

"Pope Francis Loved Arkansas," by Dr. Chris Jones

Billions across the globe are saddened to hear of the passing of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. To the world, he became Pope Francis. To people of faith, he became the modern model of what it meant to live a life of sincere faith.

Pope Francis loved Arkansas. He loved the fields and forests. He loved the people. He loved the tired nurse at a Catholic hospital in Fort Smith, the immigrant family starting over in Springdale, the child with disabilities in Pine Bluff learning to read. He loved Arkansas not because he visited here – but because of who lives here – God's children.

He was the true embodiment of Matthew 22:39 where Jesus Christ tells us that the second greatest commandment (second only to loving God), was to *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

From the moment he became pope in 2013, Francis made it clear he would be a different kind of leader. He chose love over favoritism. He chose simplicity over grandeur. He focused not on power, but on people.

Arkansas isn't known for a large Catholic population. As of 2023, Arkansas was home to approximately 166,000 Catholics, accounting for about 5.5% of the state's population. But the impact of over 150,000 Catholic Arkansans and the Catholic Church in our state runs deep. The Catholic hospitals, schools, and charities serve thousands of Arkansans every year, regardless of religion. They're feeding families, educating kids, and providing health care in underserved places. That mission reflects the spirit Pope Francis championed—one of service, humility, and care for the vulnerable.

Father Rodolphe Balthazar, a priest at St. Vincent de Paul in Rogers since 2019, was touched by Pope Francis's consistent message of hope. In responding to the news of the Pope's passing, Father Balthazar said, "I was impressed by two things. The first was his simplicity is such a simple Amen. And the second, was his listening skills. You are talking to him. It's like he got focused on you," Balthazar said. "For me he was really a pope of great hope."

Pope Francis's legacy calls us to act—not just mourn. To step outside comfort zones. To listen more. To serve. As the Bible says in Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” That’s a roadmap Pope Francis followed, and one we can carry on.

Unfortunately, there are those who are actively unraveling that fabric of neighborliness and love.

The Pope's passing is not just the end of a papacy. It's a reminder. That we are each responsible for the world we live in. That love is an action, not a feeling. That leadership means kneeling to wash someone's feet—not waiting to be served. And that we must act in the face of forces attempting to destroy justice, mercy and humility.

Pope Francis didn't personally visit Arkansas. He knew Arkansas already—because he knew that he was called to care for all of God's children.

Share your thoughts and comments at chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com.