

Pope

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Vatican guesthouse. Rather than limousines, he rode in Fiats and Jeeps.

His leadership – of some 1.4 billion Catholics globally – will be remembered for outreach to women, immigrants and refugees, LGBTQ+ people and people from other faiths.

For some, he was considered too radical in trying to enact change in the 2,000-year-old church. Others thought he provided a fresh start to make faith relevant again in secular societies, with many adherents driven from Catholicism after decades of scandal, including corruption and child sex abuse.

The pope’s worsening health

While Francis sought to be a modernizing force, he was already 76 years old by the time he was elected by the conclave to lead the church. Early in his papacy, he suspected he only had “two or three years” left to live before he’d be “off to the Father’s house,” he told reporters.

Despite this, he continued to lead the Catholic Church, even if he had health problems that seemingly increased with time and severity.

In early February, he canceled several events and by the middle of the month was hospitalized for bronchitis. He had reportedly struggled to breathe and speak. He had several visits to the papal wing at Gemelli Hospital in Rome and an extended stay in the hospital before being released March 23.

He had fallen in both December and January, suffering minor injuries and requiring him to use a cane or wheelchair at some events.

In 2024, he skipped his traditional homily during Palm Sunday in March, but he still presided over an Easter Mass that drew thousands to St. Peter’s Square in Vatican City.

Decades before, in 1957, he underwent surgery to remove one of his lungs after a severe respiratory infection, Catholic News Service reported.

‘First pope of the Americas’

On March 13, 2013, Francis succeeded Pope Benedict XVI, who was the first pope to retire in six centuries. Francis became the 266th occupant of the



During his tenure, Pope Francis sought to ensure a more diverse future for the Catholic Church. YARA NARDI/REUTERS FILE

papacy, which dates back to St. Peter, a disciple of Jesus Christ, who is considered the first pope.

The Vatican’s biography of Francis names him “the first Pope of the Americas.” Before being elected to the papacy, he was archbishop of Buenos Aires. He became the first pope from Latin America, the first from the Southern Hemisphere and the first non-European since Syrian-born Gregory III.

His first papal visit was to Rio de Janeiro, gathering 3.5 million people to Copacabana Beach in 2013. He’d travel around the world – from the largest papal event in history with a 2015 Mass that drew up to 7 million people in the deeply Catholic country of the Philippines, to being the first pope to visit Mongolia, Iraq and the Muslim Arabian Peninsula.

He sought to ensure a more diverse future for the church, especially since at least three-quarters of Catholics live outside of Europe. During his first decade, Francis named 121 cardinals representing 66 countries, with about 20% of them from Latin America and the Caribbean, 19% from Asia and the Pacific and 13% from sub-Saharan Africa, according to the Pew Research Center.

“Diversity is necessary; it is indispensable,” Francis said in a 2023 homily, when he appointed 21 cardinals from around the world – including the first from South Sudan and the second from

Malaysia – Reuters reported.

At the same time, Francis, named in honor of the patron saint of ecology, prioritized climate change as the world has come to feel worsening effects of a warming planet, particularly among those in poverty who are most at risk from extreme weather events.

Early in his papacy, he issued a 183-page encyclical, titled “On Care for Our Common Home,” the first entirely written under his leadership.

“The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change,” he said.

Embracing all people

Francis was known for his outreach to communities historically marginalized by the church or societies. He championed migrants and refugees, as well as others who were poor; sick and disabled; and older.

He declared in 2023 that “being homosexual isn’t a crime.” While not a full embrace of LGBTQ+ people, his statement made headlines globally. That same year, he welcomed transgender women to lunch at the Vatican.

A month later, he approved a blessing for same-sex couples, though he distinguished such blessings from the

sacrament of marriage. In the same declaration, he approved of blessings for divorced or remarried people.

Still, he reaffirmed the church’s doctrine that marriage was a union between a man and woman.

Looking at the United States, he told Catholics in the 2024 presidential election to “choose the lesser evil” between President Donald Trump and then-Vice President Kamala Harris who were both “against life.” Whereas Trump promised to deport millions of immigrants and turn away migrants, Harris supported abortion rights, which Francis referred to as killing a human being.

But not voting, he said, is “ugly. You must vote.”

On January 11, former President Joe Biden awarded Francis the Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction, the highest U.S. civilian honor.

The citation for the award describes the head of the Catholic Church and the bishop of Rome who hails from Argentina as “the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere,” according to a statement from the White House.

“Pope Francis is unlike any who came before. Above all, he is the People’s Pope – a light of faith, hope, and love that shines brightly across the world,” it says.

