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A portrait of Pope Francis is displayed at the Basilica San Jose de Flores in Buenos Aires, Arge

A portrait of Pope Francis is displayed at the Basilica San Jose de Flores in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Feb. 21, 2025, where Pope Francis, then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, once served. The 88-year-old pontiff was in critical condition Feb. 22 after he suffered a prolonged asthmatic respiratory crisis while being treated for pneumonia and a complex lung infection, the Vatican said. (OSV News photo/Tomas Cuesta, Reuters)



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Pope Francis remains in a critical state on his 11th day of hospitalization, but the Vatican said on Feb. 24 his conditions are slightly improving.

"Even today there were no episodes of asthmatic respiratory crises; some laboratory tests improved," said a statement released at 6:40 p.m. local time. This marks an improvement from 48 hours ago when the Vatican said the 88-year-old pontiff had experienced a sustained respiratory crisis.

In the latest Vatican statement, it was noted that the pope continues to receive supplemental oxygen; it is now being administered at a reduced flow.

On Feb. 24, the Vatican announced that the pope was experiencing mild kidney failure. Today's bulletin noted that the situation is still being monitored but is not presently a "cause for concern."

The doctors continue to monitor the fragile health of the octogenarian pontiff and said that at present it would be imprudent to offer a prognosis.

Earlier in the day on Monday, Francis received the Eucharist, and according to the Vatican, in the afternoon he engaged in some work. This evening, the pope called the parish priest in Gaza "to express his paternal closeness," as he has done almost daily since Israel's siege of the Gaza Strip began.

Bishop Claudio Giuliodori, the ecclesiastical assistant to the Catholic University of the Sacred

Bishop Claudio Giuliodori, the ecclesiastical assistant to the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, which includes Rome's Gemelli hospital, celebrates Mass and leads prayers for Pope Francis in the hospital chapel Feb. 24. (CNS/Vatican Media)

A medical specialist interviewed by the National Catholic Reporter suggests there is hope for the pope's recovery, though it would likely be prolonged and challenging.

Dr. Barbara Moscatelli, a top pulmonary specialist in Rome, said the pope's complications over the weekend were alarming but not surprising for a patient of his age and fragility.



Dr. Barbara Moscatelli (Courtesy of Barbara Moscatelli)

"These are fairly common occurrences," said Moscatelli, who worked for 35 years at Rome's Fatebenefratelli Hospital. "We seemed to be out of the tunnel, but we need to keep in mind we're talking about an extremely frail, elderly patient in whom the infection may have passed into the bloodstream."

Moscatelli warned that sepsis, a systemic infection, might have potentially developed from the initial lung infection.

"From the pulmonary infection, a more generalized, much more serious infection can occur, which also seems to have been well treated and fairly well contained, although the data we have are really few," said Moscatelli, who served as head of the respiratory pathophysiology and thoracic endoscopy service at Fatebenefratelli Hospital.

Sepsis can lead to multi-organ involvement, and in Francis' case, concerns over kidney inefficiency were found, as the Vatican announced on Sunday.

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"It is an infection that is no longer just confined to the lung parenchyma, the lung itself, but having gone around the body may have involved the kidneys. This is part of the picture of sepsis," Moscatelli said.

While antibiotics are critical in treating infections, the medicine can sometimes harm kidney function, adding another layer of complexity to the recovery process.

However, she emphasized that "this is a situation that could completely regress, even if it is a serious situation."

Despite the severity of his condition, Moscatelli said she remains cautiously optimistic about the pope's potential to recover, particularly given the medical interventions he has received.

"There is definitely potential" for recovery, she said.

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"The fact that he is lucid, that he is also able to work, and that there was no need for actual mechanical ventilation but only the high-flow oxygen cannula, these are elements that make me think that this condition might be reversible."

Key warning signs to watch for would be "the resurgence of fever, the drop in blood pressure and the cardiovascular system no longer bearing the disease condition itself."

Given the pontiff's advanced age and preexisting health concerns, she said "there are so many things that can happen in such a condition."

She said, "We are all praying that it will be resolved as soon as possible, but this is an extremely long path full of obstacles."

As of today, this marks the longest hospitalization of Francis' 12-year papacy. As the health crisis has grown, there has been an outpouring of support and prayer services organized on behalf of the ailing pontiff.

At 9 p.m. this evening, in a cold and damp St. Peter's Square, Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin, presided over a special rosary service.

From the time of the apostles, the people of God have gathered to pray for Peter and his successors whenever they faced trials or ill health, said the Vatican's secretary of state.

The cardinal was joined by many of the Rome-based cardinals and Curia officials in prayer for the pope's recovery.

And as he knelt alone in prayer under an icon of the Virgin Mary, adorned by fresh flowers, the voices of thousands of lay faithful from all over the world that had gathered in the square joined their voices in union.

This story has been updated with reporting about the evening rosary service.

The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

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