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POPE'S INFLUENCE IS
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INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY | BROAD OUTREACH | MATTHEW KELLY ON THE STATE OF CATHOLICISM



FILIPPO MONTEFIORE, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

ANYTHING GOES IN TRIBUTES TO POPE

Devotion shown
in creative ways

Matt Alderton
Special for USA TODAY

Prison yards aren't supposed to be joyful. The yard at Italy's largest women's prison, however, was downright merry when inmates gathered to dance there on Oct. 29, 2015. A mass of smiling faces and swaying hips, the inmates at Rebibbia prison outside Rome waved their hands in exultation as they performed a prayerful routine. Thousands of YouTube viewers have since tuned in to watch them sing, shake, step and spin.

They've got rhythm, to be sure. But that's remarkable about these dancers isn't their choreography, but their faith. Performed to the song *Pope is Pop*, by Italian composer Igor Nogarotto, the routine was a tribute to Pope Francis, who had visited the prison several months earlier to wash and kiss the feet of a dozen inmates.

"This is a special dance in honor of Pope Francis because they want to tell him how close they feel to him," prison director Ida del Grosso told Agence France-Presse.

It's a common feeling worldwide. A March 2016 poll by WIN/Gallup International found that Francis is more popular than any other political world leader. President Obama finished in second place 11 points back.

"Unlike [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan from Turkey, Vladimir Putin or even Barack Obama, who is controversial in some parts of the world, the pope's message is universal," says Guy Golan, an associate professor of public relations and public diplomacy at Syracuse University. "His message of love and helping the poor and being a good person is something everybody can relate to regardless of their faith."

That message resonates even more deeply because the messenger is so down-to-earth, says John Allen, president of Crux Catholic Media and author of *The Francis Miracle: Inside the Transformation of the Pope and the Church*. Francis, he points out, drives a

Inmates at the Rebibbia women's prison outside Rome perform a dance in the prison yard in October 2015 in honor of Pope Francis, who had visited the facility.

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TIZIANA FABITZI / AFP/GETTY IMAGES
SuperPope, a mural by Roman street artist MauPal.

‘The new Mandela’

▶ CONTINUED FROM 27

modest car, lives in a modest residence and even cooks his own meals. “He has become a global phenomenon because he not only talks about living simply and being humble; he walks his own talk,” says Allen, who adds that Francis feeds society’s “hunger for heroes.”

“Francis is the new Nelson Mandela — that figure on the global stage who is an unquestioned moral point of reference.”

The pope’s popularity is evident in the breadth of unique tributes paid to him. And prison-yard flash mobs are only the beginning. Here are a few other ways in which Francis fans have expressed their devotion in creative ways.

SEXY SAMBA

In January 2015, a samba troupe in the pope’s native Argentina honored Francis with a risqué performance during Carnival in Gualeguaychu. The 300-member



The Ara Yevi samba troupe performs an homage to Pope Francis during Carnival last year in Gualeguaychu, Argentina. The salute to the Argentine-born pontiff included four floats based on his biography.

NATACHA PISARENKO, AP

comparsa spent a year preparing its tribute, which included four floats representing different aspects of the pope’s biography, each with ornate decorations, elaborate costumes and throngs of near-naked dancers.

“It’s difficult to represent a pope during a Carnival where the girls and boys are not wearing very much clothing, but I think we did it with respect,” says Alan Villalba, communications manager for the Ara Yevi troupe. “Our ... tribute was not common, but it was something truly magical.”

‘SUPER’ SALUTE

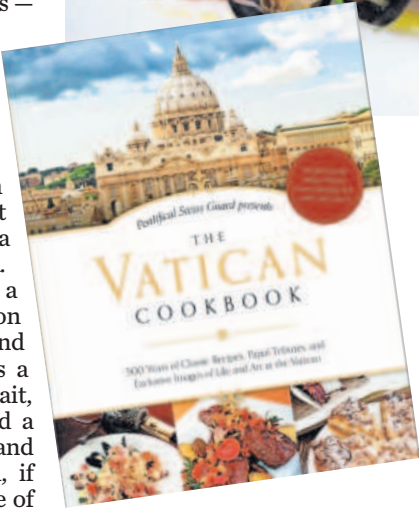
Street artist Mauro Pallotta of Rome — better known by his pseudonym, MauPal — found divine inspiration in 2014. He was reading a Superman comic and watching a documentary on the pope when he had the idea to depict Francis as a spiritual superhero. He subsequently painted a large portrait of a flying Francis — fist extended in the style of Superman, carrying a purse filled with Christian values — that he cut out and pasted on a wall next to the Vatican. The work, which he titled *Super-Pope*, garnered global attention before authorities removed it two days later. Now, Pallotta wants to replicate it in the USA.

“It’s not a superhero; it’s a simple, good, enlightened person who sets a positive example and arrives at the same results as a superhero,” he says of his portrait, whose subject has glasses and a belly instead of heat-vision and super-strength. “A great man, if listened to, can change the fate of the entire world for the better.”

REVERENTIAL RECIPES

No one knows the pope better than the men charged with protecting him: the highly trained soldiers of the elite Pontifical Swiss Guard. Although the unit’s Renaissance-inspired uniforms of yellow, red and blue are unmistakable, the Guard itself is not well known outside the Vatican. To reach potential recruits, the Guard decided to create a promotional pamphlet. When he got wind of the project, Guard soldier and esteemed chef David Geisser offered to turn it into a cookbook.

The *Vatican Cookbook* was published in Switzerland in 2014 and in the USA this spring. It features



The Vatican Cookbook, produced by the Pontifical Swiss Guard, includes such delights as frutti di mare.

more than 70 recipes inspired by papal history and by popes themselves — including Francis, for whom Geisser authored five recipes, such as Argentine empanadas on pepper salad.

“Everybody involved with this book in any way has the highest regard for Pope Francis. We just think he’s wonderful, and we wanted this book to be a tribute to him,” says Thomas Kelly, who co-authored the book’s American edition.

“Food is so fundamental to (Francis’ message of) life and family and sharing ... and we really hope people feel that connection to him when they make these recipes.”