Opinion

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Pope Francis pours dirt into a potted olive tree during the meeting, “Faith and Science: Towards COP26,” with religious leaders in the Hall of Benedictions at the Vatican Oct. 4, 2021. The meeting was part of the run-up to the U.N. Climate Change Conference, called COP26, in Glasgow, Scotland, Oct. 31 to Nov. 12, 2021. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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The death of Pope Francis hits hard.

It is always sad when a pope dies. We pray for him at every Mass. He is the face of the universal church across all media. We read his teachings and try as best we can to engage them so as to become better Catholics.

Francis touched a chord with millions of people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. As I wrote yesterday, it was not just his words but, even more, his powerful gestures that communicated the Gospel to all. He dragged the church back to the central proclamation of the Gospel: In Jesus Christ, God has shown the depths of his mercy.

How fitting it was that Francis lived to experience one last Easter. His first programmatic encyclical was *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, and perhaps it was that last experience of Easter joy which allowed him to let go of all the pain and suffering of this world, and to cross the abyss to that better world where he will be greeted by the angels and take his place among the saints in light.

Francis was a pastor, first and foremost, and a good pastor teaches. Any pope's most enduring legacy is the body of magisterial teaching they left behind. Fifty and one hundred years hence, people who did not witness Francis' power of gesture will still wrestle with his power of teaching.

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Like his namesake, Francis called all people of goodwill to revere the gift of creation, and to examine the ways our human activities imperil it. *Laudato Si*' developed the embryonic teaching on environmental concern voiced by his immediate predecessors, but he reached back to the *Poverello* to bring that teaching to full flower.

Laudato Si' was the most medieval and anti-modernist teaching of any recent pope and it inspired millions of Catholics, especially young people, to address the spiritual and moral crisis that is at the heart of the environmental crisis. His critiques of modern consumer capitalism, of the technological paradigm, of the idea that limitless growth is a proper means of measuring the health of a society, all these reached deeper than the usual ecological concerns. If our scientists discover some means of capturing CO2, and the ozone layer is repaired, the problems of the human heart which Francis identified would still be with us.

To a polarized world riven by ideologies and spread-eagle capitalism, and then beset by a pandemic, Francis issued a clarion call for a better kind of politics in *Fratelli tutti* . There are many themes in the text. The pope's meditation on the parable of the Good Samaritan is profound and accessible. His call at the end of the document for religion to purify itself so that it can help purify the world echoes the Second Vatican Council's call for the church to serve as "a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race." (*Lumen gentium*, #1) If you strip away the layers of *Fratelli tutti*, its core is the belief that a politics that does not spring from and embody a culture that values compassion, is a politics that is inadequate for humankind. It is doomed to foster alienation, resentment and reaction.

Amoris Laetitia, Francis' 2016 post-synodal exhortation joins a long line of anti-Jansenist papal teaching, from Pope Clement XI's *Unigenitus* to Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus caritas est*. In this text, and in various exhortations and comments, the pope made it clear that an obsession of purity, and especially sexual purity, distorted the teaching of the Gospel and our dogmatic belief in the priority of grace.

Indeed, I would go so far as to say that *Amoris Laetitia*, more than any other of his magisterial texts, captured the essence of the pastoral conversion Francis sought, and the right ordering of the relationship between pastoral theology and ethics. "At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity," the pope wrote. "We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel" (#311).

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If grace, mercy and compassion were the key constituents of his teaching, synodality emerged as the pope's key reform in governance. Synods became less formal, with fewer speeches and more discussion. The pope then called for a worldwide consultation of the faithful in anticipation of a double synod in 2023 and 2024, one that focused on synodality itself. The process did not yield changes on particular issues; that was never its purpose.

Instead, the synodal process invited the church to a different manner of decision-making, one that might help overcome the divisions that had emerged in certain local churches like the U.S. church. If you think of synodality like air travel, something with the potential to change a facet of life thoroughly, we could say that Francis got the ecclesiological plane in the air but it remains to be seen if his successors will continue on the synodal flight path, if synodality will become a foundational facet of church life in the 21st century and beyond.

Francis reserved any harshness for those who preached the Gospel by leading with judgment, and forgetting mercy. When he famously said, "Who am I to judge?" when asked about a priest struggling with homosexuality, Francis was not changing church teaching on human sexuality. He was, instead, reminding us of other, more central, teachings: that God reserves judgment to himself, that sexual sins are rarely the most dangerous, and that God's ministers should encourage people, not scold them.

Today, as we still wipe away the tears, Pope Francis' powerful gestures of humility and solidarity are predominant, as they should be. But as those memories recede, his magisterial teachings, with their emphasis on pastoral theology, will continue to inspire Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.