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The Pope of the People: Francis, a shepherd with the smell of the sheep.

Among his many duties and decisions, the late Pope Francis clearly enjoyed the company of other people, drawing energy from them and returning their affection with a word of encouragement or sometimes with just a caring smile.

By Devin Watkins

Pope Francis loved people being with other people. You could see it every Wednesday morning when he held his weekly General Audiences. It was even visible when he would appear at the window of his office in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace at noon on Sunday to pray the Angelus. Despite the physical distance to St. Peter's Square below, he would wave heartily and greeted countless groups of visiting Catholics. His desire to be near others drove him to carry out 47 Apostolic Journeys, visiting nearly every corner of the earth. Yet, the late Pope Francis' love of people became most palatable exactly in the moment when physical separation was imposed on everyone. In a way, the Covid-19 pandemic shuttered him in the Vatican just as the Popes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were practically imprisoned upon election because the Vatican was not yet a city-state. In another sense, however, the Argentine Pope refused to be chained behind the Leonine Walls of the Vatican City State. He embraced modern means of communication to reach out to the faithful as they huddled in their own homes, afraid of coming into contact with an unknown contagion. Every morning, at 6:00 AM, Pope Francis celebrated Mass in the chapel at his residence in the Casa Santa Marta, which was broadcast to the world on social media, television, and radio by the Dicastery for Communication (Vatican News' parent organization). Each time, he prayed for a different sector of society that was affected in various ways by the coronavirus, from nurses and healthcare professionals to teachers and prisoners. As Catholics in the Philippines were finishing lunch and the faithful in California were getting ready for bed, the Pope would reach into the homes of millions and offer a reminder that they were not alone, no matter their trepidation. Then, on March 27, 2020, he held his unprecedented *Statio Orbis* standing alone in a empty, rainy St. Peter's Square. Holding a monstrance with the

Blessed Sacrament, the Pope blessed all the world in a moment of great despair, presenting Christ as our only source of life and hope. Gradually, people ventured outdoors again, and the Pope started holding his weekly General Audiences, as well as his private audiences with various groups. Crowds became a familiar sight in Rome once more, and those months of physical distance only drove Pope Francis to seek out people with greater determination. Besides the heads of state that made their customary Vatican visits, numerous celebrities came to meet the Pope from the ends of the earth and share a laugh or a handshake with him. He shadow-boxed with Sylvester Stallone, joking with the star of Rocky that his three daughters reminded him of the three Marys of Biblical times. He shook hands with Arnold Schwarzenegger of Terminator fame, who thanked the Pope for his advocacy for the care of Creation and the environment. More recently, a cohort of comedians from around the globe made their appearance at a papal audience, and he reminded them that playful fun and laughter keep spirits up and tensions down.

Yet, it was contact with the average Joes and Janes that really gave the late Pope Francis the energy to guide the Catholic Church for 12 years. As he would descend from the popemobile and ascend the stage at his General Audiences, the Pope of the people would nearly always stop to greet the Vatican employees who would read the summaries and greetings in various languages, so that his words would be understood to all in St. Peter's Square or the Paul VI Hall. Even in those brief exchanges, he would ask after their ailing parents, wonder aloud if a pair of newlyweds were really coming back to work after their honeymoon, or even jokingly question the fashion choice of a scruffy reader's beard. In all these moments, some light-hearted and others solemn, the late Pope Francis took a keen interest in the lives of those he met, never forgetting his admonition to all priests to be "shepherds with the smell of the sheep."