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Pope Francis meets with President Donald Trump, left, on the occasion of their private audience, at the Vatican, May 24, 2017. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino, Pool, File)

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The day before he died, in his final public address, Pope Francis expressed an Easter Sunday message of unity and an appeal for the marginalized and migrants. "All of us," he proclaimed, "are children of God!"

In a dramatically different message Sunday, President Donald Trump issued an insult-laced post wishing a happy Easter to his opponents, including "Radical Left Lunatics," "WEAK and INEFFECTIVE Judges and Law Enforcement Officials," and former President Joe Biden, "our WORST and most Incompetent President."

Some of the fundamental differences between the U.S. president and the late pope — not only their divergent styles but their positions on migration, the environment and poverty — will come into sharper focus as Trump travels to Rome on Friday (April 25) for Francis' funeral, to be held Saturday morning (April 26) in St. Peter's Square.

Trump, as he prepared to leave for Rome on April 25, said Francis "loved the world, actually, and he was just a good man."

"I thought he was a fantastic kind of a guy," Trump said.

David Gibson, director of the Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University in New York, put it this way: "Obviously, it's been a fraught relationship."

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The relationship eroded

Things weren't great between Trump and the pope during Trump's first term, from 2017 to 2021. But, says Gibson, "Trump II was even worse with the Vatican because of how much more aggressive it has been on every level, against migrants, against international aid."

The Argentine pontiff and the American president sparred early on over immigration. In 2016, Francis, alluding to then-candidate Trump, called anyone who builds a wall to keep out migrants " not Christian." Trump called the comment "disgraceful."

Despite the billionaire former reality star's divergences over the years with Francis, who was known for a humble style, Trump's support has gradually risen among American Catholics. He courted them in his last presidential campaign, and many influential bishops are among his supporters.

Trump, who has identified himself as a "non-denominational Christian," has long counted Christians, especially evangelical Christians, among his key blocs of support. His policies on abortion, including his role in appointing three of the five U.S. Supreme Court justices who overturned national abortion rights, deepened his support among Christians, including many conservative Catholics.

His politics are also closely aligned with many conservative U.S. Catholic bishops, who were often at odds with Francis' more progressive approach to leading the church.

The Republican president implored Catholics last year to vote for him. In October, when he addressed the Al Smith charity dinner in New York, which raises millions of dollars for Catholic charities, Trump said: "You gotta get out and vote. And Catholics, you gotta vote for me."

Many Catholics did. In the 2024 election, Trump won the Catholic vote, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters. In 2020, the Catholic vote was evenly split between Joe Biden, but in 2024, 54% of Catholic voters supported Trump and 44% supported Kamala Harris.



Ivanka Trump, first lady Melania Trump, and President Donald Trump stand with Pope Francis during a meeting, Wednesday, May 24, 2017, at the Vatican. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File)

For Trump, Catholics' support didn't earn Francis'

But while Trump may have won the Catholic vote, he never won over Francis.

Vice President JD Vance, a Catholic who met briefly with Francis the day before he died, dismissed the pontiff's disagreements with the administration, telling reporters this week that the pope was "a much broader figure" than American politics — a man who led a church with 1.4 billion members worldwide.

"I'm aware that he had some disagreements with some of the policies of our administration," Vance said. "He also had a lot of agreements with some of the policies of our administration. I'm not going to soil the man's legacy by talking about politics."

Trump, too, met with Francis, in a largely cordial meeting at the Vatican in 2017. But their differences persisted.

In February of this year, Francis sent a letter to U.S. bishops that was similar in tone to his comments on immigration almost a decade earlier. He denounced the Trump administration's embarking on plans for mass deportations and noted that in the Bible, the infant Jesus and his family were themselves refugees in Egypt, fleeing a threat to their lives.

Some leading bishops did applaud some of the new Trump administration initiatives on "school choice" and policies defining gender as determined at birth. Francis, while upholding church teachings on sexuality, took a more tolerant stance toward LGBTQ+ people.

Other prominent bishops, appointed by Francis, are more sympathetic with his priorities. They include the new archbishop of Washington, Cardinal Robert McElroy.

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>
> — JD Vance
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Catholics are a diverse group and act accordingly

But the Catholic vote is not monolithic. John Fea, a professor of history at Messiah University in Pennsylvania, said many conservative Catholics, even if they respect the office of the pope, "don't like his progressive views" on immigrants and his authorizing of blessings for same-sex couples.

"The views of many conservative American Catholics line-up with Trump's brand of populism: strong borders, pro-life on abortion, concern about critical race theory in schools, etc.," Fea, author of *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, said via email.

In contrast, he speculated that many progressive Catholics who do share Pope Francis' social justice concerns probably did not vote for Trump.

In addition to migration, Francis also differed with Trump on the environment, writing an encyclical calling for climate action, in contrast to the president's push to bring back fossil fuels. Francis also staunchly opposed the death penalty, something Trump supports.

Stylistically, Trump's big personality also contrasted with Francis' more self-deprecating and welcoming tone, immortalized by his "Who am I to judge?" response to a question about gay priests.

Trump and Francis did share some policy goals on issues such as abortion and religious freedom, and U.S.-Vatican relations involve more than two people, said Steven Millies, director of the Bernadin Center at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

"But the alignments were at the diplomatic level more than at the personal or political level, of course," said Millies, a professor of public theology.

"They were profoundly different people — one who'd been formed by Jesuit spirituality and lived his life in deepening faith that he shared with the world, the other who mangles Scripture quotations, sells Bibles for personal profit, and uses Christian faith like a brand identity in a market competition."

{Peter Smith, a religion writer for The Associated Press, reported from Pittsburgh. Associated Press writer Will Weissert contributed to this report.}

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** and **The Funeral of Pope Francis** feature series.