

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



People in St. Peter's Square watch a broadcast as Pope Francis makes his first appearance since entering the hospital. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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In January 2025, while doing research at the Vatican archives, I heard Pope Francis' Sunday prayers in St. Peter's Square. The pope [reflected on the ceasefire](#) that had just gone into effect in Gaza, highlighting the role of mediators, the need for humanitarian aid, and his hope for a two-state solution.

"Let us pray always for tormented Ukraine, for Palestine, Israel, Myanmar, and all the populations who are suffering because of war," he concluded. "I wish you all a good Sunday, and please, do not forget to pray for me. Enjoy your lunch, and arrivederci!"

A few weeks later, Francis was admitted to the hospital, where [he remained for more than a month](#), receiving treatment for double pneumonia.

In those weeks of uncertainty, I thought back to the pope's words that Sunday afternoon. They encapsulate Francis' image: a spiritual leader using his influence to try to bring peace. He is also a down-to-earth man who wishes you "buon appetito."

Francis does not fear addressing contemporary politics, unlike many of his predecessors. And [some popes](#) have closed their eyes to not just current events but past ones: learning and history that [threatened their vision of the church](#).

As [a medievalist](#), I appreciate Francis' contrasting approach: a religious leader who embraces history and scholarship, and encourages others to do the same — even as [book bans](#) and [threats to academic freedom](#) mount.

Infamous index

For 400 years, the Catholic Church famously maintained the [Index Librorum Prohibitorum](#), a long [list of banned books](#). First conceived in the 1500s, it matured under Pope Paul IV. His [1559 index](#) counted any books written by people [the church deemed heretics](#) — anyone not speaking dogma, in the widest sense.

Even before the index, church leaders permitted little flexibility of thought. In the decades leading up to it, however, the church doubled down in response to new challenges: the rapid spreading of [the printing press and the Protestant Reformation](#).

The Catholic Counter-Reformation, which took shape at the [Council of Trent](#) from 1545-1563, reinforced dogmatism in its effort to rebuke reformers. The council decided that the Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible, was enough to understand scripture, and there was little need to investigate its original Greek and Hebrew version.

Bishops and the Vatican began producing lists of titles that were forbidden to print and read. Between 1571-1917, the Sacred Congregation of the Index, [a special unit of the Vatican](#), investigated writings and compiled the lists of banned readings approved by the pope. Catholics who read titles on the Index of Forbidden Books risked excommunication.

In 1966, Pope Paul VI [abolished the index](#). The church could no longer punish people for [reading books on the list](#) but still advised against them, as [historian Paolo Satchet](#) highlights. The moral imperative not to read them remained.

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Historian [J.M de Bujanda](#) has completed the most comprehensive list of books forbidden across the ages by the Catholic Church. Its authors include astronomer Johannes Kepler and Galileo, as well as philosophers across centuries, from Erasmus and René Descartes to feminist Simone de Beauvoir and existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Then there are the writers: Michel de Montaigne, Voltaire, Denis Diderot, David Hume, historian Edward Gibbon and Gustave Flaubert. In sum, the index is a who's who of science, literature and history.

Love of humanities

Compare that with [a letter Francis published on Nov. 21, 2024](#), emphasizing the importance of studying church history — particularly for priests, to better understand the world they live in. For the pope, history research "helps to keep 'the flame of collective conscience' alive."

The pope advocated for studying church history in a way that is unfiltered and authentic, flaws included. He emphasized primary sources and urged students to ask questions. Francis criticized the view that history is mere chronology — rote memorization that fails to analyze events.

In 2019, Francis changed the name of [the Vatican Secret Archives](#) to the Vatican Apostolic Archives. Though the archives themselves had already been open to scholars since 1881, "secret" connotes something "revealed and reserved for a few," Francis wrote. Under Francis, the [Vatican opened the archives on Pope Pius XII](#), allowing research on his papacy during World War II, [his knowledge of the Holocaust](#) and his general response toward Nazi Germany.

In addition to showing respect for history, the pope has emphasized his own love of reading. "Each new work we read will renew and expand our worldview," he wrote in a letter to future priests, published [July 17, 2024](#).

Today, he continued, "veneration" of screens, with their "toxic, superficial and violent fake news" has diverted us from literature. The pope shared his experience as a young Jesuit literature instructor in Santa Fe, then added a sentence that would have stupefied "index popes."

"Naturally, I am not asking you to read the same things that I did," [he stated](#). "Everyone will find books that speak to their own lives and become authentic companions for their journey."

Citing his compatriot, [the novelist Jorge Luis Borges](#), Francis reminded Catholics that to read is to "listen to another person's voice. ... We must never forget how dangerous it is to stop listening to the voice of other people when they challenge us!"

When Francis dies or resigns, the Vatican will remain deeply divided between progressives and conservatives. So are modern democracies — and in many places, the modern trend leans toward [nationalism, fascism and censorship](#).

But Francis will leave a phenomenal rebuttal. One of the pope's greatest achievements, in my view, will have been his engagement with the humanities and humanity — with a deep understanding of the challenges it faces.