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Lit candles lie in front of a portrait of Pope Francis at the Basilica of Lujan in Argentina April 2

Lit candles lie in front of a portrait of Pope Francis at the Basilica of Lujan in Argentina April 21, 2026, in honor of the pontiff on the first anniversary of his death. Pope Francis, formerly Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, died April 21, 2025, at age 88. (OSV News/Reuters/Pedro Lazaro Fernandez)

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Archbishop Jorge García Cuerva of Buenos Aires rebuked the country's political class for ignoring Pope Francis' magisterium on unity by bickering among themselves at a Mass celebrated on the anniversary of the late pope's passing.

Argentine media ran stories on politicians avoiding the April 21 Mass, celebrating the first anniversary of Francis' death, not greeting each other at the service and even refusing to share pews with opponents.

"More than ever, Argentina needs that culture of encounter the Pope spoke about so often. Let's see when we're going to stop looking at each other as enemies. We're not even able to sit in the same church pew," Cuerva said in his homily at the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján, shrine of Argentina's patroness.

"Unfortunately, that is happening in our Argentina today. And we, those of us who are in some way part of the ruling class and have an institutional responsibility to our people, must learn that the other is not our enemy."

The discord in Luján made national headlines, with Argentine media focusing on the politicians attending the Mass, who they were greeting and not greeting and where they were sitting.

President Javier Milei – who badmouthed Pope Francis while running for office in 2023, but later began speaking well of the Argentine-born pontiff – was visiting Israel and didn't attend the Mass. The president called Pope Francis "the most important Argentine in history," according to an April 21 X post.

A woman clutches a portrait of Pope Francis during a Mass at the Basilica of Lujan in Argentin

A woman clutches a portrait of Pope Francis during a Mass at the Basilica of Lujan in Argentina April 21, 2026, in honor of the pontiff on the first anniversary of his death. Pope Francis, formerly Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, died April 21, 2025, at age 88. (OSV/Reuters/Pedro Lazaro Fernandez)

Argentina's conservative-Catholic Vice President Victoria Villaruel canceled her attendance, saying the Mass has been "politicized," according to the newspaper La Nación.

"It seemed to me that the ceremony had a purpose other than commemorating Francis; the political caste was present, the worst of the political caste" Villaruel said, using the same language as Milei for denigrating political opponents.

Cuervo spoke of honoring the late pope by "not trying to rebuild the past," saying, "War begins in the heart. Let us construct a vocation of peace."

Pope Francis never visited Argentina after his 2013 election, though he twice flew over the country on trips to Paraguay and Chile. The pope never explained his reasons for not returning to his country of birth, but analysts have posited the pontiff likely wanted to avoid being pulled into Argentine politics – which has split between Peronist and anti-Peronist factions.

Milei, a Libertarian, won office in 2023 amid an economic crisis and triple-digit inflation on an agenda of fiscal austerity and taking a chainsaw to the state. He

branded Francis a communist but later asked for forgiveness.

"The climate of the times has changed so much that Francis' legacy, for now, will not have much of an impact," Sergio Berensztein, an Argentine political analyst, told OSV News.

Priests working in Buenos Aires' shantytowns say the late pope is remembered fondly in poor communities, while ministering in peripheral and marginalized communities is erroneously associated with Peronism.

"The Gospel, while concerned with the rich, was especially concerned with the sickest, the poorest, the most marginalized. So we must take care of them," Father Ignacio Bogattini, a priest serving in the shantytowns, told OSV News.

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