Vatican



Pope Francis appears on a balcony of the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic in Rome, Sunday, July 11, 2021. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Rome — July 11, 2021

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Pope Francis on July 11 made his first public appearance since major intestinal surgery last week, greeting well-wishers as he stood for 10 minutes on a hospital balcony, offering hearty thanks for the prayers for his recovery and calling health care for all a "precious" good.

Francis, 84, has been steadily on the mend, according to the Vatican, following his July 4 scheduled surgery to remove a portion of his colon which had narrowed due to inflammation. But it hasn't said just when he might be discharged. On the morning after his surgery, a Holy See spokesperson said his hospital stay was expected to last seven days, "barring complications."

At first the pontiff's voice sounded on the weak side as he began his remarks after stepping onto a balcony outside his special suite at Gemelli Polyclinic at noon. But he smiled broadly at those gathered below, including some hospital patients well enough to temporarily leave their rooms to cheer for him.

Noon is the hour when traditionally he would have appeared from a window at the Vatican overlooking St. Peter’s Square to recite the Angelus, or prayer. Exactly a week earlier, in his noon remarks he had given no hint that in a few hours he would have entered the hospital for surgery that same night.

"I am happy to be able to keep the Sunday appointment of the Angelus, even here from Gemelli Polyclinic," the pope said. "I thank everyone. I felt your closeness and the support of your prayers,'" Francis said.

"Thank you from my heart!" exclaimed the pontiff, smiling as he peered over the balcony railing to better see the faithful below.

Standing on the balcony with him were some children who are also hospitalized at Gemelli, a major Catholic teaching hospital on the outskirts of Rome. The crowd below clapped often, in encouragement.

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Francis underwent three hours of abdominal surgery under general anesthesia on the evening of July 4, and later that night was described by the Holy See as having responded well.

Reading from prepared remarks, he kept one or both hands on a lectern for support, including when he raised an arm in blessing.

The pope praised the "tenderness" of those who care for the sick, which he said was "like a caress that makes you feel better, eases the pain and picks you up."

"In these days of hospitalization, I experienced yet again how important a good health service is, accessible to all, as it is in Italy and other countries," Francis said.

"We mustn’t lose this precious thing," the pope said. He added that "sometimes it happens in the church that some health care institution, because of poor management, doesn't go well economically, and the first thought that comes to our mind is to sell it," he said. "But the vocation in the church is not to have money, it's to give service,'' Francis said.

Francis added his appreciation and encouragement for all the health care workers and personnel at hospitals, then, referring to the pediatric patients on the balcony with him, said "why do children suffer?"

"Why children suffer is a question that touches the heart," Francis said, asking prayers for them.

Although he stayed at a nonpublic hospital, Italy has a national public health service, and residents can often receive treatment at private hospitals, with the costs reimbursed by the government.

As he usually does on Sundays, Francis spoke of current events and of issues close to his heart. In his balcony remarks, he reiterated his closeness to Haiti's people, as he recalled the assassination last week of its president and the wounding of the first lady. Francis prayed that the people of Haiti could "start going down a path toward a future of peace and of harmony."

The world's environmental fragility has been a major theme of his papacy since it began in 2013. On Sunday, as countless people vacation at the shore, Francis urged people to look after "the health of seas." "No plastic in the sea!" the pope pleaded.

Without citing specific issues, he also voiced hope that "Europe may be united in its founding values," a possible reference to tensions between the European Union leaders and member Hungary over LGBTQ rights crackdowns. Francis noted that Juy 11 marked the feast of St. Benedict, patron saint of the continent.

Francis ended with his usual invitation to faithful. "Don't forget to pray for me," drawing rousing applause.

Besides seeing the faithful again, Francis had another reason to smile on Sunday. Argentina beat Brazil 1-0 in the Copa America soccer final overnight. Francis is a huge soccer fan, and roots for the San Lorenzo squad in his native Buenos Aires.