News



Pope Francis meets with officers of the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious at the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican March 21, 2024. From the left are: Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary, LCWR president; Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, past president; Sr. Sue Ernster, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and LCWR president-elect; and Sr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph of Philadelphia and LCWR executive director. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Catholic sisters, organizations and ministries across the United States reacted to the news that Pope Francis had died on April 21, mourning his loss and hailing his legacy.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 sisters in the U.S., said Francis' death was a loss to the church and the world, but also to them personally.

"His character, warmth, and deep humility, as well as the numerous contributions he has made throughout his papacy have made an enormous impact on the world, the Catholic Church, and on our lives personally," they wrote in a statement. "He consistently sought the counsel of advisors from around the world and had the skills to build coalitions to take on the work to reform what needed urgent change."

Francis was pope when both the doctrinal assessment of LCWR and other groups, and the apostolic visitation of all U.S. sisters, ended. LCWR had been accused of, among other things, failing to follow bishops' orders to focus on anti-abortion and anti-gay rights efforts. The visitation examined the state of religious life in the United States. Rather than finding fault, the final reports of both investigations — which were released during Francis' papacy — praised sisters' work and dedication.

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"Pope Francis led from a place of both simplicity and savvy," the statement said. "An astute moral leader, he knew how to use his influence to bring about change and was fearless in speaking out publicly even when he knew there would be resistance to his message."

Springfield Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma wrote to Global Sisters Report what meeting Francis meant to her personally. The first time, in 2023, she met him just long enough for a handshake and photo. She was LCWR president that year.

"Such a brief encounter, yet I experienced a palpable joy as he asked our personal names and those of our congregations," Gemma wrote. "Huddled together for a snapshot, I deeply felt the presence of Christ not only in this man, but in the community of faith surrounding us."

She and other LCWR leaders met Francis again in 2024, this time for a private audience.

"He often spoke of Christ's love and the need for it to be embodied with earnestness and joy. I recall his saying that followers of Christ need to smile more and not be afraid to laugh with gusto," Gemma wrote. "With a more somber tone, Francis asked that we pray for him, and the church to become more like Jesus. His tone was gentle and his request sincere. Looking into our eyes, Francis concluded the meeting with words of blessing and encouragement."

> 'We were so aware of Pope Francis as a vocal advocate for social justice, addressing economic inequality and environmental degradation.'
> —Sr. Barbara Spears

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Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, said the world is both grieving Francis' death and celebrating his life.

"Pope Francis witnessed Christ's love and mercy to all people, particularly those at the margins of society," Haddad said in a statement. "He reflected this in his memorable description of the 'Church as a field hospital' and his call to heal the wounds of our world through love and charity. During his papacy, he advanced the Church's work in health care through his unwavering advocacy for ethical care for all, particularly during the COVID pandemic and in areas of the world stricken by disease and natural disasters."



Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association (OSV News/CHA/Chris Ryan)

She said the task ahead is to continue his work.

"Let us remember that the greatest tribute we can make is to keep working toward the realization of his vision for the Church," Haddad wrote.

Sr. Barbara Spears, president of the National Black Sisters Conference, said the news left the organization "with heavy hearts."

"We were so aware of Pope Francis as a vocal advocate for social justice, addressing economic inequality and environmental degradation," Spears, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, said in a statement. *Laudato Si*' and *Laudate Deum* "called for urgent action on climate change and criticized the exploitation of the planet, highlighting the disproportionate impact on the poor and future generations."

She, also, said his legacy must continue.

"Pope Francis's legacy is one of humility, compassion, and a relentless pursuit of justice," she wrote. "His leadership has left an indelible mark on the Church and World, inspiring us to continue his mission of inclusivity and mercy."

Network Catholic social justice lobby also emphasized Francis' refusal to ignore those at the margins.

"Whether from poverty, racism, LGBTQ+ discrimination, forced migration, or the destruction of our common home, he worked tirelessly for a 'culture of care' for all, without exception," said Network Interim Executive Director Joan Neal in a statement. "Moreover, his advocacy … encouraged us in our political ministry to build up the common good through just and equitable federal policy."



