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Pope Francis raises his hand as he speaks from a clear podium at his window

Pope Francis smiles and waves at visitors gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after praying the Angelus June 18, 2023. Francis, released from the hospital two days ago, also thanked the medical staff who had cared for him. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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With a slightly quivering voice, before leading the recitation of the Angelus prayer, Pope Francis thanked everyone who prayed for him and cared for him while he was in the hospital.

Greeting an estimated 15,000 people gathered in St. Peter's Square June 18, two days after he was released from Rome's Gemelli hospital following surgery to repair a hernia, the pope thanked everyone who "showed me affection, care and friendship and assured me of their prayerful support."

"This human and spiritual closeness has been of great help and comfort to me," the pope said. "Thank you all, thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart!"

As is customary, Francis also commented on the day's Gospel reading, Matthew 9:36—10:8, focusing on the line that Jesus sent his apostles out to preach that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

"It is the same proclamation with which Jesus began his preaching," the pope said, telling everyone that "the kingdom of God, that is, his lordship of love, has come near, it comes in our midst."

The good news of God's closeness, the pope said, should fill people with trust because "if the God of heaven is close, we are not alone on earth."

When sharing the Gospel with others, he said, the first thing to let them know is that "God is not far away, but he is a father, he knows you and he loves you; he wants to take you by the hand, even when you travel on steep and rugged paths, even when you fall and struggle to get up again and get back on track."

In fact, the pope said, "often in the moments when you are at your weakest, you can feel his presence all the more strongly. He knows the path, he is with you, he is your Father!"

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The best way to proclaim God's nearness, he said, is with "gestures of love and hope in the name of the Lord; not saying many words, but making gestures," as Jesus instructed the apostles: "'Heal the sick,' he says, 'raise the dead, heal the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.'"

After reciting the Angelus, Francis noted that June 20 is the U.N.-proclaimed World Refugee day and spoke of his "great sadness and deep sorrow" after a fishing boat, packed with migrants -- estimates ranged from 500 to 700 men, women and children onboard -- sank June 14 off the Greek coast as it attempted to travel from Tobruk, Libya, to southern Italy.

Just over 100 people, all men, were rescued and, as of June 18, 78 bodies had been recovered.

"It seems the sea was calm," the pope said.

There are conflicting reports from the Greek coast guard, the European border agency and humanitarian organizations about whether the boat was in distress and about what caused it to capsize.

Nevertheless, Francis said, "I renew my prayer for those who lost their lives and I implore that always everything possible be done to prevent such tragedies."

The pope also prayed for "the young students, victims of the brutal attack that took place against a school in western Uganda" late June 16. Officials said members of the Allied Democratic Forces rebel group attacked a secondary school near the Uganda border with Congo, killing 41 people and kidnapping six others.

"This struggle, this war, is everywhere," the pope said. "Let us pray for peace!"