


# Burying Pope Francis: The Vatican Tombs, Topology and Peripheral Ataraxia

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**How to cite this paper:** Aguilar, M. I. (2026). Burying Pope Francis: The Vatican Tombs, Topology and Peripheral Ataraxia. *Sociology Mind*, 16, 61-78.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/sm.2026.163005>

**Received:** April 13, 2026  
**Accepted:** June 15, 2026  
**Published:** June 18, 2026

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## Abstract

This paper (number 7) in the research project “Burying the Dead” follows the introductory comments and typology of Aguilar’s previous papers, but moves the material context of burial to Rome and to the latest papal burial, that of Pope Francis in 2025. Pope Francis, Argentine by birth and a Jesuit, started his pontificate on 13 March 2013 and died on 21 April 2025, Easter Monday, at 7.35 am at the Vatican. He was 88 years old and had served as Pope for twelve years. His papal imprint was of a humble and people’s Pope who guided the Catholic Church and indeed the world during the COVID pandemic. He lived in the Casa Sanctae Marthae in Vatican City, where pilgrims stayed, and he was seen taking meals at the large dining room with pilgrims and Vatican employees. This paper explores the planning of a suitable tomb by Pope Francis and team, and the implications not only for the Vatican centrality of St. Peter’s Basilica but for a topology of popes’ burials. The paper argues that there was a process of papal ataraxia due to the burial diversification and change that Pope Francis pushed within the history of papal burials in the Catholic Church. The paper concludes that tombs signify a continuity of a person’s life, and in the case of the Pope, an institution’s life, centred in this case on the centrality of the apostle Peter and the Catholic Petrine office.

## Keywords

Pope Francis, Tomb, Santa Maria Maggiore, Burial, Ataraxia, Topology, Petrine Office, Burial of Popes, Rome, Vatican, Roma Monti

## 1. Introduction: The Ataraxia of the Peripheries

When Pope Francis died in April 2025, he was buried at a fresh tomb in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore at Roma Monti, a neighborhood outside the Vatican (Mazzoni, 2010). Rites of separation, prayers, and the funerary liturgy were celebrated at St Peter’s Basilica. Then the coffin departed for a private burial in the

presence of Cardinals at the new tomb, where pilgrims and devotees lined up in their thousands the following day. Pope Francis had broken with a very recent tradition of burying popes at the Vatican, and as he did in his lifetime, he had disordered tradition following his expression *hagan lío* – disorder things that need change by going to the peripheries.

The Pope of the peripheries was used to follow his reading of the life of Jesus of Nazareth as a man of the peripheries who was a shepherd close to his sheep. He was a shepherd that smelled of sheep, as Pope Francis put it, because he was with his flock, protecting, guiding, and rearranging the unjust order of things into an order of God that lived in the peripheries of society and the peripheries of the world. Pope Francis, a man born in an Italian immigrant family in Buenos Aires, lived *the ataraxia of the peripheries* where he moved, he lived, and he found the God of Christians. Pope Francis' ataraxia, that absence of trouble and disturbance, imperturbability, or a lucid state of robust equanimity characterized by ongoing freedom from distress. That ataraxia came from his life at the peripheries, where, despite the challenges of life and the human disasters of everyday life, people found fulfillment in the family, the community, and ultimately the God of the peripheries.

Pope Francis' choice of tomb reflected such ataraxia, whereby his explanation for his choice was his closeness with the Virgin Mary, the *Salus Populi Romani* (Our Lady Protectress of Rome). If in life he had found his tranquillity among the community of guests at Santa Martha, where he celebrated daily Mass with pilgrims and with the peripheral realities of ordinary Roman life, in death he wanted to find such ataraxia at the peripheries. There, with his Mother and Protector, the *Salus Populi Romani*, he was laid to rest at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. This paper has three parts: 1) papal burials in Rome, St Peter's Basilica, and Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica, 2) intention and materiality of Pope Francis' tomb, and 3) a hermeneutics of Pope Francis' ataraxia of the peripheries.

Three working concepts are used in this paper: topology, ataraxia, and peripheries. Thus, in this paper, *topology* refers practically to topological spaces as sets endowed with a structure that allows defining *continuous deformation of subspaces*, and all kinds of continuities, thus bringing to places of burial a changeable materiality over time rather than a static topography, i.e., the addition of a historical plaque at Pope Francis' tomb on the first anniversary of his death.

Ataraxia refers to the absence of anxiety in the special materiality of the dead, so that the ataraxia for the living becomes the ataraxia for the dead and *vice versa*, understood as “the state of tranquillity or imperturbability, freedom from anxiety, considered to be one of the desirable results of an immersion in scepticism”, indeed part of the highest form of happiness (Blackburn, 2016).

Peripheries are working spaces perceived as secondary to the places of power and centrality, the non-essentials within centres of burial, where historical centres usually portray the hierarchical constructions of the life of the living and the historical punctuations of the past as significant and as future to be revered and visited.

