

## A Pastoral Reflection on the Death of Pope Francis: From Father Jon Hullinger

Dear friends in Christ,

Early this morning, we received the news that Pope Francis, the 266th Bishop of Rome, has died. For many around the world—Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Anglicans, and people of all faiths and none—this is a moment of deep sorrow and reflection. And for me, it is personal.

Many of you know that I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1999, and that my priesthood was received into the Episcopal Church in 2014. I often joke that I “read my way into the Catholic Church” through the beautiful vision of the Second Vatican Council—especially *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. And I found my way to the Episcopal Church because I longed to live in a community that carried those hopes forward, where love and justice were not afterthoughts but central to our calling.

That might not be entirely fair, but it’s how it felt at the time. And yet, with the election of Pope Francis, something changed—not only in the Vatican, but in my own heart. Here was a man who reminded me, and reminded the world, that the Gospel is Good News for all Christians, indeed for all people. That Jesus walks with the poor. That mercy is the beating heart of God. That all Churches must not only speak of love, but live it—openly, humbly, joyfully.

I didn’t always agree with everything Francis said or did. But I recognized in him a fellow pilgrim, a pastor who bore the weight of the church with tenderness and courage, who smiled more than he scolded, who pointed not to himself but to Jesus.

His death today feels like the passing of a shepherd—one who brought many who had wandered to the edge of the fold back into earshot of grace.

For me, this moment is also tender because my family—my lovely wife and stepchildren—are Catholic. My spiritual director, Sr. Rita, is a Benedictine sister at Mount St. Scholastica, where we attended the Easter Vigil this year. So you see, while I am honored and proud serve here as your Episcopal priest, my life and my heart remain woven together with those in the Catholic Church. And today, with them, I mourn.

But I do not mourn without hope.

Pope Francis believed in the mercy of God. He trusted in resurrection. And he once said, “God’s name is mercy.” So today, as we commend him to the arms of the God he served, let us pray for his soul, for our Catholic brothers and sisters, and for a Church—and a world—always in need of humble, joyful, loving shepherds.

And let us keep striving to be that kind of church.

May Pope Francis rest in peace and rise in glory.

With love and in faith,  
Fr. Jon