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Pope Francis prays the Angelus from the balcony of his room at Gemelli hospital in this file ph

Pope Francis prays the Angelus from the balcony of his room at Gemelli hospital in this file photo taken in Rome July 11, 2021, when the pope was in the hospital for 10 days to recover from a scheduled colon surgery. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — March 29, 2023
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After having difficulty breathing, Pope Francis went to Rome's Gemelli hospital March 29 where he was diagnosed with a respiratory infection that will be treated in the hospital for several days, the Vatican press office said.

In the past few days, the statement said, "Francis complained of some respiratory difficulties and this afternoon he went to Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic for some medical tests. The outcome of these showed a respiratory infection -- a COVID-19 infection was excluded -- that will require several days of appropriate medical treatment in the hospital."

"Francis is touched by the many messages he's received and expresses his gratitude for the closeness and prayer," the press office said.

About six hours earlier the press office had said the pope was at the hospital for "previously planned tests."

Before acknowledging the pope would be hospitalized for a few days, a Vatican official said audiences with the pope scheduled for March 30 and 31 had been canceled "to make room in his agenda for the tests to continue" if needed.

Several Italian media outlets and the Rome correspondent for the Argentine newspaper La Nacion reported, however, that Francis was taken to Gemelli by ambulance.

La Nacion said that "a source close" to the pope told the newspaper that after his weekly general audience that morning, the pope began to feel chest pain and was advised to go to the hospital immediately.

The Gemelli hospital, part of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, keeps a suite of rooms reserved for the popes on its 10th floor.

In a late January interview with the Associated Press, Francis had said that the diverticulitis, or bulges in his intestinal wall, had "returned," but he insisted he was in good health for his age, which is 86.

Francis had spent 10 days in Gemelli hospital in July 2021 after undergoing a three-hour surgery that included a left hemicolectomy, which is the removal of the descending part of the colon, a surgery that can be recommended to treat diverticulitis.

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Three days after surgery, the Vatican said, "the final histological examination has confirmed a severe diverticular stenosis with signs of sclerosing diverticulitis," a hardening of the tissue. The statement seemed to indicate that the biopsy showed no cancerous cells, although it did not say so explicitly, and rumors began.

Interviewed by the Reuters news agency in July 2022, the pope was asked about rumors that doctors had found cancer.

According to Reuters, Francis laughed and said: "They didn't tell me about it. They didn't tell me."

But, really, he said, "they explained everything to me well -- full stop."

The cancer rumor, he said, "is court gossip. The court spirit is still there in the Vatican. And if you think about it, the Vatican is the last European court of an absolute monarchy."

In 1957, at the age of 20, Francis was hospitalized after being misdiagnosed with the flu. In the book, *Let us Dream*, written with Austen Ivereigh, the pope said, "Straightaway they took a liter and a half of water out of the lung, and I remained there fighting for my life. The following November they operated to take out the upper right lobe of one of the lungs."

While the pope can sometimes be heard breathing heavily, he has insisted the surgery had no lasting impact on his health.