

A Shepherd Returns to the Father's house: Honouring the Life and Legacy of Pope Francis

By Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay, Maronite Bishop of Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania

The passing of Pope Francis to the house of the Heavenly Father on the morning of Easter Monday is no mere coincidence; it is a significant moment. His departure mirrors the very heart of the Christian message of hope, a hope anchored in the Resurrection of Christ, whom he served with faithfulness and humility. In life and in death, Pope Francis proclaimed the victory of Christ over sin and evil, and now he returns to the One he dedicated his life to, bearing witness to the eternal promise of salvation.

Throughout his twelve-year papacy as Successor to Saint Peter, Pope Francis lived out his Petrine ministry with humility, faith and pastoral responsibility, drawing inspiration from his divine Teacher, Jesus Christ. His enduring love for the Church and her people was clearly evident in both word and deed, shaping a pontificate marked by compassion, courage, mercy and conviction. Among the many significant hallmarks of his papacy, the following five key themes stand out:

1. **Social Justice** - Pope Francis demonstrated a commitment to social justice, consistently showing love and concern for the poor, the marginalised, migrants and refugees. He called the Church to be a field hospital, reaching out to those on the peripheries of society. This theme was central to his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel, 2013)*, where he urged the faithful to embrace a Church that is poor and for the poor, reflecting the heart of Christ's own ministry.
2. **Family** - Pope Francis placed great emphasis on the importance of family, following the legacy of his predecessor especially Pope St John-Paul II, as the cornerstone of both the Church and society. He convened a Special Synod on the Family, held in two phases in Rome (2014 and 2015), to reflect on the joys and challenges faced by families today. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love, 2016)*, he affirmed the divine vocation of the family, highlighting its mission of love, unity and faith formation within a changing cultural landscape.
3. **Environmental Protection** - Inspired by his patron Saint Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis became a prominent voice for the care of creation. In 2015, he issued the landmark encyclical *Laudato Si' ("Praise Be to You")*, calling on the global community to embrace an integral ecology that recognises the connection between human life, social justice and the environment. He urged all people of goodwill to respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, emphasising that care for our common home is a moral and spiritual imperative.
4. **Interfaith Dialogue and Openness** - Pope Francis prioritised interfaith dialogue as a vital path to peace, mutual understanding and global solidarity. Recognising the role of religion in shaping a more just and compassionate world, he actively engaged with leaders of other faiths. A historic moment in this effort was his 2019 meeting with Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb in Abu-Dhabi, which led to the signing of the *Document on Human Fraternity*. This landmark declaration affirmed shared values between

Christianity and Islam and called for a new era of respect, coexistence and cooperation among the world's religions.

5. **Synodal Church** - Pope Francis envisioned a renewed model of governance founded in Synodality which he saw as a call for the whole People of God to walk together in faith. In 2022, he formally launched the Synod on Synodality, culminating in a global assembly in October 2024. This process invited both clergy and laity to engage in listening, discernment and dialogue, seeking a Church that is more spiritually alive, relationally connected, administratively accountable and missionary in purpose. At its heart the journey reflects Pope Francis' desire for a Church that is humble, participatory and always attentive to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis travelled widely. His pastoral visit to the region in September 2024, which included Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore, was an effort to bring hope and peace to communities facing poverty and hardship. This journey echoed the spirit of his 2021 visit to Iraq, where he similarly sought to uplift those living amidst suffering and marginalisation.

Following the passing of Pope Francis, the Catholic Church has entered a traditional nine-day period of mourning. During this time, Vatican flags are flown at half-staff and prayers and Masses are offered across the world for the repose of his soul. His funeral will be held on Saturday 26 April 2025 in Saint Peter's Square, attended by leaders and faithful from around the world. Following the liturgy, his mortal remains will be entombed in the Basilica of St Mary Major, in accordance with his personal request. This basilica holds deep significance for his papacy and his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In keeping with tradition, the Papal Conclave will convene within twenty days of his death to elect a new pope.

May the Lord continue to grant the Church holy Popes, true shepherds who lead His people in righteousness and holiness.