News



Sarah Ryan checks new merchandise at the Advent Shop, May 1, 2025, in Massapequa, Long Island, New York. (RNS/Fiona Murphy)

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Near the register at the Advent Shop, a 20-year-old Catholic religious goods store on Long Island, New York, a wooden table has been carefully arranged into a kind of altar. Stacked with book versions of Pope Francis' encyclicals, images of the late pontiff, rosaries featuring his papal cross and small silver rosary rings packed neatly beside his smiling face, customers gaze at and fiddle with the items as they wait to check out.

"Even when he just became ill, people were already coming in wanting a prayer card and wanting to pray for Pope Francis," said Sarah Ryan, the store's owner. "It's like losing a family member."

The display acts as a tribute and also a signal that the Catholic Church, and the culture and businesses that surround it, are in a time of transition. "We've got vendors ready," Ryan said. "As soon as that smoke comes, praise God, they'll know who it is, and they'll get some stuff ready."

Nestled in Massapequa, a suburb about 40 miles east of Manhattan, the Advent Store is as much a spiritual refuge as a small business. Ryan, who affectionately calls customers "baby" and "honey," often guides them to the front right corner of the store, where a large portrait of the Virgin Mary sits above a glass shelf holding first-class relics, according to Ryan, in shiny golden reliquaries.

The image is positioned just to the right of a large crucifix. "You wanna see Mama, baby?" she often says to visitors. The portrait was lent to Ryan by a friend who claims it was once black and white, but now, miraculously, has taken on a blue hue. "Miracles happen here," Ryan said.

The store's regular UPS driver, who comes by nearly every day, is greeted by name and often pauses to talk about his family. He drops off shipments of rosaries, candles, saint medals, communion bracelets, picture frames and other goods from U.S.-based vendors.



A customer peruses the Advent Shop in Massapequa, Long Island, New York, on May 1, 2025. (Fiona Murphy)

If the shop feels more like an extension of the church (St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church is around the corner), it stays in step with customers' spiritual desires as well as shifts brought by changes in the papacy.

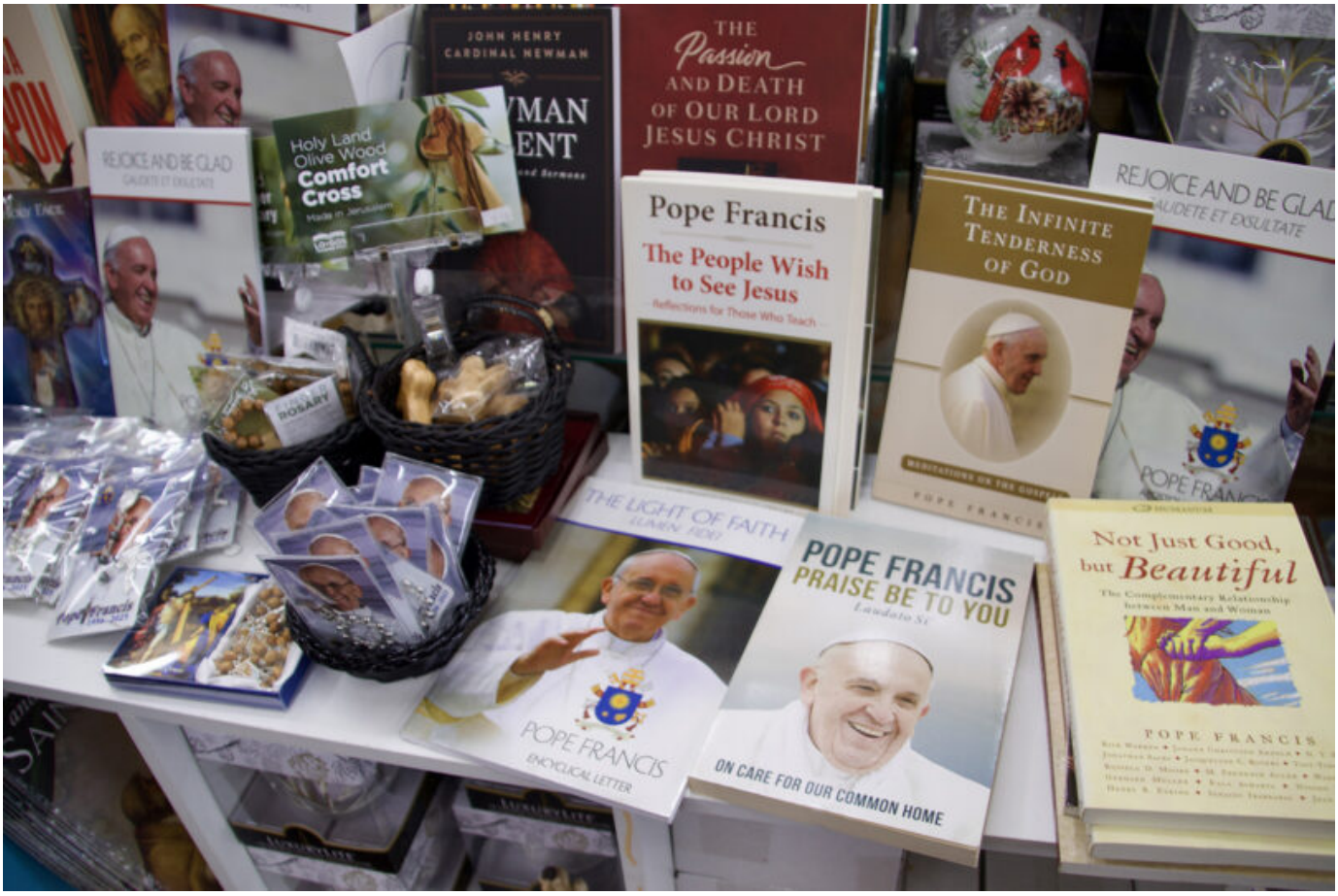
Louis DiCocco, president of St. Jude Shop and Church Art Studios, a third-generation family business in Pennsylvania that supplies Ryan's store and others like it, also provides liturgical furnishings and devotional items to churches. When Francis began falling ill, the company saw a surge in requests for black mourning bunting. "Churches were preparing, just in case," he said.

