



Mario J. Paredes
Chief Executive Officer
mparedes@somoscommunitycare.org
646.979.7613

FRANCIS, Nine Years as a Witness to the Gospel

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The 13th of March marks nine years since the election of the Jesuit priest, bishop, and cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the 266th pope in the history of the Church. Pope Francis presides over the Chair of Saint Peter and has guided the world's Catholics in faith and charity since he celebrated the inaugural Eucharist of his Pontificate on March 19, 2013, on the feast of Saint Joseph. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was born on December 17, 1936, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and chose the name Francis, as a tribute to the "poverello" of Assisi.

From the first moment that he appeared on the balcony of Saint Peter's Square to offer his first Papal blessing "Urbi et Orbi," before the crowd that was expectant and jubilant at the news of the election of the first Latin American Pope in the history of the Catholic Church, Francis' pontificate has been accompanied by novel and prophetic signs and gestures with which he has refreshed the image of the Church before the world. Our Pope perpetually calls us believers, to adhere to the person of Christ, to return to the primary sources of our faith, to live evangelical authenticity, as true disciples, and to perpetuate the missionary action of the Good News in the world.

In the complexity of this historical, political, social, and cultural juncture in which all of humanity lives today, amid the enormous challenges through which the world and its Catholics persevere today, the figure of Pope Francis, his life, his gestures, and his teachings have been, for all of us, a breath of fresh air and a beacon of light amid the vicissitudes and uncertainties that we all face.

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"Complex" describes the current situation in the world, and "very difficult" describes the circumstances, inside and outside of the Church, in which Pope Francis has had to deliver his magisterium and authority. Urgent reforms required by the administration of the Vatican state, the Roman Curia, the existence and activities of the Church in the world, the lifestyle of priests, the clergy's sexual and pederasty scandals, the criticism of the lifestyle and pontificate of Francis by conservative and reactionary sectors of the Church, the role of women in the life of the Church, in addition to climatic catastrophes, threats of local and international wars, huge masses of human migration, famine, pandemic, violence, injustice, and inequity in the world, etc.

This is just a brief list of the very important and serious problems that afflict the Church and humanity, in the face of which Pope Francis has always been at the forefront to set an example and illuminate with his message, always evangelical, timely, and compassionate.

In all the issues, news, events, and circumstances and through all means of social communication, Pope Francis has accompanied us during these nine years with his profoundly human, frank, open, sincere style, with total self-confidence, without stiffness or labels, without poses and with the freedom and joy that spring from fidelity and attachment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

His desire to move forward, to set the Church in motion so that it advances at the same pace as the changes in society and "signs of the times," his eagerness for the entire Church to be "light in the midst of darkness," since we shine light in the peripheries of the world, so we share God's love, especially with the "discarded" of the earth, has encountered criticism and obstacles, above all, within the Church itself, from those who – both laity and clergy - see in Francis a threat to their comforts and interests. They feel that Francis confronts them with the Gospel and dusts off and shakes the appeasement of their consciences, and of all those who - like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus of Nazareth - put aside the commandment of God by clinging to the legalisms and traditions of men (cf. Mk 7:1-13).



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All this because Francis is first and foremost a full-fledged "Christian," convinced that the Gospel of Christ is the answer to our yearning for happiness and everyone's search for a better, more livable, more sustainable, more humane, and fraternal world.

But Francis, with the strength and courage of the Spirit that strengthens, drives, and accompanies him, goes ahead and, among other "heroic" deeds of his pontificate, has now summoned us to a synod on synodality. This synod hopes that, together, we will build a Church of greater communion and participation, less pyramidal and more circular, less of canon law and more evangelical, less attached to the logic of the world, and closer to the wisdom of the son of the carpenter of Nazareth.

A Church that is less administrative and more supportive, less ritualistic, and more experiential. A Church that condemns less shows more of God's love to all. A Church less attached to the powerful and the powers of the world, and closer to the humble and the construction of the kingdom of God. A Church less of masses and more of people, less attentive to orthodoxy and more concerned about the orthopraxis of evangelical love.

We rejoice for all that the figure and the Pontificate of Francis is and has meant for the Church and the world. We celebrate his eagerness to bring us closer – again – to the Gospel of Christ and the love of God experienced and shared by all. We rejoice at his commitment to getting the Church out of the sacristy so that it "lights up all who are at home" (cf. Mt 5:14-16). We thank God for all his love and devotion for the poorest, the sick, imprisoned, migrants, those who suffer the most.

It has not been easy for Pope Francis. He has had to swim against the current in a world that wants to build realities, relationships, institutions, and societies against or behind God's back and, above all, and what hurts the most, against the current of denials and betrayals, to the Gospel of Christ, of laity and clerics, within the ecclesial community itself.

Let us pray for Francis, as he himself asked from the first moment of his pontificate and let us toast to many more years of Francis, the humble Pope.

Mario J. Paredes is CEO of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians—most of them primary care providers—serving close to a million of New York City's most vulnerable Medicaid patients.