## 2. The Topology of Burying the Dead

Topology, being the central concept, refers practically to topological spaces as sets endowed with a structure that allows defining continuous deformation of subspaces, and all kinds of continuities. The linear points become point, line, and polygon features that in geography share coincident geometry, and that in geography refers to the location of nodes (Mayhew, 2023). Further, homeomorphism within topological spaces allows for an inverse function that makes the whole analysis connected but different. Thus, archaeological sites and tombs contain a diversity of forms and shapes that allow the description of change and continuity rather than solely what appears nondimensional to the human eye. A homotopy represents a deformation of the topological site that informs change and a diverse synchronic and diachronic understanding, thus allowing for the differential and hermeneutical interpretation of tombs as bearers of diverse semantic meaning in the manner of the diversity of diachronicity within the project. Fragmentation, destruction, vandalism, and physical coalition and destruction come into effect when bodies and tombs are destroyed, limited, and physically moved for other purposes than their classification as innate and immobile physical and material realities.

A summary of previous papers on “Burying the Dead”: In paper 1, the topology of the dead in India outlined sites of burial within World War I and World War II in British India and the work of cultural and historical preservation by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (Aguilar, 2024a). In paper 2, the topology of the dead outlined the ordering of the dead in Chilean cemeteries since independence from Spain (1810) until the present day (Aguilar, 2024b). Paper 3 examined the topologies of the dead within the long period of political violence from the 1960s until the 2016 Peace accord, and the recovery of bodies unaccounted for in Medellín (Aguilar, 2025a). Paper 4 examined topological anomalies within burials in Chile, particularly within periods of forced disappearance, the air accident of the Uruguayan plane of 1972, and the world of *animitas*, people who died in a violent manner (Aguilar, 2025b). Within the research project, cemeteries have taken precedence because they come out of modernity within a socio-political context of public health policy, state and private ownership, and the sense of the family. Paper 5 outlined the fractality of a series of tombs in northern Peru, of the Molla civilisation, chronologically existing before the Incas, and in which a main tomb of el Señor de Sifán is surrounded by others with a degree of preservation and natural conservations that gave credit to the efforts of Pope Leo XIV to support the preservation of ancient tombs and monuments in Peru (Aguilar, 2025c). Paper 6 outlined the challenges of burying the dead in national monuments rather than in their villages thirty years after the 1994 Rwanda genocide (Aguilar, 2026).

The memory of the past has changed and has diversified globally so that, as argued by Nicolas Argenti, European conceptions of the past through the dead in “a post-Ottoman time mark the limit of models of temporality founded upon the premise of a linear chronology. In testifying to an experience of the affective half-

life of political violence (remembered not as the glory of the state or as culpability of the opponent, but simply a loss) as well as uneventful coexistence, it challenges the central operative principle of Western historicity: that the past is distant and ever-receding” (Argenti, 2017: p. 8). Innovation and leadership come out of the memory of the dead, for the dead shape our memory, our present, and our future.

### 3. Popes’ Burials Revisited

Over the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were significant changes in the funerals of Popes, namely from an expression of monarchical context to a proclamation of Church values to the world. Leo XIII might have written on social justice in the world, but he was still a living monarch who decided with little counsel the lives, ethics, and politics of Catholics in the world. However, as outlined by Ujházi, “the turning point came with the papacy of Leo XIII, who placed the church at the service of social justice” (Ujházi, 2026: p. 2). Social justice and the place of workers and the poor in society aided the development of tombs as symbolic stones of divine life for all, rather than mausolea for the rich who express their connections with divine grace by their wealth and prosperity.

The two world wars aided such change, as wealthy and poor, leaders and subjects, fought in the trenches for freedom with international solidarity. As outlined in war cemeteries, Commonwealth graves and war memorials, people of all ranks, all faiths, friends and foes were buried with sadness and pride in a unified movement of national and family pride (see, for example, the Commonwealth war cemeteries in Aguilar, 2024a). Indeed, the main development in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century papal burial was a change from separation to reunion with the Christian community so that tombs might be visited and Popes awaited the future Resurrection together rather than in a full state of separation. While a Pope’s funeral is a matter of state as head of the Vatican, the Pope is also an individual Catholic who will be judged by God and will await the final Resurrection of the Dead. The current liturgical order of papal funerals did not emerge directly from Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council but from a period of church restructuring by John Paul II, who was the head of the Catholic Church for 25 years. John Paul II reversed the importance of royal symbols and provided the possibility of selecting appropriate readings related to the Church’s missionary vocation (Ujházi, 2026: p. 3).

Within discussions on papal funerals and, indeed, together with the larger discussion on the Petrine office, lies the relation between the place of St. Peter’s Basilica and Santa Maria Maggiore as central to the papacy in Rome, one *intra muros*, the other *extra muros*. Those discussions were central in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to unify the practices of the Catholic Church, and its doctrines as outlined by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The Council of Trent, which dealt with the challenges of the Protestant Reformation, established a unified doctrine centred on the centrality of the Bishop of Rome. And as outlined by Teresa Delgado-Jermann, the visual images of architecture and art provided the clear symbols of Rome united as a Church against the critics among the Protestant Reformers (Delgado-Jermann,

2023a). And within the images of Rome, Delgado-Jermann has described St. Peter's Basilica as "the ground zero of Catholic image-making" (Delgado-Jermann, 2023b: p. 48). As a result of that primacy of Peter and the centrality of St Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis' choice of burial followed his own life at the peripheries and at the same time as a Pope in touch with the people of God and in touch with the *Salus Populi Romani* at St. Maria Maggiore.

