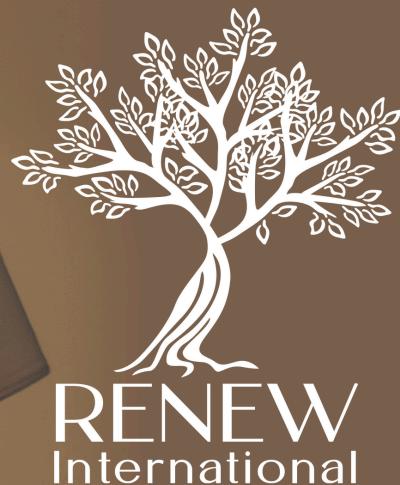


Walking with Francis

A Journey of Gratitude,
Grief, and Gospel Hope

By Meredith Augustin



Introduction: Remembering Francis—Living the Legacy

In every age, the Holy Spirit raises up a shepherd who helps the Church hear the Gospel anew. In Pope Francis, we were given not just a pope but also a pastor—a man who walked with the wounded, spoke with the boldness of the prophets, and smiled with the joy that comes from Christ.

His papacy was not about perfection but about presence. He reminded us that God's mercy is bigger than our mistakes; that the Church's doors must always be open; and that joy, even in struggle, is a sign of the Spirit at work. He challenged us to care for creation as a sacred trust and to draw near to the poor—not out of pity but out of shared dignity.

Now that his earthly journey is complete, we pause not only to grieve but also to give thanks. And more importantly, to carry the mission forward.

This four-session faith-sharing guide is a gift from RENEW International to all who wish to reflect, remember, and recommit. Through prayer, scripture, the words of Pope Francis, and shared conversation, we honor a life well lived—and we step into the dream he dared to imagine.

A Church of mercy.

A people of joy.

A world of justice.

And a future foreseen with hope.

- Meredith



Session 1 - A Church of Welcome and Mercy



Opening Prayer

God of tenderness and truth, you sent your servant Francis to remind us that mercy is the beating heart of the Gospel. Open our minds and hearts today as we reflect on his legacy—the warmth he brought to the Church's voice, the way he welcomed the forgotten, and the boldness with which he challenged us to be bridge-builders and healers. May his example inspire us to live the Gospel with fresh eyes and open arms. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



Scripture: Luke 15:11–32 (The Merciful Father)

Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

“‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”





"The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful... I see the Church as a field hospital after battle."

– Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*



Reflection: A Shift in Tone – From Fortress to Field Hospital

When Pope Francis stepped onto the balcony of St. Peter's in 2013 and greeted the world simply with "Buona sera," he set a new tone. He didn't lead with doctrine but with relationship. Over the years, that posture only deepened.

One of the hallmarks of Francis' papacy was his insistence that the Church is not a museum of the perfect but rather a field hospital for the wounded. He called us to put accompaniment ahead of answers, dialogue before defense. His consistent emphasis on mercy over moralism reoriented the Church's posture from gatekeeping to welcoming.

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he wrote:

"The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open."

And in a world where many feel unwelcome, unseen, or unworthy, that image became a lifeline.

Francis didn't water down truth. He simply insisted that love comes first and that love knows how to listen. Whether embracing the disfigured, washing the feet of prisoners, or calling for a revolution of tenderness, Francis modeled a Church that leads with compassion.

This shift has not been easy, and not everyone has welcomed it. But it has ignited hope, stirred renewal, and opened doors long closed.



Faith-Sharing Questions

1. When have you experienced the Church as a place of mercy and welcome? When has it felt otherwise?
2. What do you think it means today to be a "field hospital" rather than a fortress?
3. How can we, in our own communities, reflect the tone of Pope Francis—one of embrace, encounter, and empathy?



Invitation to Action

- This week, reach out to someone who may feel disconnected from Church or faith. Offer them not an argument but an invitation—your presence, your listening, your friendship.
- Take time to read *Evangelii Gaudium*, even just a few paragraphs, and journal about what resonates with you.