St. Jude Shop made papal chairs for the last three popes' visits to the U.S. and managed much of the liturgical setup for Francis' visit in 2015. The shop's artisans source marble from the same quarry that Michelangelo, the Renaissance sculptor and painter of the Sistine Chapel's frescoes, used in Ferrara, Italy, and DiCocco works with carvers and metalworkers across Europe.

He said he has seen firsthand how papal transitions subtly but unmistakably reshape the religious goods business. When Pope John Paul II died and Pope Benedict XVI stepped in, DiCocco noticed a shift in customer preferences.

"We noticed that there was a change with what was being asked for by our clients," DiCocco said. "Because I think they followed Pope Benedict, who liked the regal. He had more of a preference towards the higher-end church, the religious, the sacred and more of the details."

That tone extended to everything from vestments to sanctuary designs, inspired by Benedict's love for liturgical richness, even down to his iconic red Prada papal shoes.



A table featuring Pope Francis merchandise at the Advent Shop in Massapequa, Long Island, New York, on May 1, 2025. (Fiona Murphy)

Francis' style brought with it another transformation. "We saw a more serene, simpler, less decorative, less avant-garde, more simplistic approach," DiCocco said. "That is, I think, the ebb and flow of one pope to the next."

Asked how the company prepares for the election of a new pope, he said: "We don't. We wait and see."

No matter who is chosen, DiCocco said, his art studio will be shaped by the style and vision the next pope brings. The constant, he said, is the studio's commitment to using high-quality and fine materials. "It's how we've always liked to work anyway," he said. "So in that sense, we're always ready."

Both DiCocco and Ryan agree that, first and foremost, churches and customers will want pictures of the new pope to hang in their spaces. "Everybody would want to request the pictures of the new pope because a lot of them will put in their churches and in their rectories," DiCocco said. "In the beginning it will be fairly quiet."

But when it comes to ordering more specialized items, such as the new pope's writings, figurines and devotional materials, they'll have to wait and see. "It isn't an immediate thing," Ryan said.

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At the Advent Shop, Ryan has learned preparedness through experience. Just a month after she and her former business partner bought five religious stores in 2005, Pope John Paul II died. That moment, she said, was "a learning curve" in how the religious goods market responds to a shift in leadership.

"There were new things to learn," Ryan said. "New words. I went to Mass like most people, but the average person doesn't know what the book on the altar is called. In the beginning, I didn't know the terminology either."

Now, 20 years later, Ryan is ready. She has prepared the store not just to memorialize Pope Francis, but to welcome his successor. "It's going to happen quickly," she said. "And it's exciting. We'll start getting phone calls from vendors right away."

Ryan got into the religious goods business to protect it. "The whole idea was to keep Catholic stores alive," Ryan said. "We had five stores at one time, and we struggled to keep them alive. I think it was a tumultuous time for the church and for us, to be truthful."



Sarah Ryan organizes items at the Advent Shop in Massapequa, Long Island, New York, on May 1, 2025. (Fiona Murphy)

Now only one store remains. "But it's enough," she said. "Because these places reach people who might not walk into a church."

Her customers are often godparents searching for gifts, people recovering from loss or families preparing for baptisms. "You get such an opportunity to speak to them, to share God with them," she said. "People either come in here for a pain or pleasure."

Longtime customer and retired nurse Eileen Zeacetis waits in line at the register, clutching a new rosary with a Pope Francis prayer card.

"He was the pope for all people," Zeacetis said. "I met people in my building that day (he died) who weren't even Catholic, and they said, ‘We love your pope.' He brought people together, and that's what we're gonna miss most."

The sense of shared loss is met, at the Advent Shop, with quiet perseverance. For Ryan, hope in the future is found in daily interactions, in prayer and in preparing her

shelves. "We'll keep doing what we've always done," she said. "The church will go on. So will we."

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