

# Catholics in Arkansas remember what made pope special

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



In what might be the latest instance of God’s poetic timing, Pope Francis, known for his pastoral leadership in caring for the poor, marginalized and the environment, died on Easter Monday, April 21, right in between Easter Sunday and Earth Day.

The shockwaves following the 88-year-old pontiff’s death have been felt around the world, and Arkansas has been no exception. Clergy and lay leaders from across the state shared their thoughts with *Arkansas Catholic*, along with instances of the pope’s impact on their own lives and ministry. Catholics from Arkansas on the ground in Rome were also able to provide a glimpse into the heart of the faith during the week following the pope’s death, sharing conversations and testimonies from other Catholics from around the world in the streets.

## **Bishop Anthony B. Taylor**

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor recounted his two encounters with Pope Francis. The first was when he accompanied Father Ruben Quinteros to his native Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2010 following the diocesan priest’s ordination. The pope was the archbishop of Buenos Aires at the time.

He then met the pope during his *ad limina* visit with bishops from Texas and Oklahoma in January 2020 before the pandemic began.

“There was no desk,” he said during his homily April 27 at a memorial Mass for the pope at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock. “He had us sit in a big circle and introduce ourselves. He invited us to help ourselves to some pastries on the side table, and then he told us where the bathroom was. We didn’t expect that. Very down to earth. He asked us questions and invited us to ask him questions. There were no prepared statements. Instead, there was a conversation with a certain amount of give and take. His questions to us were largely about what we were doing to reach out to those on the periphery in our own dioceses, and in particular, the welcome we were giving to migrants and what kind of care we were giving to others who were suffering. His concern was always for the poor. The meeting lasted two hours. I left knowing that he was really interested in what we thought.”

### **Father Ruben Quinteros**

Father Ruben Quinteros, pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary and St. Mary churches in North Little Rock, shared the following message in a Facebook tribute to the pope.

“Happy Easter, Pope Francis!!! Jesus embraces you with the Easter joy! Thank you for teaching me how to live my priesthood in the most real and accessible way to my flock. Thank you for challenging me by listening to the voices of the members of the Church, whose voices are being silenced by the self-righteousness of many. Thank you for your love and unwavering dedication to serving the marginalized, the poor, the immigrants. Thank you for loving our wounded Church, thank you for loving our humanity in all its vulnerability. Rest in peace!”

### **Jeff Hines**

Jeff Hines, director of the Office of Faith Formation, said the pope undertook important work to empower Catholics to evangelize the faith.

“Pope Francis taught us that we are all missionary disciples. He wrote about it in ‘The Joy of the Gospel,’ where he taught us how to be missionary disciples. He taught as Jesus taught, through his words and the example of his life. In 2023, Pope Francis dedicated his Wednesday audiences to the topic of evangelization. He said that the Gospel is always good news for everyone. In fact, the pope’s messages inspired our faith formation office to create our office’s podcast, Apostolic Zeal. It is one of Pope Francis’ last catechesis series and shows what he was all about.”

### **Cackie Upchurch**

Cackie Upchurch, former director of Little Rock Scripture Study now living in Fort Smith, said Pope Francis was like a breath of fresh air in the history of the Church.

“The election and introduction of Pope Francis in 2013 felt to me like a ‘new life’ moment, brimming with possibility and joy and urgency. At a time of growing disparity between the rich and poor, Francis’ words and deeds reminded us that God’s heart is full of compassion. In a world filled with violence and insecurity, Francis called for the courage to prioritize peace. In a world where migration is a fact of life and often spurred by desperation, Francis was unafraid to beg for bridges and not walls. I am convinced that he was the leader needed for this moment in our world and in our Church. I am grateful to God for the very human face of leadership in our Church.”

## Rep. French Hill

Rep. French Hill was among the bipartisan congressional delegation chosen to attend the funeral April 26.

In an interview with *Arkansas Catholic*, the member of the Cathedral of St. Andrew said he had audiences with Pope Francis in 2021 and 2023.

“I was humbled to be a part of the congressional delegation to attend the funeral and pay our respects on behalf of the American people... It was just overwhelming to walk into St. Peter’s Square and see hundreds of thousands gathered under a perfect, beautiful, cloudless blue sky, 67 degrees with a nice breeze. The music and the Mass were beautiful and such a tribute to His Holiness. I have not witnessed a formal Mass at that scale, obviously, before and so I was just so impressed with the whole ceremony and liturgy.”

## Arkansas parishioners

Parishioners from the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, led by rector Father Joseph de Orbegozo, are on a pilgrimage in Rome for the Jubilee Year — coincidentally overlapping with the week of the Pope’s death and funeral. Father de Orbegozo has spent the week sharing anecdotes and pictures with *Arkansas Catholic* and talking to people from around the world in the streets outside the Vatican.



*Father Joseph de Orbegozo (center) talks with pilgrimage leader Stephen Binz (left), former Little Rock Scripture Study director, and pilgrims during their Jubilee Year pilgrimage in Rome April 24. (Julie Favorite)*

Julie Favorite, a parishioner of the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, reflected on the

pope's kindness.

"When I look at Pope Francis, he speaks with kindness and love, and it is reflected in his eyes. You can see it without him speaking — welcoming to everyone."

Mark and Kristen Hall, parishioners from St. Vincent de Paul Church in Rogers, witnessed the pope's body being transferred from his home to St. Peter's Basilica.

"It's changed our plans some, we've had to adjust some of the sites that we visit, but it's also allowed us opportunities. Like today (April 23), we were able to be at St. Peter's Square when they transferred Pope Francis' body from his home, Santa Marta, from the chapel there, and processed through part of the square really close to us. We were able to see his body as well as all of the cardinals and archbishops. Then they took him into St. Peter's Basilica," Kristen said.

Mark added. "We feel like, in a way, you're losing your leadership, your leader, but part of the Catholic faith is such an orderly line of events that take place. It was a surprise to us, but there's such structure and order to how these things are done. It's comforting, because yes, you're losing your leader, but there is a process in place, so there's not a worry about what's going to come next."

"You can sense the anticipation here," Kristen said. "It's like the world is waiting as they're gathering to say goodbye to Pope Francis. There's also this anticipation of what we know comes next with the conclave — everyone eagerly waiting to find out who the next leader will be. Before we started recording (this message), we were talking about how there are people here from all over the world and news crews from countries all over the world here, gathering together for this transition."

Father de Orbegozo said, "It's truly incredible. We've heard from, we had mentioned among us, news crews from Brazil, CNN Brazil, from Italy, Ireland, Sharon Aureli, one of the parishioners at the Cathedral, was interviewed by the Associated Press for somewhere, maybe England. Reporters everywhere — we've seen reporters and journalists all over."

*Editor Malea Hargett contributed to this article.*

**CORRECTION:** *The original publication of this article incorrectly spelled Sharon Aureli's last name. This online version has been corrected.*