Indeed, those discussions on the Petrine Office were refreshed with the challenges posed to Rome by the German Reformation, whereby confessional issues had a certain materiality on the discussions of relics and burials, churches and communion with Rome (Carbonnier-Burkard, 2016). Within those scholarly discussions, the figure of Cardinal Guglielmo Sirleto, Cardinal Librarian of the Holy Roman Church (1514-1585; Cattaneo, 2025), who has been acknowledged for defending the primacy of Peter, and Peter's arrival in Rome for his own martyrdom, was central. Sirleto established himself as a central prelate who aided Pope Paul IV (1555-1559) in the readjustment of the ceremonial apparatus for the ceremonies that marked the *Cathedra Petri*, aka St. Peter's Throne. Sirleto became a wanted contributor to the evolution of the *Cathedra Petri* because of his keeping of manuscripts and his knowledge of the history of the Roman Church (Clausi & Lucà, 2022). At that time (1547), manuscripts were being printed as part of the historical sources to be used by the Inquisition to define heretics, such as Greeks persecuted by the inquisitors (Kennerley, 2022).

What followed those discussions about loyalty to the successor of Peter and the challenges of heretics were discussions about the centrality of St. Peter's Basilica vs other Roman churches, including Santa Maria Maggiore, triggered by other important sees of Catholicism such as Milan and Venice. This important matter's discussion was delayed at times because scholars could not examine Sirleto's *De Praestantia Basilicae Vaticanae*, because the manuscripts were never identified. Fliip Malesevic provided, though, an examination and reconstruction of Sirleto's working methods in readjusting the ceremonial solemnities prescribed for the feast day of the *Cathedra Petri* according to Curial ceremony (Malesevic, 2023). I note here that Sirleto was concerned with the relation between the Church of Rome and other local sedes in a non-unified Italy rather than the emerging challenge to the Petrine office arising out of the German Protestant Reformation and the person of Martin Luther (Hill, 2015; Sorensen, 2016). Such discussion is essential in order to understand the discussions then and now about the places for burial of the successor Peter the Apostle.

The art of dying remained a topic within the German Reformation rather than an article of faith only, and detailed studies of such post-Luther period reflect an important sense of the popular understanding of the materiality of dying connected to the authority of Rome, and yet to be connected to articles of reformed confessions of faith. Austra Reinis, in a very detailed description of the time (Reinis, 2007), describes some of those practices that Carlos Eire, as reviewer, evaluates as follows:

Those familiar with Reformation theology might be puzzled by the survival of

this genre among early Protestants, given the fact that the medieval *ars moriendi* focused on what the dying person might be able to do at the last moment to gain salvation. After all, Luther's battle cry of "faith alone", which turned the world upside down by changing merely one letter in the adage *salus hominis in fine consistit*—with *fide* (faith) replacing *fine* (whatever one might do at the end)—seemingly left salvation entirely in the hands of God rather than the individual. If salvation were determined solely by God in his eternal realm rather than by the individual at the deathbed, and nothing could be done at all to earn salvation, what advice was there to give at the moment of death? (Eire, 2009: p. 683).

The discussions between Sirleto and Carlo Borromeo considered not only the place of Rome in relation to other centres of Catholicism and Reformation but also the place of Santa Maria Maggiore in relation to St. Peter's Basilica. Thus, the liturgical work of Guglielmo Sirleto remains central to exalt the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline Hill in a work prepared for the Cardinal Bishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo (Archbishop of Milan 1564-1584, made cardinal 1560). Such a second manuscript, composed out of the correspondence between Sirleto and Carlo Borromeo, recreates the challenges to *Cathedra Petri* by exalting Santa Maria Maggiore in the manuscript *Trattato sopra la chiesa di Santa Maria Maggiore* (available in Malesevic, 2023). Thus, Carlo Borromeo became central in the process of the Counter-Reformation, together with Ignatius of Loyola and Philip Neri. As part of such a doctrinal fight with the Protestant Reformers, Carlo Borromeo was responsible for significant reforms in the Catholic Church, including the foundation of seminaries for the formation of priests. It might be said that because of the process of reaffirmation of the doctrines of the Catholic Church, centralized normativism became essential, while important figures at that time who were in regional places, such as Milan, became centralized as artifices of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, including the Society of Jesus (Jesuits).

