Vatican

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Pope Francis blesses faithful with olive and palm branches before celebrating the Palm Sunday's mass in St. Peter's Square at The Vatican Sunday, April 2, 2023 a day after being discharged from the Agostino Gemelli University Hospital in Rome, where he has been treated for bronchitis, The Vatican said. The Roman Catholic Church enters Holy Week, retracing the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection three days later on Easter Sunday. (AP Photo/Filippo Monteforte, pool)

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Bundled in a long, white coat and battling a hoarse voice, Pope Francis presided over Mass in St. Peter's Square before tens of thousands of faithful on Palm Sunday, a day after he left a Rome hospital where he was treated for bronchitis.

The sun broke through the clouds during the Mass, one of the longest services on the Church's calendar, as Francis, red vestments placed over his coat, sat in a chair under a canopy erected in the square.

He took his place there after standing and clutching a braided palm branch in a popemobile that drove at the tail end of a long, solemn procession of cardinals, other prelates and rank-and-file Catholics. Participants carried palm fronds or olive tree branches.

Francis, 86, received antibiotics administered intravenously during his three-day stay. His last previous appearance in St. Peter's Square saw him conduct his regular Wednesday public audience. He was taken to Rome's Gemelli Polyclinic that same day after feeling ill.

His voice sounded strong as he opened the Mass, but quickly turned strained. Despite the hoarseness, Francis read a 15-minute-long homily, occasionally adding off-the-cuff remarks for emphasis or gesturing with a hand.

The homily focused on moments when people feel "extreme pain, love that fails, or is rejected or betrayed.'' Francis cited "children who are rejected or aborted," as well as broken marriages, "forms of social exclusion, injustice and oppression, (and) the solitude of sickness."

Deviating from his prepared speech, Francis spoke about a homeless German man who recently died, "alone, abandoned," under the colonnade circling St. Peter's Square, where homeless persons often sleep.

"I, too, need Jesus to caress me and be near to me,'' Francis said.

Concern over abandonment threaded through his homily. "Entire peoples are exploited and abandoned; the poor live on our streets and we look the other way; migrants are no longer faces but numbers; prisoners are disowned, people written off as problems," Francis said.

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The pope also referred to "young people who feel a great emptiness inside without anyone really listening to their cry of pain," and who "find no other path but that of suicide."

Palm Sunday marks Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem in the time leading up to his crucifixion, which Christians observe on Good Friday.

At the end of Mass, Francis greeted the Romans, tourists and pilgrims who had flocked to the square, noting that many in the crowd of 60,000 had come from afar.

"I thank you for your participation and prayers, that in the last days you intensified,'' the pontiff said, a reference to the many wishes he received for a quick recovery during his hospitalization. "Thanks!"

Francis’ appearance on April 2 opened a heavy schedule of Holy Week appointments, including a Holy Thursday Mass at a juvenile prison in Rome. Holy Week culminates on April 9 with Easter Sunday Mass, which recalls the Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection.

Francis said Holy Week will see “more intense prayer” for the "martyred Ukrainian people.'' In a reference to Russia's war in Ukraine, he noted that the olive branches Catholics wave on Palm Sunday are symbols of Jesus' peace.

Then, the cardinals greeted Francis one by one, some shaking his hand or chatting briefly with him as he sat in the wheelchair he uses to cope with a chronic knee problem. At least one prelate gave him a kiss on each cheek.

Finally, Francis went back aboard the open-topped popemobile to loop around and through the square, as he smiled and waved to the faithful, many of whom held aloft national flags. At one point during the nearly 20-minute jaunt over the cobblestones, he was driven down a stretch of the boulevard lined with cafes and souvenir shops that leads to St. Peter's Square.