# Pope of the excluded

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I’m here to be with you. A little bit late, but I’m here.”

Pope Francis’ words were like a balm bringing relief and reassurance to the traumatized survivors of Supertyphoon “Yolanda” (international name: Haiyan), one of the deadliest storm on record, that laid to waste Tacloban, Leyte on Nov. 8, 2013, and left over 6,000 people dead.

“When I saw from Rome that catastrophe, I felt that I had to be here,” Francis told the cheering crowd during his Jan. 17, 2015 visit to Leyte that coincided with Tropical Storm “Amang” (Mekkhala). With his gray hair dancing in the strong winds and his cassock barely visible under a dripping yellow plastic raincoat, the Pontiff told the faithful: “So many of you in Tacloban have lost everything. I don’t know what to say—but the Lord does … He underwent so many of the trials that you do.”

Though the Pope had to cut short his visit because of the raging storm, a Yolanda survivor who lost 11 members of her family felt comforted enough by his presence: “It is like having a friend visit you while you are grieving,” she said, holding back tears.

Francis’ visit may have set the stage for the release in May 2015, of his encyclical, “Laudato Si,” where he warned of climate change and the West’s wasteful consumption of earth’s resources that has imperiled the planet.

The 88-year-old Pontiff died on Monday, leaving a world stunned by his sudden passing just a day after greeting well-wishers on Easter at the Vatican grounds on his popemobile. He had previously spent 38 days in hospital for double pneumonia.

## Empathy and compassion

Meeting Tacloban’s bereft families underscored the empathy and compassion embodied by St. Francis of Assisi, whose name the Pope took upon being chosen leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics in 2013.

In his 12 years of papacy, the Argentinian formerly known as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, had become known as the People’s Pope for embracing the downtrodden, the marginalized, and the excluded in controversial statements and policies that often disrupted the accepted teachings of the Church.

Asked about gay priests in a spontaneous exchange with the press, Francis responded: “If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them?”

In what the LGBT community hailed as a milestone moment, the Pope also criticized laws that criminalize homosexuality as “unjust,” and said that gay people must be welcomed and respected. “We are all children of God, and God loves us as we are,” Francis said.

He followed this up with support for same-sex couples, saying that priests should be permitted to bless them, as long as the blessing is not part of regular Church rituals or related to civil unions or weddings.

## Strongest rebuke

As if to illustrate this, Francis enriched some Church traditions, and included a Muslim woman in the “washing of the feet” Lenten ritual. He also joined 90 prison inmates for lunch during his 2019 visit to Naples, including 10 from the ward which houses those who are gay, transgender, or have HIV/AIDS.

Aside from opening more Vatican posts to women, the Pope chastised the clergy for stigmatizing unmarried mothers: “[T]here are priests who don’t baptize the children of single mothers because they weren’t conceived in the sanctity of marriage. These are today’s hypocrites … Those who separate the people of God from salvation.”

But the son of a migrant father reserved his strongest rebuke for people who exhibit the “fanaticism of indifference” that greets migrants seeking a better life. “People who are at risk of drowning when abandoned on the waves must be rescued,” he said in his 2023 visit to Marseille, France, as boatloads of African refugees arrived on the island of Lampedusa in Italy, triggering heated debates across Europe on who should take responsibility for them.

## Conservative Vatican officials

Early on, in 2013, Francis urged local bishops to examine modern family issues and crises in a more merciful light, suggesting that divorced and remarried Catholics should be allowed to celebrate the Eucharist.

Risking direct conflict with conservative Vatican officials, he said: “We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a church that is wrapped up in its own world … If I had to choose between a wounded church that goes out on to the streets, and a sick, withdrawn church, I would definitely choose the first one.”

In his apostolic exhortation to young people in 2019, the Pope urged them “not to become the sorry sight of an abandoned vehicle.” Instead, he said, “Make a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you … Live! Give yourselves over to the best of life! Open the door of the cage, go out and fly!”

The words may well sum up Francis’ audacious life, this shepherd who joyfully gathered his flock in the tight, inclusive embrace that defines his legacy.