In summary, papal burials related to a slight historical tension between the primacy of St. Peter's Basilica and the rise of Santa Maria Maggiore were not in opposition to *sede vacante* but rather in a different place of worship and burial than St. Peter's. The complexities of such diversity of churches and burials within Rome, within the city walls and outside, outline a vibrant historical diversity, but choices that were and are still expressions of socio-historical meaning, signifiers of tradition that didn't remain unspoken but were an active Roman tradition in the making. Indeed, one returns to the very fruitful work on the invention and reimagining of tradition, whereby tradition is not unmoved by time and history but, on the contrary, is enriched by such changes and developments. A clear example is the development of the *Ordo* for the burials of popes, which was rethought by the latest popes, including Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. The invention of tradition became an invention of a Petrine tradition as truth (Pastwa, 2024), for example, the moment when Pope Leo the Great, on the first anniversary of his election, stood in front of the bishops who were present, asserted his privileged position as the heir of Peter the Apostle (Demacopoulos, 2013). However, papal burials and their direct association with St. Peter's Basilica became normative during the 20<sup>th</sup> cen-

ture.

#### 4. Papal Burials at St. Peter's Basilica

Within a modern Catholic Church of the post-World Wars and after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), all popes were buried at the Vatican in St. Peter's Basilica.

**John XXIII** (25 November 1881-3 June 1963) was buried at the Vatican Grottoes on 6 June 1963. The Vatican Grottoes are a series of underground chambers and chapels located under part of the nave of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. They are located three meters below the current floor from the high altar to about halfway down the aisle, constituting an underground church between the current floor of the Basilica and the old Constantinian Basilica of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The Vatican Grotto contains the tombs of 91 popes, some royals such as Queen Christina of Sweden and Queen Charlotte of Cyprus. Within the Clementine Chapel, behind the altar, lies St. Peter's tomb.

**Paul VI** (1897-6 August 1978, buried 12 August 1978) is also buried at the Vatican Grottoes, halfway along the north wall of the old grottoes in a deep niche with a low vault. At the centre of the travertine slab, the tomb is covered by a simple travertine slab, slightly higher at the head with the monograph of Christ and his name PAVLVS PP VI. As in the case of Pope Francis, Paul VI had written a testament in which he outlined his last will: "The tomb: I would like it to be in the real earth, with a humble sign to indicate the place and to invite Christian piety. No monument for me" (see [Figure 1](#)).



**Figure 1.** The tomb of Paul VI.

**John Paul I** (28 September 1978), who was Pontiff for only 33 days, is buried in the Vatican Grottoes under an arch on the right (north) side of the grottoes. Un-

like Paul VI, who desired a tomb on the ground, the Fabbrica of St. Peter's commissioned the sarcophagus designed by Francesco Vacchini for his burial on 4 October 1978. The tomb is a massive and linear parallelepiped with a slightly slanting lid. Engraved on the front is the monogram of Christ and the name of the Pope IOANNES PAVLVS PP. I.

**John Paul II's** (18 May 1920-2 April 2005) burial took place at his first tomb on 8 April 2005, located on the north side of the Vatican Grottoes, less than 100 feet from St. Peter's tomb. John Paul II's body was interred in an area that had held the sarcophagus of John XXIII. That sarcophagus was moved to the St. Jerome's Altar in St Peter's Basilica on 3 June 2001, after his beatification.

**Benedict XVI** (16 April 1927-31 December 2022) was buried at the Vatican Grottoes. He died at Mater Ecclesiae Monastery at the Vatican, a monastery founded in 1990 by John Paul II, a monastery of cloistered nuns who pray especially for the health of the Pope. Benedict XVI resided there from his resignation in 2013 until his death in 2022. In 2023, the monastery returned to host a group of contemplative nuns after a group of Benedictine sisters of the Abbey of St Scholastica in Victoria, Argentina, was invited to reside at the Vatican by Pope Francis. His funeral on 5 January 2023 was overseen by Pope Francis.

Benedict's funeral was the second and final funeral celebrated according to the first edition of the *Ordo Exsequiarum Romani Pontificis*, the liturgical order for papal funerals, prior to the revision of 2024, in which a simplified Ordo was approved by Pope Francis. Benedict was interred in a private ceremony in the crypt underneath St. Peter's Basilica in the same place where John Paul II had been buried in 2005 until his body was moved for his beatification in 2011. Benedict's cypress coffin was placed inside a zinc one, which was in turn enclosed in an oak outer coffin. The tomb was open to public visits on 8 January 2023.

## 5. Pope Francis' Tomb at Santa Maria Maggiore

While recent popes had been buried at St Peter's Basilica, there is a history of papal burials at Santa Maria Maggiore as well. Before Pope Francis, the popes buried at Santa Maria Maggiore were Honorius III (1216-1227), Nicholas IV (1288-1292), Pius V (1566-1572), Sixtus V (1585-1590), Clement VIII (1592-1605), Paul V (1605-1621), and Clement IX (1667-1669). The Basilica also hosts tombs of cardinals, Roman nobility, and prominent artists, including Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his father Pietro. Santa Maria Maggiore is an extra-territorial property of the Holy See, granted special autonomy and international recognition.

