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Pope Francis celebrates the Palm Sunday mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Sunday, March 24, 2024. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Pope Francis decided at the last minute to skip his homily during Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter’s Square, avoiding a strenuous speech at the start of a busy Holy Week that will test his increasingly frail health.

Hobbled by bad knees and persistent respiratory problems, Francis also didn’t participate in the procession of cardinals around the obelisk in the piazza at the start of the Mass. Instead, the 87-year-old pontiff blessed the palm fronds and olive branches carried by the faithful from the altar.

Francis had been expected to deliver a homily halfway through the service and a prepared text had been distributed to journalists. But when an aide presented Francis with his glasses to begin reading, the pope made clear he wouldn't deliver the remarks, leaving the crowd waiting in silence.

Vatican officials didn't immediately explain why. The Vatican press office later said the homily was replaced by "a moment of silence and prayer."

Francis though did pronounce prayers throughout the service and offered a long appeal for peace at the end of the Mass. He said he was praying for the families of those killed in what he called an "inhuman" attack at a suburban Moscow concert hall and also asked for prayers for "the martyred Ukraine" and people of Gaza.

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Vatican officials estimated some 60,000 people attended the Mass, held under a sunny, breezy spring sky. Francis spent several minutes greeting them from the popemobile, making several loops around the piazza at the end of the service.

Palm Sunday kicks off a busy week for Francis leading up to Easter Sunday when the faithful commemorate the resurrection of Christ. On Thursday, Francis is due to travel to a Rome women’s prison for the traditional washing of the feet ritual. On Friday he is scheduled to preside over the torchlit Way of the Cross procession at Rome’s Colosseum re-enacting Christ’s crucifixion.

The following day marks the Easter Vigil, during which Francis presides over a solemn nighttime service in the basilica, followed by Easter Sunday Mass in St.

Peter’s Square and his noontime blessing from the loggia above.

The Holy Week schedule is challenging for popes even under the best of circumstances. But that is especially true this year for Francis, who has been battling on and off all winter what he and the Vatican have described as a case of the flu, bronchitis or a cold. For the last several weeks he has occasionally asked an aide to read aloud his speeches and catechism lessons to spare him the effort.

On Sunday, there was no substitute called in, and the homily was skipped. Vatican officials said the prepared text was to be considered as never having existed. Usually, the pope doesn't deliver a homily at Easter, but he traditionally offers reflections on Palm Sunday.

Even when he isn't sick, Francis often speaks in a whisper and seems to run out of breath easily. He had part of one lung removed when he was a young man because of a respiratory infection.

At this time last year, he was hospitalized for three days with an acute case of bronchitis, but then rallied to get through Holy Week. He has been hospitalized two other times during his pontificate for abdominal surgery, including one 10-day stay in 2021 to remove a part of his large intestine.

At the end of the Mass, Francis offered a long prayer for peace for all those suffering from war, and for the Lord to comfort the victims of the "vile terrorist attack" in Moscow.

"May he convert the hearts of those who protect, organize and carry out these inhuman acts that offend God, who commanded us not to kill," Francis said.

Without citing Moscow, Francis also asked the faithful not to forget Ukraine's suffering. He noted many Ukrainians are now without electricity as a result of "intense attacks on infrastructure, which not only bring death and suffering, but also the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe of even bigger dimensions."

"Please don't forget the martyred Ukraine," he said. "And let us also think of Gaza, which is suffering so much, and so many other places of war."