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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)

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Vatican City — March 3, 2025
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Pope Francis' extended hospitalization and care is a reminder that every human being, especially the frail or elderly, must be given proper care, said Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life.

"What I would hope is that what we do for the pope we must do for everybody, for all the elderly, for all those who are alone, for all the abandoned," he told reporters on the sidelines of a news conference at the Vatican March 3.

Entering his 18th day at Rome's Gemelli Hospital for double pneumonia, the 88-year-old pope "is exercising an extraordinary magisterium on frailty. Not with words, but with his body," said the archbishop who turns 80 in April. "The pope is reminding every one of us, all people, starting with us elderly, that we are all frail and therefore we must take care of each other."

The pope's prognosis is guarded, which means doctors do not feel he is out of danger, especially since during his stay he has had two respiratory crises, which have required administering supplemental oxygen and a brief time of non-invasive mechanical ventilation.

The archbishop was asked about the Catholic Church's position on medical treatment and care, a teaching that holds that it is not licit to suspend treatments that are required to maintain essential life functions as long as the body can benefit from them, while it is licit to renounce aggressive treatments or disproportionate medical procedures that provide only a precarious or painful extension of life.

How does the church's position apply to a pope, the reporter asked. "What would happen?"

"The pontiff is a person like every believer so we say that even when someone cannot be cured, one must always provide care," a person must always be accompanied, the archbishop said.

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A pope would follow the same "path" for all Christians, he added, recalling Francis' support of the cessation of aggressive treatments in his speech to European members of the World Medical Association in 2017.

The pope had said that people who are dying must be accompanied by loved ones and the care of medical professionals, but there is no requirement that every means available must be used to prolong their lives.

"Even if we know that we cannot always guarantee healing or a cure, we can and must always care for the living, without ourselves shortening their life, but also without futilely resisting their death," the pope had said.

Paglia was asked what the pope meant by feeling "blessed" in his written Angelus message March 2 when he said he felt "in my heart the 'blessing' that is hidden within frailty because it is precisely in these moments that we learn even more to trust in the Lord."

The pope feels the support of so many people's prayers, the archbishop said. And it would be beautiful if every man and woman who was hurting could feel the same kind of support from people's prayers "and not, as is often the case, abandoned and eliminated."

"How much do you miss Francis at a time like this" when his message makes him seem so alone? the archbishop was asked.

"We miss him so much. That's why it is good we pray for him to come back soon," he said, and to "lend his voice even publicly because we need men like him who are really universal and not just partisan."