The choice of a tomb at the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore came from Pope Francis's custom of stopping at Santa Maria Maggiore before and after each one of his papal travels. During each one of those occasions, Pope Francis visited the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore to greet and to pray in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary, the *Salus Populi Romani* (Our Lady Protectress of Rome). For example, after his long stay in the hospital and when he was discharged, he made a stop at the *Salus Populi Romani* with flowers to be placed at the icon. It was a place

where Pope Francis felt at home, praying for the world and for the Church. While the latest popes, Benedict XVI and John Paul II, are buried at the crypt of St Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis developed the idea of being buried in a simpler manner close to the Madonna, whom he knew well and who protected him while he served in Rome.

Pope Francis provided changes that eventually allowed his own wishes and decentralized the Vatican's sense of the liturgy at St. Peter's Basilica. He indicated on certain occasions that the Pope eventually might not be buried there but elsewhere. Thus, Pope Francis justified such a choice by emphasizing that St Maria Maggiore had long been associated with pilgrimage, the care of the poor, and the devotion to Our Lady, particularly by Roman pilgrims.

Pope Francis' burial wishes were outlined in his Testament dated 29 June 2022 that for the sake of clarity I reproduce in this paper as outlined by Vatican News in April 2025:

**Miserando atque Eligendo** (Vatican News, 2025).

*In the name of the Most Holy Trinity. Amen.*

As I sense the approaching twilight of my earthly life, and with firm hope in eternal life, I wish to set out my final wishes solely regarding the place of my burial.

Throughout my life, and during my ministry as a priest and bishop, I have always entrusted myself to the Mother of Our Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary. For this reason, I ask that my mortal remains rest—awaiting the day of the Resurrection—in the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major.

I wish my final earthly journey to end precisely in this ancient Marian sanctuary, where I would always stop to pray at the beginning and end of every Apostolic Journey, confidently entrusting my intentions to the Immaculate Mother, and giving thanks for her gentle and maternal care.

I ask that my tomb be prepared in the burial niche in the side aisle between the Pauline Chapel (Chapel of the Salus Populi Romani) and the Sforza Chapel of the Basilica, as shown in the attached plan.

The tomb should be in the ground; simple, without particular ornamentation, bearing only the inscription: **Franciscus**.

The cost of preparing the burial will be covered by a sum provided by a benefactor, which I have arranged to be transferred to the Papal Basilica of Saint Mary Major. I have given the necessary instructions regarding this to Cardinal Rolandas Makrickas, Extraordinary Commissioner of the Liberian Basilica.

May the Lord grant a fitting reward to all those who have loved me and who continue to pray for me. The suffering that has marked the final part of my life, I offer to the Lord, for peace in the world and for fraternity among peoples.

**Santa Marta, 29 June 2022**

**FRANCIS**

Pope Francis created not only a new paradigm of an individual pope's choice but also, he left detailed instructions of where Franciscus was to await the Resurrection. He had broken with the recent tradition of popes' burials at St. Peter's basilica that applied to the previous Popes. His wishes were written in his autobi-

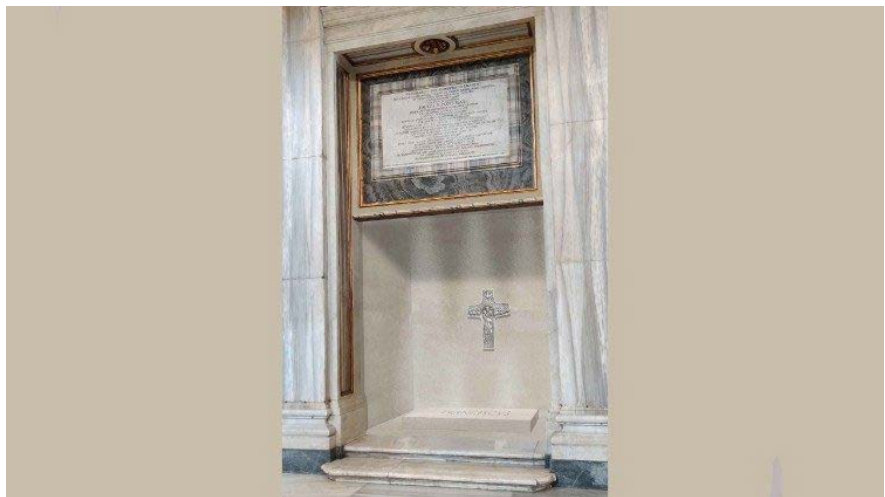
ography, *Esperanza* (Francisco, 2025). Pope Francis wrote:

Cuando fallezca, no me enterrarán en San Pedro, sino en Santa María la Mayor: el Vaticano es la casa de mi último servicio, no la de la eternidad. Estaré en la habitación en la que ahora custodian los candelabros, cerca de esa Reina de la Paz a la que he pedido ayuda siempre y por la que me hecho abrazar durante mi pontificado más de cien veces (Francisco, 2025: p. 218).

In summary, Pope Francis wrote: When I die, I will be buried in Santa Maria Maggiore, not at St. Peter's ... I will be near the Queen of Peace to whom I have always asked for help and whom I have asked to hug me more than a hundred times during my pontificate (my translation).