Closing Prayer

God of mercy, you sent us a shepherd in Pope Francis who reminded us that your love knows no bounds and that your Church must echo your welcome. Thank you for his witness—for the way he opened doors, softened hearts, and invited us to meet one another with tenderness. Help us to carry that spirit forward. Make us people of mercy, not judgment. Make us bridges, not walls. Make us bold enough to welcome, humble enough to listen, and faithful enough to love without counting the cost. We pray in the name of Jesus, who is your face of mercy. Amen.



Session 2 - Joy in the Gospel, Joy in the Struggle



Opening Prayer

God of joy and justice, you call us not to a life of ease but to one of meaning, mercy, and mission. In Pope Francis, you gave us a leader who taught us that joy is not the absence of hardship but the presence of hope. As we reflect today, fill our hearts with that gospel joy that refuses to give up, that rises in laughter through tears, and that sings even in the shadows. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



Scripture: John 15: 9-11 (That your joy may be complete)

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”



Wisdom of Pope Francis

“An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!”
–Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*



Reflection: The Audacity of Joy

Pope Francis has often said that a Christian without joy is not truly Christian. Yet he doesn’t speak of a superficial smile or a naïve optimism. The joy he proclaims is deeper—it’s rooted in the Gospel and revealed even in the face of suffering.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis writes:

“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus... With Christ, joy is constantly born anew.”

That’s a powerful promise—but also a challenging one, because Francis never denied the presence of pain. He simply insisted that joy and struggle aren’t opposites; they are companions. We can weep for the world and still believe in its redemption. We can carry crosses and still dance along the road.

Pope Francis calls us to live joy as resistance—against apathy, against fear, against the temptation to give in to cynicism. Joy, he reminds us, is not an escape from the world, but a commitment to transform it. And that joy becomes contagious when lived in community, especially with the poor, the excluded, and the wounded.

His laughter, his lightness of being—even in dark times—was never disconnected from his call to justice. Rather, it was rooted in a deep trust that the Spirit is always at work.





Faith-Sharing Questions

1. Where have you experienced joy in your faith—either in celebration or in struggle?
2. How does Pope Francis' understanding of joy challenge or inspire you?
3. What role can joy play in renewing our Church and our communities today?



Invitation to Action

- Practice joy as a spiritual discipline this week. Write down three moments of joy each day—especially those that surprise you in the midst of difficulty.
- Bring joy to someone else—a call, a note, a shared memory. Choose joy, not because things are perfect but because God is present.



Closing Prayer

God of boundless joy, you have shown us, through Pope Francis, that joy is not reserved for the comfortable, but belongs to those who hope, who serve, who trust. Let us not be robbed of this joy. Let us not grow weary in our journey. Instead, fill our spirits with your gladness, especially in times of darkness or doubt. May our joy be real, rooted, and radiant—a testimony to the Gospel we proclaim. We ask this through Christ, our Joy. Amen.



Session 3 - A Voice for the Poor and the Church



Opening Prayer

Creator God, you made this world in beauty and balance—a home for every creature, a table with room for all. Through Pope Francis, you called us to hear the cries we've grown deaf to—the cry of the earth, and the cry of the poor. Open our hearts today to that double call. Teach us to see our shared suffering, to act with urgency and compassion, and to walk gently upon the earth. We ask this in the name of your Son, who had no place to lay his head, and who still walks with the poor. Amen.



Scripture: Matthew 25: 31-46 (Whatever you did for the least....)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”





"The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one and the same."
–Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*



Reflection: Prophetic Solidarity

Pope Francis has consistently lifted up the two great cries of our time—the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor—and reminded us that they are one and the same.

In the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, he reawakens the Church to the spiritual and moral dimensions of climate justice. He speaks not as a scientist or politician but rather as a pastor—calling us to examine how our lifestyles, our economic systems, and even our religious institutions affect the most vulnerable.

