News



A man prays at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City April 21, 2025, after the death of Pope Francis was announced by the Vatican. Pope Francis, formerly Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, died April 21 at age 88. (OSV News/Reuters/Adam Gray)



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Linda Ekstrom knelt in the front pew and prayed silently following the April 22 midday Mass at St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral in Fall River, Massachusetts. A few feet in front of her, a framed portrait of Pope Francis, surrounded by flowers, stood in front of the cathedral's sanctuary.

Ekstrom, a resident of Tiverton, Rhode Island, said she prayed for the church and for Francis, who died at age 88 on April 21, Easter Monday. She said she was shocked to learn of the pope's death.

"I thought Francis was a bridge to a new understanding, to a bigger heart and more awareness of our core values and of immigrants," Ekstrom said. "He gave us all more awareness of the importance of sympathy, empathy and giving. He showed us how to do it, and it was a lovely thing."

A little more than 24 hours after the Vatican announced that the pope had died at 7:35 a.m. in Rome, lay Catholics and parish priests across the United States reflected on Francis' 12-year papacy and his legacy as a pastor who sought out those on the peripheries and tried to make the Catholic Church a more welcoming space for the marginalized.

A man prays during a Mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast

A man prays at the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast, April 22, 2025.. (OSV News/Luc Gnago, Reuters)

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Katie Wojda, a student working on a Master of Divinity degree at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago, said Francis' papacy was formative for her throughout her teenage years and young adulthood, when she felt called to priesthood and came out as bisexual.

"It meant so much to me. Knowing that he was my pope kept me grounded throughout many years," she told the National Catholic Reporter. "I often thought about what Pope Francis' response to my questioning would be, and realized it

would probably be something loving, something very kind."

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Palestinian Christians attend a Mass at Holy Family Church in Gaza City, April 21, 2025,

Palestinian Christians attend a Mass at Holy Family Church in Gaza City, April 21, 2025, after the death of Pope Francis was announced April 21 at age 88. (OSV News/Dawoud Abu Alkas, Reuters)

Francis' openness to LGBTQ Catholics, his prophetic stance on welcoming migrants, and his championing of synodality gave Wojda hope. "It made me think, 'This is a church I want to be part of,' and because of Pope Francis I am hopeful we can become a more listening church," she said.

Msgr. Stephen Avila, who celebrated the midday Mass at the cathedral in Fall River, said he was inspired by Francis' example of faith and fidelity to the church, as well as his love of the poor and concern for those on the margins of society.

"He was the right pope at the right time in our church to bring a lot of healing and to bring us to a greater awareness to go outside the doors of the church and bring the message of Christ outside the doors of the church," Avila said.

In Portland, Oregon, Christina Nguyen spoke with her hand on her heart while discussing the pontiff's death.

People gather in the streets of Rome April 22, 2025, following the death of Pope Francis. The

People gather in the streets of Rome April 22, 2025, following the death of Pope Francis. (OSV News/Mohammed Salem, Reuters)

"It was beautiful how he bravely carried the cross with Jesus the whole time during Lent, and how he was back with us for Holy Week," she said after the April 22 morning Mass at St. Rose of Lima Parish in Portland, where an image of Francis was propped on the altar.

"On Monday morning when I heard the news, I thought it was perfect timing. He went home to the risen Lord," said Nguyen, who told NCR that Pope John Paul II's death in 2005 marked the beginning of her conversion, leading her "deeper and

deeper into the love of Jesus."

> 'Francis' papacy gave me the courage to finally say yes to the church.'
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Nguyen said she believes Francis carried a desire to bring people "who are far away from the church back to Jesus."

"So that is my prayer: for those who feel far away from the church, that they can come back." said Nguyen, who added that she had always wanted to write Francis a letter.

"Because when I looked at him, he was not just a pope, he was a father," she said. "He was a loving father to those who are unfortunate, to those who are pushed away from society, the small and forgotten. I loved him for that.