Pope Francis argued that the Vatican was the place of his last post but not his home for eternity. I will be, he continued, in the room of the candles, near the Queen of Peace, to whom I always requested help and to whom I allowed an embrace more than a hundred times. Thus, there is no doubt that Pope Francis saw the Vatican as his place of work and Santa Maria Maggiore as his eternal home, and where he would await the final Resurrection. However, he wanted to remain close to his mother, the Virgin Mary, to whom he so often asked for advice, consolation, and, as he put it, a hug.

When Pope Francis died in April 2025, his written wishes were also found on his desk at Santa Martha with small personal belongings. He was buried on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, and from the following day, thousands of pilgrims have visited his tomb, see **Figure 2** ©Vatican News (Giribaldi, 2025).



**Figure 2.** The tomb of Pope Francis.

The tomb is very simple, bearing the name “Franciscus” and a reproduction of the late Pope’s pectoral cross. The materials for the tomb came from the Italian region of Liguria, the region of Pope Francis’ grandparents. It is located near the altar of St. Francis, in the niche of the side nave between the Pauline Chapel (Salus Populi Romani Chapel) and the Sforza Chapel.

The connection between Pope Francis and his Italian grandparents is still re-

membered at the small town of Cogorno, where a plaque of slate commemorates Bergoglio's great-grandfather, Vincenzo Sivori. He traveled from Italy to Argentina in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and raised a family, including his granddaughter Regina Maria Sivori, Pope Francis' mother. Pope Francis' ancestors live in the so-called "Slate District" which includes 18 quarries and 12 companies in the Ligurian Hills. The slate is described as a people's stone that gives warmth. Previously, the town of Cogorno had ties to Popes Innocent IV and Adrian V. As Edoardo Giribaldi put it, it "echoes how Pope Francis lived, up until the very end of his earthly journey" (Giribaldi, 2025).

Once Pope Francis was buried, all sorts of connections with the neighborhood of Roma Monti started to appear. It was a neighborhood outside the walls of the Roman City where immigrants to the city arrived, where widows, orphans, and prostitutes found their place over the centuries, and where the Roma Termini is located today, the main railway station of Rome. Pope Francis might have mentioned his spiritual connection, but the neighborhood started connecting their lives and their history with Pope Francis. After all, Pope Francis decided not to be buried beside the latest popes at the Vatican but outside with those who may never attend the liturgies of St. Peter's Basilica. Roma Monti, the hills of Rome were the peripheries of the central administrative centres where today international shops and tourists visit. Further, the Argentinean Embassy is located a few blocks away from the tomb of Pope Francis. A large imposing building that, given the large number of Argentines who have Italian ancestry, is a busy place located close to the tomb of the most important Argentine in history.

Pope Francis stated that he had had an inspiration from Our Lady to be buried at Santa Maria Maggiore but over time more and more connections started to appear, for example the signing of an important international interfaith Declaration on a Shared Humanity, signed on 25 May 2022 by a group of academics led by Omar Mohamed, a friend of Pope Francis from Mosul Iraq, and the organiser, author of this paper who at the same time was the biographer of Pope Francis (Aguilar, 2014, 2021). Coincidentally, when the group of interfaith dialogue of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics (CSRП) of the School of Divinity, University of St. Andrews, requested advice from the Vatican about a possible public declaration on a shared humanity in Rome, this author was suggested to Roma Monti and the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore. With hindsight, all who were close to Pope Francis were shifting their absolute preoccupation with events at the Vatican to Roma Monti without knowing that Pope Francis himself was going to be buried there.

## 6. Signifiers in a Simple Tomb

A tomb carries signifiers, elements that transfer meaning from the material to the hermeneutics of those who visit the tomb and stand watching, respecting, and finding peace on the memory of the dead. By introducing the concept of ataraxia, this paper connects the peacefulness of the living with the repose of the dead, both

states related by the active action of the preservation, burial, and keeping of the dead. Thus, the ataraxia for the living becomes the ataraxia for the dead and *vice versa*, understood as “the state of tranquillity or imperturbability, freedom from anxiety, considered to be one of the desirable results of an immersion in scepticism”, indeed part of the highest form of happiness (Blackburn, 2016). A state of ataraxia is achieved by exercising pilgrim rights to visit the material tomb of spiritual leaders and by the exercise of sacramental kinship at the periphery of a tomb inside a Basilica that is not the central basilica with the remains of Peter, but the ataraxia received by a tomb located at the peripheries.

On the first anniversary of Pope Francis’ death, the materiality of his tomb brings the rare possibility of the intentionality of ataraxia. The concrete intention of a tomb to be consistent with the person’s life, the tranquillity of knowing that the Vatican was only a place where he spent the last thirteen years of his life, and the absolute ataraxia of the journey ahead to God, in God and for God. As in the case of Paul VI, there was a clear intention of a simple slab that united him with the region of his ancestors, where the faith of his grandfather came from, a plus de Soir in pectora.

