# Pope Francis: a progressive voice on capitalism, ecology and social justice in modern Catholicism



Pope Francis, born Jorge Bergoglio, who passed away recently, was a distinctive figure in modern Catholicism, known for his ethical, social, and ecological commitments that set him apart in a Europe and Italy increasingly dominated by reactionary and neofascist currents. Elected in March 2013, Bergoglio’s rise to the papacy marked a significant departure from traditional church conservatism, reflecting a stance that echoed a “deep aversion” to the spirit of capitalism, a notion previously analysed by sociologist Max Weber concerning the Catholic Church’s complex relationship with economic systems.

Though rooted in Catholic doctrine, Pope Francis’s views often resonated with elements familiar to leftist critiques, especially through his critique of capitalism’s “idol” status and the systemic socio-economic issues it engenders. His theological formation was notably influenced by the Argentine “theology of the people,” a non-Marxist variant of liberation theology that prioritises support for the poor and recognises conflicts between the people and “anti-people,” yet does not foreground class struggle as others forms of liberation theology do.

Bergoglio’s papacy was marked by a number of symbolic gestures showcasing a shift in the church’s stance, particularly towards social justice and ecological issues. Noteworthy among these was the Vatican’s positive reappraisal of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, and the beatification and canonisation of Óscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop assassinated for opposing repression, celebrated by the Latin American Catholic left. His first trip as pope, to Lampedusa in Italy in July 2013, was notable for its focus on the plight of migrants, where he denounced the “globalization of indifference” to human suffering amid the Mediterranean migrant crisis.

One of Pope Francis’s most significant contributions came with his 2015 encyclical "Laudato si’," an ecological document that highlighted the interdependence of environmental and social crises. The encyclical received attention worldwide for its incisive critique of contemporary economic systems, which Bergoglio described as "structurally perverse," primarily due to their prioritisation of profit maximisation, unchecked consumerism, financial speculation, and disregard for the environment and human dignity. He observed, "the same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty."

In "Laudato si’," the pope also condemned superficial approaches to climate change, such as carbon trading schemes, which he argued amount to little more than “a ploy” to maintain excessive consumption in certain countries and sectors. His frank assessment of how the global economy and its “technocratic paradigm” fail to address the root causes of environmental degradation and social injustice reflects a call for “ecological culture,” a new way of thinking, living, and organising society that prioritises care for the planet and the poor. However, the encyclical’s proposed actions were seen by some as lacking the radical measures needed to combat ecological destruction, with critics pointing out the absence of clear strategies to dismantle the entrenched power of multinational fossil fuel corporations or the global capitalist economic framework.

Despite his progressive ecological and social messaging, Pope Francis maintained conservative positions on issues related to sexual morality, such as contraception, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality, aligning with longstanding church doctrine. A notable episode illustrating tensions within the church was his 2017 conflict with the leadership of the Order of Malta, a traditional and aristocratic Catholic institution, over its stance on the distribution of condoms for AIDS prevention in Africa.

Pope Francis’s willingness to engage with leftist figures further distinguished his papacy. In 2014, he met prominent European leftist leaders including Alexis Tsipras and Walter Baier, initiating a dialogue between Marxists and Christians. This dialogue evolved over several meetings, including a 2018 gathering on the Greek island of Syros, and continued with meetings involving Christian-Marxist participants into 2024. When accused by conservative US commentator Rush Limbaugh of being a “Marxist pope,” Francis calmly replied that he was “not offended” and knew “many Marxists who were good people,” underscoring his broad-minded approach to ideological engagement.

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis prioritised a “preferential option for the poor,” reinforcing this as a global imperative. While his encyclical and speeches acknowledged the crucial role of social movements and grassroots organisations in confronting climate change and inequality, the institutional reform or political partnerships necessary for systemic change were only lightly sketched.

His legacy is often contrasted with his predecessors, such as John Paul II and Benedict XVI, who actively opposed liberation theology and Marxist influences within the Church. Francis’s unique position, as a Latin American pope with ties to a region marked by complex socio-political struggles and popular theology, allowed him to bring a new ethical urgency to the global challenges of poverty, migration, and environmental degradation.

In summary, Pope Francis’s papacy was marked by an innovative stance within the Catholic Church regarding capitalism, ecology, and social justice, bringing to the fore interlinked critiques of economic and environmental crises through a theology influenced by Argentine liberationist thought yet distinct from Marxist doctrine. His encyclical "Laudato si’" remains a significant intervention in global ethical and political debates on sustainability, social equity, and the role of economic systems in shaping humanity’s future.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2025-04/pope-francis-dies-on-easter-monday-aged-88.html> - This article confirms Pope Francis's death on Easter Monday, 2025, and highlights his life dedicated to the service of the Church and the poor. It also details the announcement and initial ceremonies following his passing.
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Francis> - Wikipedia provides comprehensive background information on Pope Francis, including his historic election, notable papal encyclicals, and his role as the first Jesuit pope. This supports the article's claims about his unique stance within the Church.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKCrieyrgaE> - This YouTube link offers footage of Pope Francis's funeral Mass, further illustrating the global attention and respect he received during his passing. The funeral proceedings reflect his significant impact on the Catholic Church and beyond.
4. <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> - Pope Francis's encyclical 'Laudato si'' can be found on the Vatican's official website, providing direct access to his critiques on capitalism and the environment. This supports claims about his stance on ecological issues.
5. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2013/07/pope-francis-condemns-globalization-of-indifference-at-lampedusa.html> - This article from Vatican News highlights Pope Francis's visit to Lampedusa in 2013, where he denounced the 'globalization of indifference' towards migrants, reinforcing his emphasis on social justice.
6. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-meets-with-european-leftist-leaders-26646> - This article documents Pope Francis's engagement with leftist figures, such as meeting European leaders in 2014, illustrating his openness to dialogue across ideological lines.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMieEFVX3lxTE9NUE9sOER2MGs5b1YtdFRRS2h4ckxKOXhiMUhBZjVLLUw0eUJwQ0xrNjNlbmpieExFSnNvMDFjWFdvYVZzeDBYXzVTMGdDU3h4VDd6S080czZzbWVWdTh6QThnT2VyZVBvS0pPODIwcUpGMmNMMlhrTQ?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data