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Pope Francis waves as he leads the weekly audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Feb. 18, 2015. He died April 21 at age 88. (CNS/Reuters/Giampiero Sposito)



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Pope Francis, history's first pontiff from the Global South, has died at age 88 following a months-long respiratory illness, setting the stage for a high-stakes secretive election to determine his successor.

"The Bishop of Rome, Francis, has returned to the house of the Father," Cardinal Kevin Farrell announced early Monday (April 21) from the chapel of the Vatican guesthouse where Francis resided. "His entire life has been dedicated to the service of the Lord and His Church."

"He taught us to live the values of the Gospel with fidelity, courage and universal love, especially in favor of the poorest and most marginalized. With immense gratitude for his example as a true disciple of the Lord Jesus, we commend the soul of Pope Francis to the infinite merciful love of the One and Triune God," Farrell said.

Francis died at 7:35 a.m. local time, and the Vatican announced his death two hours later. On Monday evening, the Vatican said that Francis had experienced a cerebral stroke about 7 a.m. He then fell into a coma and died about a half hour later.

The pope's death followed the busy Easter Tridduuum, during which he made several public appearances, although he did not lead any of this year's Holy Week services. On Easter Sunday, he met briefly with U.S. Vice President JD Vance, whose comments on immigration and theology had drawn the pope's public rebuke.

At the end of the Easter Mass in St. Peter’s Square, the pope appeared in his wheelchair and gave the traditional Easter blessing from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica. His spoke in a voice weak as shouts of *viva il papa*! ("long live the pope") rippled through the square. He later made a tour of the square in his popemobile, drawing enthusiastic cheers.

Catholics, well-wishers and Vatican watchers had been speculating about the pope's death, whether he might resign and possible successor since he entered Rome's Gemelli hospital on Feb. 14 after several weeks of struggling to deliver speeches and

experiencing shortness of breath. During this fourth — and longest — hospitalization of his papacy — the pontiff's doctors warned that Francis was a fragile patient with a history of chronic bronchitis and pulmonary issues that made his illness difficult to treat.

He was discharged on March 23 after a five-week stay where he twice nearly lost his life. Despite a doctor-mandated convalescence of two months, the pope has since then made a number of surprise public appearances.

The death of the trailblazing pope leaves the Catholic Church at a crossroads. As members of the College of Cardinals — the elite body of churchmen responsible for electing the next pope — prepare to head into conclave, they will have to decide how the 2,000-year-old institution operates in the modern world.

Francis' death brings to a halt a period of rapid change in the Vatican, where women ascended into new ranks within the hierarchy, where concern for migrants and climate change superseded issues of gender and sexuality and where the church engaged all its members.

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But despite the breakneck speed of reform under Francis, he leaves behind an incomplete record. Although he enacted major new legislation on clergy sexual abuse, victims still lament the lack of transparency and accountability in how church law is implemented. And for all his efforts to make the Catholic Church more welcoming to women and LGBTQ Catholics, church reform leaders lament that many impediments to their full inclusion remain.



Pope Francis meets a group of nuns during his weekly general audience in the Pope Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, on Aug. 30, 2023. (AP/Andrew Medichini, File)

At the same time, Francis' conservative detractors — who view his changes as out of sync with the church's longstanding tradition — will likely advocate to seize this moment to seek a course correction.

This heightens the stakes for a conclave that will serve as a referendum on Francis' legacy and a moment of reckoning for the unfinished business he left behind — all while trying to preserve some form of unity in a global church of over 1.3 billion Catholics.

While Francis left an indelible stamp on the College of Cardinals, appointing two-thirds of the men who will select his successor, there's no guarantee that they will gather in the conclave to choose a candidate in the mold of Francis.



A person holds a rosary, an image of Mary and the Christ Child, and an image of Pope Francis as people join Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, in reciting the rosary for Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Feb. 24. (OSV News/Guglielmo Mangiapane)

Over the course of his pontificate, Francis greatly diversified the ranks of the college, giving the cardinal's red hat to clergy from nearly 30 countries that had previously never before been represented in the select group.

When the cardinal-electors assemble at the Vatican in the coming weeks, representing 70 countries around the world, many of the men will be getting to know each other for the first time. Predicting the papal successor will be a challenge because there are no political parties in the Catholic Church indicating the exact theological orientations and pastoral priorities of the cardinals, particularly those lacking major public profiles.



Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, pictured at Mass in 2024 (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

There is no clear favorite heading into the conclave. Yet there are frontrunners who are certain to be discussed, including:

- Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin, 70, who served as Francis' longtime secretary of state;

- Italian Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, 59, a Fransican friar, who is the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem;
- Hungarian Cardinal Péter Erdő, 72, the archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest and a leading favorite among conservatives;
- Filipino Cardinal Luis Tagle, 67, head of the Vatican's evangelization office;
- Canadian Cardinal Gérald Cyprien Lacroix, 67, archbishop of Quebec who served as a member of Francis' Council of Cardinal Advisers;
- American Cardinal Robert Prevost, 69, head of the Vatican office for advising the pope on the appointment of bishops;
- Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech, 68, head of the Vatican's synod office.

But as the proverbial wisdom here in Italy warns: "He who enters the conclave as pope, leaves it as a cardinal."

A statue of St. John Paul II is seen outside of Rome's Gemelli hospital June 8, 2023, where Pop

A statue of St. John Paul II outside of Gemelli hospital where Francis was treated (CNS photo/Justin McLellan)

During his hospital treatment in recent months, the pope received treatment from a medical team of seven specialists on the 10th floor of the private Roman hospital that has long been associated with popes. During his nearly three-decade papacy, Pope John Paul II was treated there on nearly 10 occasions.

Per Francis' wishes, his funeral is to be held in St. Peter's Square.

It will mark the first funeral for a reigning pope in two decades. The funeral for Pope John Paul II in 2005 drew about 4 million mourners to Rome. The last papal funeral — that of retired Pope Benedict XVI — took place in January 2023 and marked a rare occasion of a sitting pope, Francis, presiding over the funeral Mass of his predecessor.

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His funeral Mass is expected to be attended by scores of heads of state, alongside church leaders and faithful from all over the globe.

Francis will then be buried at his beloved Roman Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore — the first pope to be interred outside the Vatican in more than a century and a fitting resting place for a man who prized his independence.

Francis first revealed in a December 2023 interview that he intended to be buried at Santa Maria Maggiore, noting that he wanted to be close to his favorite icon of the Madonna and at a place he would go to pray before and after his international travels.

The day after his election as the 265th successor to St. Peter on March 13, 2013, Francis went to Santa Maria Maggiore to pray.

After his burial there, the 135 cardinals from around the world tasked with electing his successor will begin closed-door meetings to discuss the future of the church and the profile of the man they would like to next lead them.

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This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.