"The earth herself... is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor." (*Laudato Si'*, 2)

In the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, he challenges the boundaries we've built—national, economic, racial—and insists on the dignity of every human person. He reminds us that we belong to one another, and that indifference is no longer an option.

Pope Francis doesn't let us off the hook. His voice is gentle but it doesn't flinch from the truth. He invites us to an "integral ecology"—a way of living that recognizes the interconnectedness of all creation and that refuses to separate care for people from care for the planet.

He has given the Church a clear and urgent prophetic mission: to stand with the poor, to protect our common home, and to do it now—not tomorrow.



Faith-Sharing Questions

1. How have you been personally impacted by Pope Francis' teachings on care for creation and care for the poor?
2. What are some ways your community or parish can better reflect this "integral ecology" Francis speaks of?
3. Where do you see the connection between poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation in your own neighborhood or country?



Invitation to Action

- Commit to one concrete act of ecological or economic justice this week. It could be reducing waste, supporting a local food bank, advocating for fair housing, or participating in a cleanup.
- Pray with *Laudato Si'* or *Fratelli Tutti*. Reflect on one passage and consider how it challenges your habits or worldview.





Closing Prayer

God of the small sparrow and the wide sky, God of the hungry child and the broken soil— You have spoken through Pope Francis to awaken our love for what we have forgotten. Stir in us a holy discomfort. Do not let us be at peace while others suffer or creation groans. Make us bold, humble, and ready—to hear, to act, and to hope for a world where all are fed, all are free, and the earth herself can sing again. We ask this through Christ, who became poor so we might become whole. Amen.



Session 4 - The Race is Finished, the Dream Endures



Opening Prayer

God of every season, you called your servant Francis to walk humbly, love boldly, and dream with you for a Church renewed. Now that his earthly race is finished, help us to carry forward what he began—a dream of mercy, of justice, of joy, of a Church with open doors and open hearts. May his words echo in our lives. May his witness live on in our choices. And may the work of your Spirit continue through us. We pray in the name of Jesus, who calls each of us to run the race set before us. Amen.



Scripture: 2 Timothy 4: 6-8 (I have finished the race....)

“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”



Wisdom of Pope Francis

“No one is saved alone; we are either saved together or not at all.”
—Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*



Reflection: The Audacity of Joy

In his final years, Pope Francis often spoke of “dreaming together”—dreaming of a Church that listens, that welcomes, that walks with the wounded. He dreamt of a world where fraternity replaces fear, and where tenderness reshapes power.

He did not live that dream in ease. With remarkable grace, he bore criticism, frailty, loneliness, and the weight of leadership. Yet through it all, he never lost the joy of the Gospel or the fire of his mission.

Like St. Paul, Francis can now say,

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”
(2 Timothy 4:7)

But his dream was never meant to end with him. It was always meant to be passed on. We are that legacy. We are the continuation of his hope, the next verse of the song he began to sing.

Pope Francis taught us that holiness is not perfection, but closeness to Christ and compassion for the world. His dream is not a blueprint—it’s a way of living. And the invitation is now ours: to walk, to accompany, to proclaim, to hope.





Faith-Sharing Questions

1. What part of Pope Francis' legacy do you feel most called to carry forward?
2. How has his life and message changed your understanding of the Church?
3. What does it mean for you to run the race and keep the dream alive?



Invitation to Action

- Write a letter or prayer to Pope Francis—sharing what his witness has meant to you and how you will carry it forward. Keep it as a spiritual commitment.
- Gather others to continue his dream. Consider forming or joining a small group in your parish or neighborhood focused on accompaniment, social justice, care of creation, or joyful faith-sharing.



Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, you stirred the heart of Jorge Mario Bergoglio and raised him up as Francis—a brother to the poor, a voice for the forgotten, a dreamer of a Church reborn. Now that he has returned to you, we give thanks for his life poured out in love. Let his legacy take root in us. Let his gospel joy be our strength. Let his dream become our mission. And may we, like him, live in hope, walk in mercy, and finish our race with love. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.





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