Sr. Carol Keehan, the former president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, stands in front of a large photo of Pope Francis April 21 in the crypt chapel at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. Keehan, a Daughter of Charity, took part in the offertory during the Mass of

remembrance for Pope Francis, who died earlier that day. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

The Alliance to End Human Trafficking also praised Francis' work for those who rarely have an advocate.

"Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis stood with the most vulnerable, including migrants, the poor, the forgotten, and survivors of exploitation. He called the world to conscience, urging all people of faith and goodwill to confront indifference and respond with mercy," said Katie Boller Gosewisch, the alliance's executive director, in a statement. "His unwavering commitment to end human trafficking inspired and guided our mission. He reminded us that every life has inherent dignity and that true peace begins where justice and love prevail."

The Mercy Sisters of America noted Francis' dedication to *encuentro*, or encounter.

"In the spirit of *Encuentro*, Pope Francis encouraged us to break down walls and build bridges," they said in a statement. "A cornerstone of his papacy was the care for our common home, one of the many values he shared with the Sisters of Mercy."

The Adrian Dominican sisters called Francis' work powerful.

"In his 12-year papacy, Pope Francis made consequential changes to our Church and world for which we will always be grateful," they said in a statement. "In powerful word, gesture and deed, he reached out with great compassion to the desperate, destitute and marginalized, cried out for an end to the horror of war and for joyfully embracing migrants in welcome."

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Louis Province, also hailed Francis' embrace of the poor.

"Pope Francis challenged us to welcome immigrants as our neighbors, reminding us that we are 'one single human family' with no justifiable barriers between us. He spoke boldly against economic systems that exclude and devalue human life, calling for an economy of inclusion where all might thrive," they wrote. "In his unwavering commitment to centering the marginalized, he echoed our charism of unity and reconciliation, urging us to never abandon the poor but to see in their faces the face of Christ."

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Sr. LaDonna Manternach, president of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, said Francis' example put the church's true mission front and center.

"He was a true brother of the poor instructing those who proclaim the Gospel to take on the smell of the sheep, to be in solidarity with the poor. His encyclical Laudato Si' pointedly addressed the connection between climate change, our extractive economy, and the plight of the poor," she wrote. "His effort to open dialogue between the pastors of the Church and the people through synodality, encourage the involvement of lay leadership, and advocate for a Church actively engaged with the world puts charity at the heart of our mission."

The Ursuline Sisters of Louisville said Francis sparked dramatic change in the church.

"Pope Francis opened the Catholic Church in a way that had not been seen since the Second Vatican Council," they wrote. "He wanted 'a poor church for the poor,' one that would serve, accompany, and defend the most vulnerable among us."



Not every sister had only praise, however.

Erie Benedictine and best-selling author Sr. Joan Chittister hailed much of Francis' papacy, but also pointed out what she saw as shortcomings.

"His commitment to poverty and mercy are a large part of his legacy, but he falls short on actions for and about women," she wrote. "The roles of women in the church remain minimal and largely unchanged from those of his predecessors."

Sr. Nancy Sylvester, of the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, Michigan, and a former LCWR president, wrote in a reflection that the news made her weep.

"Hearing that Pope Francis died, tears welled up in me, grateful for the witness he has been to truly living the Gospel," she wrote. "He was able to see in new ways and offer a way of being a world leader that is so needed today. He was a holy man."

Sr. Carol Keehan, former president and former CEO of the Catholic Health Association, took part in the offertory during the Mass for remembrance for the pope April 21 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C..

"To think he would go to face God, having used this last breath to speak for kindness, for charity, for living the dignity of our own lives and the dignity of other people's lives and caring for the most vulnerable. That's a wonderful way to face our Lord with your last breath," said Keehan, a Daughter of Charity. She said she will remember Francis' smile and "his very direct speech about our responsibility to hold people in the light that Jesus holds them, with dignity and with love, and especially the most vulnerable."

Rhina Guidos, Latin America regional correspondent for GSR, contributed to this report.

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.