Pope Francis delivers the Angelus noon prayer from his studio window overlooking St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, Feb. 20, 2022. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

by Associated Press

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VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis on Sunday hailed health care workers as heroes for their service every day, not just during the pandemic, asking the public in St. Peter's

Square to join with him in applause.

Francis clapped his hands in what he said was a "great thank you" for health workers, including volunteers, who care for the sick. Italy was marking Sunday as a national day to pay tribute to health care workers.

The national professional association of doctors and dentists counts 370 physicians who have died of COVID-19 in Italy.

"We must recall the many doctors, nurses, volunteers, who are close to the sick, treat them, make them feel better, help them," Francis said in his weekly appearance from a window of the Apostolic Palace overlooking the square.

No one saves themselves, Francis said. "In illness we need someone who saves us, who helps us."

He hailed "the heroic health care personnel, who made plain this heroism in COVID times, but the heroism remains every day."

"For our doctors, nurses, volunteers, applause and a great thank you," Francis said. He then started clapping and hundreds of people in the square below did, too.