



### Passing of Pope Francis and His Legacy as a Human Rights Advocate

Earlier this week on Easter Monday, Pope Francis passed away at the age of 88. The pontiff had given his final public address the day before at St. Peter's Square in the Vatican City, lamenting the many conflicts raging across the globe and calling for peace and efforts to ease suffering. Pope Francis expressed particular concern over the harrowing humanitarian crises in places such as Gaza, Ukraine, and Yemen – imploring all those involved to find solutions through constructive dialogue. For many, the pope's last public remarks were fitting for someone who had dedicated his life to advocating for the marginalized and vulnerable, and espoused the importance of safeguarding human rights. He was also a strong proponent of tolerance and interfaith discourse, having frequently met with heads of other religious groups during his tenure as leader of the Catholic Church. Pope Francis leaves behind a legacy of compassion and a championing of societal issues which sought to inspire a sense of shared humanity.

Over the preceding months, Pope Francis ramped up his criticism of Israel's military actions in Gaza, labeling the humanitarian crisis there "very serious and shameful" back in January. He strongly condemned the bombing of civilians and bemoaned the targeting of hospitals in the Palestinian territory, which had resulted in inexcusable levels of humanitarian suffering, most alarmingly among vulnerable segments of the civilian population such as children. Following the onset of the Gaza War, the pope had even begun and consistently maintained – despite his array of commitments and busy schedule – a nightly routine of calling and checking on the wellbeing of Palestinians at the Holy Family Church in the enclave. The hundreds of civilians – both Christians and Muslims – sheltering in the parish's church and school have [relayed](#) how Pope Francis's humble evening tradition provided them with much-needed comfort and insight into the depth of his empathy. One of the pope's strongest and most notable denunciations of Israel's devastating Gaza War took place late last year when he suggested that the international community investigate whether what was happening there amounts to genocide. The remarks from Pope Francis were featured in a book based on interviews conducted with him, and came to light amid Israel facing an ongoing case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) brought by South Africa which provides evidence that Israel – through its actions of mass destruction, targeting of civilian infrastructure, hindrance of humanitarian aid, and use of starvation as a weapon of war – is committing genocide in Gaza. Separately, around the same time, the International Criminal Court (ICC) also issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former minister Yoav Gallant, citing that they bear responsibility for war crimes.

With his humble approach to the masses, Pope Francis desired a Catholic Church that was more inclusive and merciful – one that focused on marginalized people within society. He formally gave approval for Catholic priests to conduct blessings on same-sex couples and stated that being gay is "not a crime" – something which did anger the more traditional ecclesiastic members of the Catholic Church. Pope Francis also attempted to tackle issues like the sexual scandals and abuses of the past, instituted new rules regarding the transparency of the Church, and led it through a global health pandemic. One of the main messages of his papacy was "servant leadership and caring for those most in need first." He displayed this through his peace advocacy and strong opposition to wars, frequently speaking out about conflicts around the world – remaining steadfast in his attempts to shed light on the horrors of war and humanitarian suffering.

Pope Francis will largely be remembered for his reformist outlook on a variety of humanitarian and environmental causes. During the course of his 12-year papacy which started in 2013, the pope's more progressive-minded opinions on issues like immigration, climate change, divorce, gay rights, and women holding positions of power within the Catholic Church garnered him both admirers and critics. He was also a trailblazer for being the first Jesuit pope and the first pope from the Americas. Pope Francis, born Jorge Mario Bergoglio, derived his papal name from that of St. Francis of Assisi – a 12th century figure who famously turned his back on family wealth in favor of a monastic life of service to the poor and the environment. The pope's stances towards some Church issues earned him the title of an "outsider," with his reign often being described as one bridging modernity and tradition, as he did hold what most consider more liberal opinions in certain areas while at the same time remaining firm regarding conventional Christian teachings on others. Now, in the aftermath of the passing of Pope Francis, the future of the Catholic Church is at a crossroads, with many left waiting to see the path that it takes under his successor.