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## **A Personal Reflection: Remembering the People's Pope**

*By Amanda Huan*

The news of Pope Francis' passing has stirred an outpouring of remembrance, reverence and reflection around the world. In the hours since, I have found myself returning to a singular moment in June 2024, when I had the rare and humbling opportunity to meet the Pope in person at the Vatican as part of the Focolare Movement's [interreligious conference](#), which I attended as part of our work at the Social Cohesion Research Programme at RSIS.

It was a moment marked not just by the solemnity of protocol or the gravity of his title, but by something far more moving – his undeniable presence, humility and the quiet power he wielded by simply being among the people.

What astounded me most during that meeting was not the solemn beauty of the Vatican's architecture that surrounded him, but the reverence that he commanded well beyond the boundaries of his own faith. In the waiting lines were not just Catholics eager for a blessing or a handshake. There were Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and even the non-religious like me queuing patiently, for a brief moment with His Holiness. It was startling and inspiring to witness the hold that he had, not through coercion or command, but through sincerity, compassion, and a deep understanding of the human spirit.

His visit to Southeast Asia, in particular his time in [Singapore](#), stands in my memory as a perfect encapsulation of who he was: the people's Pope. The streets were lined with well-wishers from all walks of life eager to welcome him. The warm reception he received was heartfelt and revealed what many had already come to believe: that Pope Francis belonged not just to Catholics, but to the world.

Regardless of whether Pope Francis truly understood the magnitude of his influence, he chose to wield his position not for institutional aggrandisement, but for the betterment of society. In many ways, he was a maverick leader, unafraid to challenge

convention when it was the moral thing to do. He made global headlines for [embracing migrants](#), [washing the feet of female prisoners](#), and [converting a Vatican palace into a shelter for the homeless](#). Through his acts, he changed the tone of how religious authority could operate in the 21st century – not from a pedestal, but from within the crowd.

His legacy, however, extends beyond these acts. He was among the first religious leaders to publish a formal treatise – the 184-page encyclical [Laudato Si'](#) – in which he highlighted to all followers (and indeed, broader society) the moral responsibility of humanity to care for the natural environment. At a time when climate change was increasingly becoming a partisan issue, Pope Francis positioned caring for the Earth not as a political issue, but as a moral and spiritual imperative. He called upon “every living person on this planet” to perform their duty of being more responsible to the environment. The encyclical helped boost the [Laudato Si' movement](#), which coordinates climate activism around the world and counts more than 900 Catholic organisations in its efforts.

But what has distinguished Pope Francis was his honesty about the ills within his own institution. He did not shy away from addressing the grave failures of the Church, particularly the [clerical sex abuse](#) issue. He saw it as his [personal responsibility](#) to rid the Church of the abuse. He admonished the structures that enabled complicity and sought institutional reforms. His candour extended to other issues. On religious extremism, he recognised that it was not the province of any one religion; he acknowledged that Catholicism had its own [groups of fundamentalists](#).

Pope Francis was, of course, not without his flaws. His [use of derogatory terms](#) in a private meeting shocked many and is a blemish in an otherwise remarkable public record. It reminds us that even the most revered figures are not immune to the cultural biases and missteps that haunt our times. However, to judge him solely on this would risk overlooking the broader themes of his leadership – a style defined by courage, transparency, and moral conviction.

The global chorus of in memoriam tributes since his passing speaks volumes. From faith leaders to heads of state, from devout followers to those who have since long left the pews, there has been an unmistakable sense of collective loss, but also collective gratitude. Gratitude for a Pope who broke barriers, who extended hands across divides, and who challenged his own institution to be better. His papacy will be remembered not just for the policies he enacted, but for the spirit he embodied – a spirit of inclusion, humility, and love.

In today's era marked by division and distrust, Pope Francis reminded us of the need to live with grace. His papacy was a reminder that religious leadership can be a significant force for healing and hope, that compassion can transcend doctrine, and that humanity is capable of profound goodness.

As the world mourns his passing, it also celebrates a life well-lived. For those of us who had the privilege of encountering him even briefly, the moment lingers not just in memory, but in conviction. He was truly the people's Pope, a shepherd who walked with his flock, and a leader who dared to believe that a gentler, kind world was possible, one handshake at a time.

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*Dr Amanda Huan is a Research Fellow in the Social Cohesion Research Programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798