It was the task of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Dean of the College of Cardinals, to deliver the homily that unfolded the life of Pope Francis and his tomb to the world, as he had done in the funeral of Benedict XVI, when he presided over the Eucharist while Pope Francis delivered a short homily. Thus, on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2025, and as millions of people watched Pope Francis’ funeral, Cardinal Re delivered not a eulogy but a factual account of a man and his tomb. The difficult task of speaking about a person’s life and death connected the earthly life of Pope Francis with the heavenly Jerusalem and the eternal life of God and the Church, and with the beautiful white tomb, visited by thousands after his death.

Cardinal Re reminded people of the life of a man who had led the people of God as archbishop of Buenos Aires and as a Jesuit, and who had chosen the figure of St Francis of Assisi, so loved in Italy for his papal name: Franciscus. Franciscus, the sole word on his white tomb, signifies 800 years of witness to the centrality of the poor and of ordinary people within the Church, the patron of Italy. Francis of Assisi was not a cleric but decided to follow his dream of connecting creation with humans and humans with God in a manner that was prophetic, new, and challenging in his lifetime. Such life became the essence of Pope Francis’ pontificate so that his life and writings became a song about God and his creation. But the creatures became the vehicle for God’s action, and the words by Cardinal Rae summarised the essence of Franciscus: “He established direct contact with individuals and peoples, eager to be close to everyone, with a marked attention to those in difficulty, giving himself without measure, especially to the marginalized, the least among us. He was a Pope among the people, with an open heart towards everyone” (Re, 2025).

Further, Cardinal Re stated: “Rich in human warmth and deeply sensitive to today’s challenges, Pope Francis truly shared the anxieties, sufferings, and hopes

of this time of globalisation. He gave of himself by comforting and encouraging us with a message capable of reaching people's hearts in a direct and immediate way. His charisma of welcome and listening, combined with a manner of behavior in keeping with today's sensitivities, touched hearts and sought to reawaken moral and spiritual sensibilities" (Re, 2025).

Cardinal Re summarised Pope Francis' perception of the Church: "The guiding thread of his mission was also the conviction that the Church is a home for all, a home with its doors always open. He often used the image of the Church as a 'field hospital' after a battle in which many were wounded; a Church determined to take care of the problems of people and the great anxieties that tear the contemporary world apart; a Church capable of bending down to every person, regardless of their beliefs or condition, and healing their wounds. His gestures and exhortations in favour of refugees and displaced persons are countless. His insistence on working on behalf of the poor was constant" (Re, 2025).

As the bus with the Cardinals arrived at Santa Maria Maggiore and Pope Francis' coffin was finally laid to rest in a private ceremony, the legacy of Pope Francis started to unfold. I have argued consistently that his writings and his speeches in so many journeys to the peripheries of the world were consistent with the life of a person who found Christ in the peripheries and simply felt very comfortable there. As he was put to rest in Santa Maria Maggiore, and his body awaits the Resurrection of the Dead, pilgrims have come in their thousands to visit Pope Francis. His inspiration to go to followers of other faiths, particularly followers of Islam, became a signature of Pope Francis' life. His visit to Iraq was triggered by the visit of the Nobel Prize Winner 2018 Nadia Murad, and he listened to those who encouraged him to visit places where he never thought he would go, always a pilgrim, always a representative of Christ, always a man who listened to others in the peripheries of the world.

## 7. Tombs as Divine Signifiers

Thus, tombs become signifiers of life and death, where the dead rest and the humans who visit feel compelled to act on behalf of the dead. The centre of those tombs for Christianity is the tomb of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where, according to tradition, Christ was buried and rose from the dead. The signification of such tomb was of global importance so that the Crusades were preached in order to fight for the liberation of the holy places in Jerusalem for the benefit of Christendom and from the point of view of Islam to secure the presence of Islam in Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem became of importance for Christianity and Islam and a place of pilgrimage, a global place of encounter, not a political centre by a state created only in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but the place where all children of Abraham can live in peace.

Over the history of Christianity, popes, saints, and people recognized by Christianity as significant for a historical relation between the Church and God have been buried in public places where their presence reminds pilgrims of the pres-

ence of God and the transferal of divine graces upon pilgrims and their families. Therefore, Pope Francis's tomb remains the place where the legacy of Pope Francis will unfold, as pilgrims would exchange their views, and as they did on the day of his funeral, some of them would request the public recognition of Pope Francis' holiness as a Christian pilgrim and a saint. One example of this unfolding legacy during 2026 was the planning of a pilgrimage organised by the group "Scholars for Dialogue" chaired by Dr Shruti Dixit, Dr Ann Simpson and this author on the Solemnity of St Peter and St Paul (29 June) in which Muslims and Christians, Iraqis and those of several nations including Italy, Brazil, and the UK visited Pope Francis' tomb to pledge their commitment for peace in the world and dialogue between the religions of the world. Those taking part represented Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Pope Francis' tomb has become such a place of pilgrimage for those who were touched by his life and actions during his 12 years as Pope and Head of the Roman Catholic Church. Tombs resume the journey of a person, and the word Franciscus resumes twelve years since that night in March 2013 when Cardinal Bergoglio of Argentina became Pope Francis. It is a tomb that remains the physical and spiritual presence of a deceased, and it is a tomb where a life is remembered by loved ones and, in the case of a public figure such as Pope Francis, by a global community of those who were moved and changed by the deceased's presence during their lifetime.