"Then yesterday I'm praying to him and I'm like, 'Well, I don't have to write you a letter, because you are past this pilgrimage,' " Nguyen said. "Now we can talk heart to heart."

Rita Mendonca, of Fall River, Massachusetts, said she liked that Francis struck a modern tone in how he exercised the Petrine ministry.

"I think we're all going to miss him terribly," Mendonca said. "Just knowing that he was aware of people's feelings, and that he knew the world was changing, I think that was all a step in the right direction."

A man prays the rosary at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City April 22, 2025, one day afte

At St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, a visitor prays after the death of Pope Francis. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Joseph Moniz, of Westport, Massachusetts, said he and his family had been praying for Francis, who was hospitalized for 38 days from mid-February to late March for a life-threatening case of pneumonia in both his lungs.

"We could see that he was frail, and was ready to meet our Lord," said Moniz, who credited Francis with being a moral example for Catholics and the wider world.

"With the pope passing now in these crucial times," Moniz said, "We just hope that God will not only guide him into his heavenly award but also now we ask for him to guide the College of Cardinals to hopefully have someone who will continue to guide the faithful. We definitely need a strong shepherd for the church today."

For Jim Wang, a Chinese immigrant in New York City who converted to Catholicism last year, the pope's death marked a deeply personal moment. "Pope Francis' death feels so personal to me. I was baptized just last year, but my journey started long ago when my grandfather took me to church in Beijing," Wang said.

"Francis' papacy gave me the courage to finally say yes to the church," Wang said.

He described Francis' legacy in one word: mercy. "He taught me that faith isn't just about being perfect, it's about being open," he said. The image that stands above the rest for him is when Francis stood alone in an empty St. Peter's Square during the pandemic.

"He was completely alone and praying for the world. It really moved me to tears," Wang recalled. "My hope is that the church continues in his spirit, humble, brave and radically welcoming."



Pope Francis leads a prayer service in an empty St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 27, 2020. At the conclusion of the service the pope held the Eucharist as he gave an extraordinary blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world). The service was livestreamed in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)

That spirit of welcome was equally meaningful for Abigail Loughlin, an elementary school teacher in Manhattan, who said she was "shocked and honestly heartbroken" when she heard of the pope's death. She said his legacy lies in how he redefined what the church could be. "He made a lot of people feel very welcome and included in a church that unfortunately hasn't always been inclusive."

"He really showed people radical love and was certainly a step in the right direction for our church on earth," she said.

Octavio Canhoto, a native of Portugal who immigrated to Massachusetts, remembered Francis' visit to the Portuguese capital of Lisbon for World Youth Day in August 2023, and how the pope said then that the church was for "todos, todos, todos," or everybody.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams joins fellow mourners as they attend a memorial Mass for Po

New York City Mayor Eric Adams joins fellow mourners as they attend a memorial Mass for Pope Francis at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City April 22, 2025. Pope Francis died April 21 at age 88. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"He was a good pastor for everyone," Canhoto said. "He taught the way that we have to love everybody as equal, with no differences between rich and poor. For him, everybody was the same."

Ekstrom, the Rhode Island resident who prayed before a portrait of Francis, said she had no doubt that the new pope would "also be a beautiful man" who would inspire the faithful like his predecessor had. Ekstrom added that she was aware of critics who sometimes said derogatory comments about Francis and his ministry.

"I don't believe in any of that," she said. "I believe in the soul of the man who was given the keys of the papacy. We have to trust in that and be more supportive of the papacy."

Gregoria Caceres prays next to a picture of Pope Francis placed outside the Virgin of Caacupé

Gregoria Caceres prays next to a picture of Pope Francis placed outside the Virgin of Caacupé chapel in Buenos Aires, Argentina, April 21, 2025, after the death of Pope Francis. (OSV News/AMatias Baglietto, Reuters)

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