

Holy Mass on the Occasion of the Death of Pope Francis

St George's Cathedral, Southwark

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

Although our Holy Father, Pope Francis, had been so seriously ill during his stay in the Gemelli Hospital in Rome, our Church and the world was, nonetheless, shocked to learn of his death yesterday morning. Only the day before, Easter Sunday, he was present in St Peter's Square when he blessed us and wished us a 'Happy Easter.' Little did we know that these would be his last public words, and that his journey through the crowd in the Popemobile would be his farewell parade.

Our Holy Father's beautiful words of Easter greeting, read out on his behalf, were a summation of his life, faith, discipleship, and pontificate: "Christ is risen," he said "alleluia! Jesus, who was crucified, "is not here, he has risen." (*Lk 24:5*) Jesus is not in the tomb, he is alive! Love has triumphed over hatred, light over darkness and truth over falsehood. Forgiveness has triumphed over revenge." Pope Francis continued, "Evil has not disappeared from history; it will remain until the end, but it no longer has the upper hand; it no longer has power over those who accept the grace of this day." (Easter Sunday, 2025)

From the Pope's first moments on the balcony of St Peter's, when he appeared to the world on 13 March 2013 with the name Francis, his simplicity would honour his chosen patron saint of Assisi, *Il Poverello*, the 'little poor one.'

During his twelve years as the Successor of St Peter, Pope Francis called every Catholic to rediscover their vocation as a missionary disciple, reminding everyone that the "name of God is mercy." Even if we tire of asking forgiveness, he would say, God never tires of forgiving. Our Holy Father never tired of reminding us that the Lord Jesus triumphed over darkness and that he really is the light of the world.

Pope Francis quickly established his priority to proclaim the Gospel to our world with an explicit concern for people living on the margins, for people trapped in

poverty and injustice, for trafficked and migrant peoples, and for peoples and nations suffering violence and war. Pope Francis can rightly be called a Pope for the poor, a Pope of peace and mercy, a Pope who asked the Church and the world to hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. We all share a common home, which we must all care for responsibly. We all belong to one human family, and every member, every human life – without exception – deserves honour, dignity and respect, from conception to natural death.

How could we forget the powerful image when, during the Covid Pandemic, Pope Francis walked alone through St Peter's Square; and, on behalf of the world, kissed the feet of the Crucified Saviour saying, "...you Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm." "Do not be afraid," (Mt 28.5) he told us. Instead, "with Peter," he urged us to "cast all our anxieties onto the Lord, [who cares] about us.' (cf. 1 Pet 5,7)" (27 March 2025)

I've had the privilege of meeting Pope Francis a number of times. Two particular personal encounters expressed for me something of the Holy Father's humility and humanity.

After I was named Archbishop of Southwark in 2019, I went to Rome to receive the pallium from Pope Francis. A pallium is a special scarf woven from lamb's wool, worn by the Pope and by Metropolitan Archbishops. It's a sign of a special bond with the Holy Father.

I was 51-years-old and the youngest new Archbishop of the thirty-one gathered in St Peter's. When I went forward to receive the Pallium from Pope Francis, I said, in Italian, "Holy Father, I'm a baby from England." He burst out laughing. "How old are you?" he asked. I said, "51." "Oh," he replied, "that's nothing, I'm almost finished!" And he laughed again with a roar. It was such an affirming moment of fatherly encouragement.

The Ad Limina visit of the Bishops of England and Wales to Rome in 2018 closed with us all meeting together with Pope Francis. He welcomed us warmly and for over two hours we asked him questions and he answered.

I was going to ask him about his experience of catechesis in South America, but was told my question was the last one. I changed my mind and said, "Holy Father, my mum said to me, 'if you speak to Pope Francis, please tell him that I pray for him every day.'" The Pope interjected, "please tell your mum to keep on praying for me." I then said, "I know, Holy Father, that you have a great devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary as she who unties knots. Can you tell us what this devotion means for you, and for us as bishops?" He spoke so beautifully. "I have a very simple faith," he said; "when I meet problems in my life, or in the Church, I come before Our Lady and I offer them to her and I say, 'Please, Blessed Mother, please untie these knots. Some people may think I'm naive,'" he said, "but, I just offer them to her." It was such a heartfelt response, full of faith and trust in the power of prayer.

As we were leaving, we greeted the Holy Father and I went to shake his hand. "Just a moment," he said. He spoke to someone, who fetched something which the Pope gave to me. "This is for your mum," he said. It was a beautiful rosary. He'd remembered. It was a little detail, but he'd remembered. He noticed the individual, the details of people's lives. And he showed them the Lord's kindness through simple and humble actions and words.

There is something very poignant about Pope Francis' death falling at Easter. As he said in his Easter Sunday message: "The resurrection of Jesus is indeed the basis of our hope. For in the light of this event, hope is no longer an illusion. Thanks to Christ — crucified and risen from the dead — hope does not disappoint! (cf. *Rom* 5:5). That hope is not an evasion, but a challenge; it does not delude, but empowers us." (Easter Sunday, 2025)

As we hear the unfolding account of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels this week, today Mary Magdalene only realises she has met the risen Lord when he calls her by name. But this call gave her hope, and this hope empowered her to speak with faith as a witness to Christ. This same call from the Lord, and this same hope in the Lord, must empower us to bring the joy and love of Christ to the world. Like Pope Francis, let us never tire of announcing that the Lord Jesus is the light of the world, and that whoever follows him, will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Thank you, beloved Pope Francis. We are praying for you with deep gratitude. As the risen Lord calls your name, please remember us. Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.