## **8. Ataraxia and the Petrine Office**

Pope Francis' ataraxia and the topology of papal tombs arise out of a duplicity and historical tension between the centrality of Peter the Apostle and the Pope as the successor of Peter, and the histories marked by ecclesial diversity in Rome and the Christian (Dulles, 1987). Pope Francis stressed in his Testament that he wanted to be buried at the Papal Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, thus within the primacy of a papal building that shows the continuity and the communion between Santa Maria Maggiore and St. Peter's Basilica. By requesting what he felt he wanted to do, that is to be close to the *Salus Populi Romani*, he spoke as a Christian pilgrim preparing for eternal life. As a Pope, the successor of Peter, he needed to confirm those who were left behind that he would be awaiting the Resurrection in the materiality of a tomb, as the successor of Peter, and together with them. Thus, Pope Francis, in his human duality, needed to provide the necessary conditions for an ataraxia for himself as well as for those who had been taught, nourished, and accompanied by him as a Pope.

One must remember here the differences given to ataraxia between Pyrrhonism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism. For Pyrrhonism, ataraxia is a result of *epoché*, a suspension of judgement regarding all matters of dogma as non-evident belief (Machuca, 2013; Smith, 2022). For Epicureanism, ataraxia is a key component of the Epicurean conception of pleasure, *hedone*, considered the highest good, in which they recognize a clear distinction between pleasure as a physical category

and pleasure as a mental category (Warren, 2002). In stoicism, ataraxia, a tranquillity of mind, is not the goal of life because the goal of life is a life of virtue according to nature, intended to bring about apatheia, the absence of unhealthy passions (Eckerman, 2021). Thus, because Stoics in a state of apatheia do not care about matters outside themselves, they would be unable to be disturbed by anything at all. It is in this variety of senses that this paper argues that Pope Francis, on planning his tomb, decided to plan the awaiting of the Resurrection with a great protector such as the *Salus Populi Romani* in the Stoic sense, where matters outside the power and the design by God are not reachable by the dead. At that moment of death, four things are the only realities of the dead: death, judgment, heaven, or hell. However, because of his role as Pope, Pope Francis' care needed to extend to the spiritual health of others who would visit the tomb, remember his example, and continue searching for the ataraxia of the peripheries within their earthly life.

The realities of life, death, judgement, and signifiers in a Christian tomb signified an understanding given to the deceased pope by the Christian community rather than others, and the simplicity of the material tomb signifies the absence of agency by the dead who await the Resurrection at the end of time. Only the living have the possibility of aiding the dead by prayers, commendations, and offerings, and the tomb becomes a waiting room rather than the final place of repose. In summary, the topology of the tomb and the ataraxia of the waiting take place in the context in which a person is buried and becomes part of the dead awaiting the Resurrection of the dead. The markers for this context can be found in the rules and semantic understandings of the Catholic Church's beliefs, and the belief in the Resurrection by Pope Francis: "In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in his almighty power, will grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus' Resurrection" (CCC 1994: § 997; John Paul II, 1992).

One year after Pope Francis' burial, a memorial plaque was placed at the right hand of the chapel where he is buried. The plaque, written in Latin, reads in English as follows: "*Francis Supreme Pontiff, who paused 126 times in devout prayer at the feet of the Salus Populi Romani, according to his will, rests in this Papal Basilica.*"

## 9. Conclusion

This paper has explored the planning of a suitable tomb by Pope Francis and the implications not only for the Vatican centrality of St. Peter's Basilica but for a topology of popes' burials and the process of a papal ataraxia as burial diversification and change within the history of the Catholic Church. This paper concludes that tombs signify a continuity of a person's life, and in the case of the Pope, an institution's life, centred in this case on the centrality of the apostle Peter and the Catholic Petrine office. How to combine these two social realities, that of an Ar-

gentine who remembered his grandfather, and a universal pope who has given up his nationality and land of birth to affirm the faith of a global community?

This paper has argued that decisions on tombs, particularly personal tombs, are ridden with individual and social tensions, but at the same time, they are full of ritual and social norms that make the choice easier. Thus, Pope Francis was able to make an informed choice of faith by commissioning a tomb beside the *Salus Populi Romani* with a connection to his Italian roots. However, it is plausible that without thinking about the Petrine Office and the role of Santa Maria Maggiore during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, his wishes would not have been respected. The ataraxia of resting in peace until the Resurrection of the Dead was managed by Pope Francis by following all the plausible canons or the Roman Ordo, but providing an innovation that has opened the way for a re-examination of the agreed “tradition” of tombs and burial for the future popes, including Pope Leo XIV.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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