A life of teaching, service

Born on Dec. 17, 1936, Francis was one of five children. His father, Mario, was an accountant and his mother, Regina, was a “committed wife,” according to the Vatican biography.

Francis studied chemistry in college and was ordained as a priest in 1969. He obtained degrees in philosophy and theology from Colegio de San Jose in San Miguel, teaching literature and psychology in Argentinian colleges.

In 2001, Pope John Paul II appointed him as a cardinal.

More than a decade ago, he was so sure he wouldn’t be elected pope that he almost missed the final vote entirely while speaking with another cardinal outside the Sistine Chapel.

“The master of ceremonies came out and said ‘Are you going in or not?’ ” Francis said in an interview with The Associated Press. “I realized afterward that it was my unconscious resistance to going in.”

He was elected the 266th pope on the next ballot.

Contributing: Reuters

Cuts

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Schools was awarded \$667,000, according to spokeswoman Carolyn Callahan.

“This was a one-time funding with no expectation that it would become recurrent, although we hoped it would,” she said. “It supported local farmers and fed our students.”

Moving forward, more cuts could come for districts that do not eliminate diversity initiatives or allow parents to view students’ “gender identity” records.

Kentucky schools receive more than \$1 billion in federal funding, which especially assist in the education of the state’s neediest students.

Health care

Education was not the only sector to lose out on unspent COVID relief funding. Last month, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) announced cuts for Kentucky health departments, estimated at \$148.8 million, according to Cabinet for Health and Family Services spokesperson Kendra Steele.

The cuts are now being challenged, with Gov. Andy Beshear joining a lawsuit to halt them alongside politicians in 22 other states. But if they prevail, the loss of funding would impact a wide range of services and programming, including immunization efforts, staffing for 988 call centers and youth drop-in centers, the delivery of addiction treatment services and the Purple Star Program, which supports veterans, active military members and their families.

Another area that could take a major financial hit is the state’s Medicaid program.

In February, U.S. House of Representatives members passed a budget

resolution that would task the Committee on Energy and Commerce with making \$880 billion in funding cuts over 10 years. The committee oversees \$25 trillion in spending, the vast majority of which goes toward Medicaid and Medicare.

Kentucky ranks fifth among states for the highest match rate, with the federal government providing about 71% of funding for the program. In fiscal year 2023, Kentucky state government spent \$3.3 billion on Medicaid, while the federal government spent over \$13 billion, according to KFF, a nonpartisan health policy research organization.

Nearly 1.5 million people in Kentucky are enrolled in Medicaid. Potential cuts to the program could lead to a decrease in the amount paid to health care providers, the removal of some services currently offered or both.

Housing assistance

Several changes have been made within the public housing sector, though the impacts are less clear.

DOGE, led by tech billionaire Elon Musk, has called for reducing staffing at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) by 50%, according to a report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Additionally, \$1 billion in funding for HUD’s Green and Resilient Retrofit Program, which helps preserve affordable housing, was cut, according to the Associated Press.

Another \$60 million that largely went toward affordable housing developments is currently stalled, the AP reported.

More than \$30 million in grants for nonprofits working to combat housing discrimination and enforce fair housing laws were terminated in February, according to the National Fair Housing Alliance (NFHA).

Meanwhile, HUD’s Secretary Scott



Metro United Way in Louisville hosted a roundtable discussion about potential Medicaid cuts on March 19. At the head of the tables are Emily Beauregard (left, in red), U.S. Rep. Morgan McGarvey (center) and Sheila Schuster (right). LUCAS AULBACH/COURIER JOURNAL

Turner announced plans to combat the housing crisis by building affordable housing on federal land.

“Working together, our agencies can take inventory of underused federal properties, transfer or lease them to states or localities to address housing needs, and support the infrastructure required to make development viable — all while ensuring affordability remains at the core of the mission,” Turner wrote in a press release.

Libraries and museums

Two grants awarded to the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, as well as another grant awarded to a Louisville museum, are in jeopardy due to layoffs at the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

The Grants to States Program previously awarded about \$2.7 million to Kentucky in order to support a variety of

library services throughout the state, including the Kentucky Talking Book Library for the Blind and Print Disabled.

Additionally, nearly \$250,000 was meant to go toward training for librarians and archivists. But in March, all of the national institute’s staff were placed on immediate administrative leave.

In Louisville, the Speed Art Museum had been awarded \$249,000 to support a series called “Louisville’s Black Avant-Garde.” About \$168,000 of that funding remains unspent and could be in jeopardy, a spokesperson for the museum said.

In a statement from the labor union that represents the institute’s workers, the layoffs mean “all work processing 2025 applications has ended. The status of previously awarded grants is unclear. Without staff to administer the programs, it is likely that most grants will be terminated.”

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