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# Did Francis live up to promise as 'pope of the poor'?

[Astrid Prange de Oliveira](#)

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Pope Francis slammed capitalism and ecological destruction, washed the feet of incarcerated youth and preached tolerance. But Latin America's first pontiff didn't fulfill all expectations in the Global South.



Francis changed the Catholic Church as pope, but also disappointed many

Image: VINCENZO PINTO/AFP/Getty Images

The pontificate of [Pope Francis](#), which began with much promise in March 2013, has now [come to an end](#). In one of his first acts, he had washed the feet of incarcerated youth at a detention center ahead of Easter.

Millions attended the [World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro that July](#), cheering when the new pope spoke of "an option for the poor" and slammed capitalism.

"[This pope will change the church](#)," the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff told DW at the time.

And Francis, formerly Jorge Mario Bergoglio, did indeed change the church.

"The pope already did a lot for the poor in his diocese during his time as archbishop of Buenos Aires," Miguel Hirsch, an Argentine journalist who has written a book about Francis, told DW. "He set a great deal in motion, including with his 40 or so trips, most of which were to developing countries. And he repeatedly denounced the capitalist system."

But as head of the [Catholic Church](#) for [more than a decade](#), many of the hopes that greeted the first Latin American pope went unfulfilled in the [Global South](#).

## Climate change was a core message for Francis

According to the German Catholic relief organization Misereor, one the pope's major achievements was the attention he helped to focus on the environment.

Misereor considers poverty and ecological destruction as issues that must be confronted together. This was the core message of the pope's second encyclical letter, "Laudato Si" (Praised Be), published in 2015.





The pope was popular with the poor

Image: TIZIANA FABI/AFP/Getty Images

"With 'Laudato Si,' the pope spoke to the conscience of the powerful," said Pirmin Spiegel, the former director general of Misereor, in 2024. "I was told by the archbishop of Suva in Fiji, Peter Loy Chong, that [climate change](#) and [migration](#) are the most important issues for the local population."

In an article for the left-wing German daily *Tageszeitung* in 2023, Boff wrote that the encyclical was "the first time that a pope has treated the subject of ecology in a holistic manner." He added that many of the statements in the encyclical had ties to the Latin American concept of liberation theology — a theological approach to aiding socio-economically disadvantaged people with socio-political affairs.

"This pope managed to disappoint everyone," Bento Domingues, a Dominican friar, wrote in an op-ed for the Portuguese newspaper *Publico* in 2023. "The laity pushing for reforms, as well as the traditionalists who want a return to the past."

## Increased influence from Latin America

Francis reshaped the geography of the conclave, the body of cardinals who elect the pope. In 2013, a majority of cardinals were European. But during his time as pope, Francis appointed more cardinals from other parts of the world, including Latin America, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region.

"I think this pope will create a dynasty of popes from the Third World," Boff told DW in 2013. And, under Francis, the Vatican has indeed seen an increased influence from Latin America.

Given the global distribution of Catholics, Europe still remains overrepresented. According to 2023 data from the Pew Research Center, 24% of the world's Catholics live in Europe, 39% in Latin America, 12% in the Asia-Pacific region, 16% in sub-Saharan Africa, 8% in North America and 1% in the Middle East.







Pope Francis called for dialogue with other religions, and met with Muslims and Jews

Image: Reuters/M. Abd El-Ghany

Even if there has been a shift in the regional weighting, the pope did not make any drastic changes to the structures of the Catholic Church. This was particularly noticeable at the [Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, or Amazon synod](#), in Rome in 2019. Francis' post-synodic apostolic exhortation, "Querida Amazonia" (Beloved Amazonia), dashed all hopes for reforms in a region where there is an extreme shortage of priests.

Not only was the ordination of married men of proven virtue (*viri probati*) as priests rejected, but so was the ordination of women as deacons, which would allow them to preach and celebrate weddings and baptisms.

Spiegel, who took part in the Amazon synod, did not understand the decision. "Two-thirds of the bishops at the synod were in favor of the 'viri probati' and of women deacons," he said. "The ball was in front of the goal, and [Francis] didn't score, he kicked it out. Why? I have no idea."

## Poor record on sexual abuse in the church

There was also [great disappointment regarding the pope's record on sexual abuse](#) in the Catholic Church.

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), founded in the United States in 1989, questioned why the Pope did not followed up on his tough words on abuse with action.

"He could levy the harshest penalty, excommunication, against a dozen or more of the most egregious abuse-enabling church officials. He's done this to no enablers, or predators for that matter," David Clohessy, the former spokesperson for SNAP, wrote [in the National Catholic Reporter in March 2023](#) [↗](#) .

"He could demote at least a dozen or more Vatican bureaucrats and four or five dozen bishops who are or have concealed known or suspected child sex crimes and openly denounce them and lay out their complicity," he added.

"But he perpetuates a long-standing pontifical pattern of quietly letting an embattled bishop 'retire' or 'resign,' either deceptively citing 'health reasons, or saying nothing at all," he added.

In Chile, bishops were faster to react than their pope. In the wake of [sexual abuse revelations in 2018](#), all of Chile's bishops offered their resignation to the pontiff — a hitherto unprecedented event in the Catholic Church.

## Devotion to world's poor