News



Sisters from various congregations gather to pray for Pope Francis at the national Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang on Apr. 24 in Quang Tri province. (GSR photo)

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As Pope Francis' historic papacy entered its final chapter, Catholic sisters in Vietnam are reflecting on the profound impact he has had not only on their country's church but also on their spiritual lives and ministry.

From strengthening diplomatic ties with the Vietnamese government to championing the poor, the environment and marginalized communities, the pope's influence deeply resonates with religious women across the country.

Francis died on April 21 at the age of 88. His funeral was held on April 26 in Rome.

"In a spirit of openness and harmony, Pope Francis has moved relations between the Holy See and the Vietnamese government closer to full diplomatic ties," Dominican Sr. Anna Pauline Ngo Thi Ngo told Global Sisters Report.

Ngo highlighted the pope's commitment to Vietnam, noting that during his 12-year papacy, he met with several Vietnamese leaders at the Vatican — including two state presidents, the chairman of the National Assembly, and a deputy prime minister — to promote stronger ties.

In a landmark step in 2023, Francis appointed Archbishop Marek Zalewski as the first resident papal representative to Vietnam. The following year, in April 2024, the Vatican secretary for relations with states, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, visited the country, meeting with government officials and participating in liturgical events in Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City.

The appointment marked a significant breakthrough in a relationship long fraught with tension. Vietnam severed diplomatic ties with the Vatican in 1975 following reunification under Communist rule.

"The late pope laid the groundwork for a fully normalized relationship between the Vatican and Vietnam," Ngo said. "He also reached out pastorally, writing to Vietnamese Catholics to emphasize the importance of serving the poor, journeying with the nation, and being 'good Christians and good citizens.' "

Beyond diplomacy, his pastoral example left a deep impression on religious in the Southeast Asian country, especially those whose ministries focus on the marginalized.

Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hue Sr. Anna Huynh Thi Ngoi spoke of her admiration for a pope who lived in solidarity with the poor and homeless. "He is a model for us religious — to serve others regardless of their background," she told GSR.

Ngoi, the congregation's former superior, recalled the pope's affection for Vietnam and his expressed desire to visit. "He once said, 'If I cannot visit Vietnam, Pope John XXIV will.' That shows how much he cares for our people," she said.

"Vietnam is gradually leaving its painful past behind to embrace peace and development. A papal visit would not only bring joy to the church here but would also deepen diplomatic ties," she told GSR.

Despite the passage of time, the consequences of war remain. "Fifty years after the Vietnam War (1955-1975), many still live in poverty, disabled by ordnance. Their spirits, too, need healing," Ngoi said. "A pope's visit would be a sign of hope."

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But even without setting foot in the country, Francis has left a profound spiritual legacy.

"He is a shepherd who always speaks out for the poor, for the environment, for peace, for those on the margins," she said. "He lives the Gospel in every breath, every step to the periphery, every moment of silent prayer."

That legacy of inclusion and simplicity has inspired other religious leaders as well. Sr. Maria Ly Thi Bich Quyen, vice president of the Conference of Major Superiors in Vietnam, said Francis represents a "church of the poor and of divine mercy, welcoming all with a universal love."

"He called on religious to live simply, not for show, and to bear witness to mercy," she told GSR. "In many places today, rituals have become too focused on appearances. He reminded us of the deeper meaning: to transmit divine mercy."

She praised the pontiff for recognizing the roles of all people, including religious, in the church's life. "He lived synodality and called everyone to journey together toward a holier church and a more human society."

The provincial superior of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions in Vietnam, who spent years working in Rome, said the Argentinian pope's humanity was evident in small gestures — he would wave first before others greeted him. He chose to live simply at the Casa Santa Marta rather than the Apostolic Palace.

"I learn from him how to work quietly for others' benefits, helping them to recognize the goodness of God and letting God grow through my service," Bich Quyen told GSR.

She said Francis' witness has shaped how Vietnamese congregations respond to urgent global issues like environmental degradation. Religious communities embrace his call to care for creation: ditching plastic bags, making compost, sorting household waste, teaching youth to plant trees and organizing community cleanups. Many now observe an hour of power shut-off and offer prayers for the Earth on the 22nd of every month in honor of Earth Day.

Bich Quyen said that his oft-quoted — "Where there are religious, there is joy" — has become a guiding principle for many communities.

"It's a reminder for us to foster joyful, holy and harmonious communities and to let go of disagreements and division," she said.

"These are invaluable lessons that religious must learn and practice in their consecrated lives. It's the most meaningful way to remember him," Bich Quyen said.

Ngo, who retired from her role as an internal medicine specialist at a state-run hospital, currently works at a church-run charitable clinic in Xuân Lộc Diocese. She said Francis' call to live the Gospel through concrete acts of love and charity inspired her to continue serving.

"His invitation moved me and many others to care for the poor's health," she said. "His words are not only teachings but a living spiritual legacy calling us to respond with prayer and action, with love for the church and the world."

"These days, we are called to pause to pray, to give thanks and to continue the journey," she said.



The Sisters of the Holy Cross lay wreaths at the portrait of Pope Francis on behalf of the community on April 27 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. (Stephan Uttom Rozario)

The appointment of sisters in positions in the Vatican by Pope Francis and empowering sisters in the local church have given Bangladeshi sisters hope.

"I thank Pope Francis for giving importance to women religious or sisters in the church, even after 2025 years, and for placing them in some policy-making positions" said Sr. Jacqueline L. Gomes, principal of S.F.X. Greenherald International School and College.

Gomes, a member of Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, said since it took a long time for the Vatican to give importance to the sisters, it will definitely take more time for this trend to be introduced in Bangladesh.

In August 2021, Francis appointed Italian economist Sr. Alessandra Smerilli to a second-ranking position in the Vatican's social development office and Sr. Nathalie Becquart became the highest-ranking woman to ever work in the Synod of Bishops

after Francis appointed her in February 2021.

In January, Francis appointed Sr. Simona Brambilla, the first-ever woman to head a Vatican dicastery — the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. In February, Francis appointed Franciscan Sr. Raffaella Petrini as president of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State and governor of Vatican City State, making her the first woman to ever hold the position.

Although sisters of Bangladesh have successfully fulfilled responsibilities in renowned schools and colleges, the Bangladesh church has not yet given them any major responsibilities in their congregations.

The reason for this, said a sister who asked not to be named, is that the church's policymakers think that sisters may not know theology well or are not capable of making church decisions. She also said that Bangladesh's patriarchal society does not want to see women in policy-making positions.

"I am hopeful that in the coming days, the Bangladesh church will definitely follow the path of Pope Francis and implement the synodal church through the participation of sisters and women at the highest levels of the church," she said.

This story has been updated with a dispatch from Bangladesh.