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Sr. Jane Wakahiu, a member of the Institute of the Little Sisters of Saint Francis, Kenya, and associate vice president for program operations and head of Catholic Sisters for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, meets with Pope Francis at the Vatican in January. (Courtesy of Hilton Foundation)



by Chris Herlinger

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April 28, 2025

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Catholic sisters, including those based at the United Nations and whose ministries focus on international concerns, say Pope Francis set an example for the whole world in shedding a spotlight on the needs of the marginalized.

But sisters and congregational representatives who spoke with Global Sisters Report are emphatic: The best way to honor Francis' legacy, they say, is for his successor to continue his prophetic pastoral path.

"Pope Francis' death leaves a great void, but his legacy will continue to inspire those who dream of a more just, compassionate and inclusive world," said Sr. Michelle Loisel, the NGO representative at the U.N. for the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

"May we honor him by carrying forward his vision," she said.

"We all mourn our great advocate for mercy, the poor, oppressed and marginalized, and care for Mother Earth," said Sr. Roberta White, the past Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary representative at the U.N.'s Commission on the Status of Women.

"Francis mirrored God's unconditional love and care for all creation. May his legacy be continued by our next pope."

Saying she was "devastated" by the news of Francis' death, Sr. Janet Palafox, the current NGO representative to the U.N. for the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary-Loreto Generalate, said "Pope Francis was a prophet who encouraged us to be our best selves, to believe in a loving and merciful God and to be merciful and loving, as well."



Pope Francis addresses the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York Sept. 25, 2015. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Segar)

In the coming days, "I pray that our church leaders listen prayerfully to the Holy Spirit."

Palafox added: "I do hope Pope Francis' message will continue — now more than ever we need church leaders who will unify while accepting our diversity rather than divide, focus on mercy and reconciliation rather than judgement."

Beth Blissman, a laywoman serving as the U.N. representative for the U.S.-based Loretto Community, said the joy of the resurrection this year was "tinged with both sadness and special significance" with the death of the church's first Latin American pope.

"I pray that our church will continue on the path of selecting a humble servant with a thirst for social justice at this challenging time globally," she said. "Jesus spent his time reaching out to those on the margins, and I pray that our next pope will continue the work that Pope Francis started."

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Sr. Jean Quinn, an Irish Daughter of Wisdom who serves as head of the U.N.-based advocacy group UNANIMA International, called Pope Francis a reformer who reached out to the LGBTQ community, as well as other marginalized groups, such as the homeless.

She hailed his demands for justice for the poor; his criticism of capitalism and the global market economy; and his calls to respond to the climate crisis.

"And so I hope Pope Francis' successor will continue to be a man of the people," Quinn said. "That the person will continue his vision of equality and his vision for a community of believers — and that women continue to be part of reform within the church structures."

Concrete concern for migrants

Loisel called Francis "a prophetic voice for our times," who from the moment he chose the name Francis, "signaled a different kind of leadership — one rooted in humility, simplicity and a deep identification with the least among us."

"He consistently challenged a culture of indifference and called the church and the world to remember the faces and stories of those on the margins."

Loisel in particular praised Francis' concern for migrants, saying it was not "abstract, but concrete and passionate."

"Whether visiting refugee camps or urging nations to open their hearts and borders, he spoke with a moral clarity that few dared to match. His call was always to welcome, protect, promote and integrate those forced to flee their homes."

Loisel also praised what she called Francis's equally prophetic voice on ecological justice.

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With his 2015 *Laudato Si'*, Francis "offered not just an encyclical but a global wake-up call. He reminded us that everything is interconnected and that the cry of the Earth is intimately linked with the cry of the poor," Loisel said. *Laudate Deum*, the follow-up apostolic exhortation, "reaffirmed his deep concern that we must act — not someday, but now."

Sr. Jane Wakahiu, a member of the Institute of the Little Sisters of St. Francis, Kenya, is associate vice president for program operations and head of Catholic Sisters for the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, a major funder of Global Sisters Report.

