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Pope Francis prays the Angelus from the balcony of his room at Gemelli hospital in this file ph

Pope Francis prays the Angelus from the balcony of his room at Gemelli hospital in this file photo taken in Rome July 11, 2021, when the pope was in the hospital for 10 days to recover from a scheduled colon surgery. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Despite his illness, age and hospitalization, Pope Francis is still demonstrating his deep faith and exercising his role as pontiff, said a cardinal who once served as an auxiliary bishop of Rome.

"The pope offers profound meaning to human suffering — that same suffering that he himself has always flagged as part of the 'throwaway culture,'" Cardinal Augusto Paolo Lojudice of Siena, Italy, told the Italian newspaper La Stampa.

Since being hospitalized Feb. 14 and undergoing treatment for double pneumonia, the pope has become a witness to the same conditions many elderly and ill people face, said the cardinal, who ministered in the Diocese of Rome's poorest and roughest neighborhoods from 2015 to 2019.

It is another example of how the pope feels he is simply another member of "the people of God," while also leading the universal church, he said Feb. 26.

In fact, the pope has continued to work, nominating new bishops, issuing new rules for the governance of Vatican City State, calling the Holy Family church in Gaza, and most recently, advancing some sainthood causes, said Bishop Francesco Savino of Cassano all'Jonio, vice president of the Italian bishops' conference.

"Even during this time of suffering Pope Francis is serving the church even more," he told La Repubblica Feb. 26. "He is extremely hard-working" and offering "stupendous testimony" from a pulpit of pain.

Savino said the church and the world still need Francis, "his witness, his courage, his being a reforming pope who has launched processes for change."

Lojudice said the pope has "knocked down walls and opened new roads in the church. Perhaps only with time will we be able to fully understand the scale of his pontificate."

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Every pope has had his supporters and detractors, the cardinal said, "and Pope Francis is no exception: there are those who love him and those who criticize him."

"But his commitment to peace, justice and the least has won over the hearts of many people, believers and nonbelievers," the cardinal said. "His affection for humanity is evident" and is being reciprocated with the outpouring of prayers and concern from around the world.

Being in the hospital is "a strong sign of the pope's humanity," Lojudice said. He is the vicar of Christ, but he is also a man, "like all of us, with his frailties, weaknesses" and advancing age.

"And, precisely in this condition, he continues to give witness to his faith and his role, even with the limitations posed by illness," he said.

Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, prefect of Congregation for Saints' Causes, told Corriere della Sera newspaper Feb. 26 that he is not surprised the pope is still working, including advancing several sainthood causes Feb. 24.

It isn't just a question of his tireless energy and mental toughness, but it is more so a sign of his spiritual strength, he said.

"The fact is that Francis powers his days with long moments of reflection and prayer. It's like fueling up before a long journey. He wakes up before dawn every morning and devotes at least two hours to personal prayer," Semeraro said.

Savino underlined the importance of the church coming together to pray for Francis.

"Prayer is our strength, it is the most beautiful way to be by Pope Francis' side," he said.

"It is beautiful to think of our hands raised toward heaven and the doctors' hands on our dear pope's body and both of these support and help him so that he can return home as soon as possible," the bishop said.