebral-palsy-touches-worlds-faithful/> (February 2025)

⁸ Synod of Bishops Synod 2021-2023 *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission Preparatory Document* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: 2021) n. 6: online at www.synod.va.

⁹ 'Pope Francis tells new bishops: Avoid scandal of being 'airport bishops' *CatholicPhilly* (19th September 2013): <https://catholicphilly.com/2013/09/features/words-of-pope-francis/pope-francis-tells-new-bishops-avoid-scandal-of-being-airport-bishops/> (February 2025)

¹⁰ See Pope Francis *Homily, Chrism Mass, St. Peter's Basilica* (28th March 2013): online at www.vatican.va

¹¹ See *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 2006) 182-185.

¹² Pope Francis *General Audience, St. Peter's Square* (27th November 2013): online at www.vatican.va

¹³ The Introit (Entrance Antiphon) from the Requiem Mass puts it well, when it says, "God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will give life also to your mortal bodies, through his Spirit that dwells in you." See *The Roman Missal. English Edition according to the Third Typical Edition* (London, CTS: 2010) 1447

¹⁴ Matthew 25: 23.