She described herself as bereft and heartbroken over the pope's death, saying the loss is personal. (Wakahiu met Francis seven times, most recently in January in Rome.). "I often felt like I was with my brother and not a leader of the whole world," Wakahiu said. "Pope Francis demonstrated all qualities of a Good Shepherd articulated in the Gospel."

"I admired and respected his visionary and prophetic leadership," she added, lauding him as "an inspirational, visionary and prophetic leader of the church and the world."



Sr. Roberta White, a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dubuque, Iowa, second from left, with other participants at the United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women. She and others attended as members of a delegation representing the Loretto Community. The Loretto Community has been partnering with the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Dubuque since 2011. This year, Loretto Community's UN representative Beth Blissman hosted a delegation of 40 participants with 28 attendees hailing from four U.S. high schools. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Wakahiu said her personal encounters with Francis all "left an indelible mark on my heart, particularly his way of elevating the human dignity of all people and encouraging inclusive and pastoral care for the most vulnerable."

His papacy left a considerable imprint on the world, she said, because he led with "grace, compassion, fraternal love and walked alongside people suffering due to poverty, conflicts, illness and aging, among others."

"I will remember him as a pope whose legacy of love, commitment and action on behalf of the most vulnerable urges consecrated persons and people of goodwill to wake up and do something for those who suffer," Wakahiu said. She also praised his "love of women religious and elevating [the] contribution and leadership of women in the church."

As for the future, Wakahiu said she hopes "to have a pope who continues to provide the fraternal, compassionate, and pastoral leadership that is genuinely needed in these extraordinary times."

A clear and challenging legacy

Mercy Sr. Deirdre Mullan, whose past congregational ministry at the United Nations included working with the U.N.-based Working Group on Girls, called Francis "a prophet and advocate for the poor." She said his advocacy for groups such as Haitian immigrants in the United States stood in stark contrast to their demonization by President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance during the 2024 presidential election.

> 'At the end of our days, each of us will be asked to account for how we treated the poorest and most vulnerable. The message and legacy of Pope Francis is as simple and challenging as that.'
> —Sr. Deirdre Mullan
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"The legacy of Pope Francis is very clear. There can be absolutely no ambiguity about our faith calling," she said, quoting Matthew's Gospel. "At the end of our days, each of us will be asked to account for how we treated the poorest and most vulnerable."

"The message and legacy of Pope Francis is as simple and challenging as that," Mullan said.

Blissman and those currently at the United Nations praised the pope's championing of many of the causes they support. These include the U.N.'s ambitious sustainable development goals to end global poverty and other social ills, and, perhaps most importantly, care for the environment, as demonstrated through Laudato Si'.

Laudato Si' is likely to be the pope's most enduring legacy, Blissman said, in part because it has proven inspiring both inside and outside the church, and also those "on the fringes" of the church and who might have even been brought back into the church's fold because of the pope's environmental commitment.

Francis also championed dialogue in a way that could serve as a model for the United Nations itself. Francis, she said, had "a deep respect for dialogue and [modeled] the kind of multilateralism we desperately need in the world right now."

Similarly important, said Adrian Dominican Sr. Durstyne "Dusty" Farnan, who represents the Dominican Leadership Conference at the U.N., was the pope's commitment to indigenous peoples and their strong environmental ethic. This was demonstrated by the pope's 2019 Synod for the Amazon, which gathered thousands from the Amazonian region.

"We had a pope who was listening and committed to the Earth," she said.



An opening prayer service on March 10 at the chapel of the Church Center for the United Nations during the first day of the 69th Commission on the Status of Women

at the U.N. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Farnan said that she was impressed that the leadership of her congregation, the Adrian Dominicans, which had not quoted popes much in public pronouncements, began to do so with Laudato Si'.

"We supported this pope because he was supporting something important to us," she said. "I will be ever grateful to his leadership in the global movement to protect Mother Earth."

Sr. Irene O'Neill, a Sister of Saint Joseph of Carondelet who serves as president of Sisters Rising Worldwide, a sister-run nonprofit based in St. Paul, Minnesota, that has a global focus, said the late pontiff's example was "always to love always and in all ways."

She also praised Francis "for courageously calling out people feigning to be Christians but failing to follow the mission of Christ."

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