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Pope Francis delivers the Angelus noon prayer from his studio's window overlooking St.Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Sunday, Jan. 14, 2024. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis said Jan. 14 that if he can, he'll visit his native Argentina in the latter part of 2024, a trip that would see him there for the first time in his nearly 11-year-old papacy and while his fellow Argentines are suffering economically.

Francis hasn't been back to his homeland since he was elected pope in 2013.

In an interview with the host of a talk show on a private Italian TV channel, Francis said he is worrying about Argentina's people because "they are suffering much," an apparent reference to the ravaged economy in that country.

From his residence at the Vatican, Francis, 87, told the interviewer on the show "Che Tempo Che Fa" that he plans to visit Polynesia in August and that an Argentine trip would come sometime after that this year.

Late last year, Francis said Argentina's new president, Javier Milei, had invited him.

Francis has long been dogged by questions about why he hasn't gone home since he became pope.

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During the new Argentine president's election campaign, Milei, a self-described "anarcho-capitalist," called Francis an "imbecile" for defending social justice. The pope, who had a long conversation with Milei after he won, has indicated he has forgiven him for the campaign rhetoric.

Asked if he would go to Argentina and if he were worried about Argentines, Francis replied: "Yes, I worry because the people are suffering so much. It's a difficult moment for the country."

"Under planning is the possibility to make a trip [to Argentina] in the second part of the year,'' Francis said, also noting that timeframe takes into account that the country has a new government.

"I'd like to go,'' the pope added, making a reference to the "10 years" since he has been away.

With Argentina's annual inflation rate running above 200%, Milei has pledged to reduce government regulations and payrolls and allow the privatization of state-run

industries as a way to boost exports and investment. The cutbacks have already drawn protests but Milei has vowed to forge ahead.