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Pope Francis, sitting, holds hands with African Jesuits standing in a circle

Pope Francis holds hands and prays with a dozen Jesuits working in South Sudan during a meeting Feb. 4, 2023, in Juba. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis told Jesuits working in Congo that he had taken seriously the promise he and all Jesuits make to not seek offices of authority and power in the church and, in fact, he twice declined becoming a bishop.

But, he said, in May 1992 he accepted his appointment as auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, because the nuncio presented him with a letter from the Jesuit superior general saying he could accept.

"When I made that vow, I meant it," the pope said.

Francis met with Jesuits in Congo and in South Sudan and responded to their questions during his visit to the two countries Jan. 31-Feb. 5. The Jesuit journal La Civiltà Cattolica, which publishes transcripts of Francis' meetings with Jesuits abroad,

released the texts of the Africa meetings Feb. 16.

Asked by a fellow Jesuit why he accepted becoming a bishop in Argentina when he had made the promise, the pope said he had declined when asked to become bishop of San Miguel and again when asked to become bishop of a diocese in the northern province of Corrientes.

"The papal nuncio, to encourage me to accept, told me that there were the ruins of the Jesuit past there," the pope told the Jesuits in Congo Feb. 2. "I replied that I did not want to be the guardian of ruins, and I refused."

When he accepted the appointment to Buenos Aires, he said, he did so "in a spirit of obedience."

Now that he is pope and makes those appointments, Francis said his preference is to choose someone who is not a Jesuit, but the greater good of the church always prevails.

With the papal trip to Africa coming soon after the revelation that Francis had long ago prepared a letter of resignation in case he became too ill or infirm to carry out the duties of the papacy, one of the Congolese Jesuits asked him if he really was planning on stepping down.

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"Look," he said, "it's true that I wrote my resignation two months after I was elected and delivered this letter to Cardinal (Tarcisio) Bertone. I don't know where this letter is. I did it in case I had some health problem that would prevent me from exercising my ministry and was not fully conscious and able to resign."

"However," he added, "this does not at all mean that resigning popes should become, let's say, a 'fashion,' a normal thing."

The late Pope Benedict XVI "had the courage to do it because he did not feel up to continuing due to his health," the 86-year-old pope said, but at least for now, it is not "on my agenda. I believe that the pope's ministry is 'ad vitam' (for life). I see no reason why it should not be so."

The question came up again Feb. 4 when he met with a dozen Jesuits in Juba, South Sudan.

"Are you considering resignation?" a Jesuit asked him.

"No, it has not crossed my mind," he replied.

Another Jesuit in Juba asked the pope how he prays.

"Clearly, I say Mass and recite the Office" each day, he said. "Then sometimes I pray the rosary, sometimes I take the Gospel and meditate on it. But it depends a lot on the day."

For example, the pope said, in Kinshasa Feb. 1, "when I met with people who were victims of the war in the east of the country, I heard tremendous stories of the wounded, maimed, abused. They told unspeakable things. Clearly, I certainly could not pray with the Song of Songs after that. One must pray immersed in reality."