Vatican
Vatican News
News
Spirituality
Funeral crowd

Nuns and faithful gather, ahead of the funeral Mass of Pope Francis, at the Vatican, April 26. (OSV News/Reuters/Remo Casilli)



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They came from around the world to honor and pray for Pope Francis. From Spain to Rwanda, from Ecuador to the United States, upwards of half a million people packed St. Peter’s Square and lined the streets of Rome to say goodbye to the people’s

pope.

Gathering under brilliant blue skies and sunny weather, a crowd of more than 200,000 in Vatican City, plus another 300,000 lining the route to Francis' burial site, gathered to say a final farewell to Pope Francis, who died April 21 at age 88.

The funeral crowd represented a decidedly youthful demographic because the theme of this weekend's Jubilee events was on youth. Tens of thousands of people had planned to attend the canonization of Carlo Acutis, the first millennial saint. The canonization was postponed when Francis died.

> 'He brought the world together, not just Catholics, Christians, but everyone with his message of peace, unity, understanding, mercy and forgiveness.'
> —Evelia Gonzalez
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Hours before the funeral Mass began in St. Peter's Square, a group of teenage girls from Madrid, wearing hoodies and jeans and Spanish flags draped over their backs and tied around their necks, walked arm in arm with a crowd of students.

"Pope Francis was important because he transmitted a lot of peace for me and helped me in difficult moments. Being here is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing," said 15-year-old Carlota Garcia.

Gema Mas, 14, said attending the funeral was "a unique opportunity to experience a historic moment."

"We're sad about the circumstances but at the same time, it's pretty cool to be here for this," she said.

Brother Thacien Nizeyimana from Rwanda said he came to the funeral to accompany the pope in prayer. He described Francis as a "brave papa" who "opened the doors of the church to everybody."

He said Francis was a role model for all Christians.



A funeral attendee takes a selfie ahead of the funeral for Pope Francis at the Vatican April 26. Officials said 200,000 people attended the outdoor service. (NCR photo/Olivia Bardo)

No matter their reasons, worshippers were there to pay their respects to Francis and thank him for his leadership in the church.

Carlos Pérez from Argentina, alongside a large Argentine flag draped over the barricade that he and his family members leaned against, said it was "a huge opportunity to be here."

He came to Rome for the Acutis canonization. But with the change of schedule, he said, "We felt like we needed to be here as a form of thanking him, a form to thank God for having selected an Argentine pope to lead the church for a moment in history, and a promise to Francis that we'll continue the work he began in his

papacy."

"His work doesn't end here just because another pope will come. The work of Pope Francis will continue with every Argentine — let's hope — and each and every Argentine ought to live out the hopes and petitions of the pope: for the poor, for the migrants," he said.

Diane Pincon, an 18-year-old from Dallas who is studying in Turin, said she ended up in Rome at the end of a school trip and wanted to come to the funeral "since it's so historic."

Francis was the only pope she's really known and from watching news reports over the past days she said she's seen how "he’s such a progressive pope, the most progressive pope we’ve ever had," and someone who has "brought a new face" to the church.



A group of young people awaits the funeral for Pope Francis at the Vatican April 26. (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

Pincon said when she heard about the pope's death she and her friends studying abroad decided this was "a really important moment that we have to go to. Not just because it’s so historic but also really for the city itself. It’s important to integrate yourself and embrace the city and really participate in what the city is doing."

Crowds gathered early not just outside St. Peter's Basilica, but also assembled the night before the funeral Mass outside the Basilica of St. Mary Major, Francis' burial place, about 3 miles from St. Peter's.

Among those outside this church so beloved by the pope was Evelia Gonzalez, from Los Angeles. She had been on vacation in Texas when she heard the pope died and immediately knew she wanted to be in Rome for his funeral Mass.

"I took a shower, packed. I don't know even what I packed, and I went out," she said. "I decided just like that, at the last hour, to come to the pope's funeral. But it was worth it. He was a brother to all."

Gonzalez said that the time since the pope's death she has been full of emotions thinking about Francis' leadership.

"He brought the world together, not just Catholics, Christians, but everyone with his message of peace, unity, understanding, mercy and forgiveness," she said. "It's a universal message for the world. One we need to think about each day and use to live a better life."

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The Chafla family of Ecuador had been traveling through France when they heard about the pope's death and decided to go to Rome for the funeral. They didn’t have a lot of money, but the family of nine camped on the outskirts of St. Mary Major with a view of a sign that said "Grazie, Francesco," or "Thank you, Francis." Hauling backpacks, they said they were waiting for blankets so they could keep vigil outside all night before the pope’s burial inside.

"We share the pope’s Catholic faith," said Jose Luis Alargon, traveling with the family April 25. "And he was a pope of the people. He didn’t like riches.

"We wanted to give him a last goodbye," added Alexanda Chafla.

Some viewed the funeral from the rooftops of their homes, such as Sr. Anupa Viyagappan a Sister of Maria Bambina, whose order's residence is adjacent to St. Peter's Square.

After the funeral Mass, she said she is sure the pope "will be blessing us from above and will be blessing the church in the whole world."

Viyagappan said she hopes "God will be inspired to choose a proper person to guide the church" who will "stand for the marginalized and poor."

Christopher White, Camillo Barone and Olivia Bardo in Rome contributed to this report. The story was edited by Carol Zimmermann in Washington, James V. Grimaldi in Rome and Renee Gadoua in Syracuse, New York. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

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Brother Thacien Nizeyimana from Rwanda said he came to the funeral to accompany the pope in prayer. (NCR photo/Soli Salgado)

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