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Pope Francis washes the feet of inmates during his visit to the Regina Coeli detention center in Rome, Thursday, March 29, 2018, where he celebrated the "Missa in Coena Domini". (Vatican Media/AP)

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As Pope Francis remains hospitalized at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome, Italian prisoners are praying for his recovery, Catholic chaplains said, noting the pope's longtime focus on addressing the needs of incarcerated people.

Fr. Raffaele Grimaldi, inspector general of chaplains in Italian prisons, told a small group of Vatican reporters on Friday (March 7) that he sent a note to every prison chaplain in the country to pray for the pope.

"Ever since Pope Francis began his Petrine ministry in 2013, he has always had a special regard toward people who are incarcerated," Grimaldi said, adding that "you can't imagine how much suffering is in the hearts of prisoners in seeing the pope at the hospital and suffering."

Francis admitted himself to the hospital on Feb. 14, and doctors diagnosed him with a polymicrobial infection causing pneumonia in both lungs. While the pope has had some severe respiratory crises during his hospitalization, his condition was stable as of Monday (March 10).

"Right now, all of the people of God — and especially detainees — always pray to God that the pope will recover, whether it's in the silence of their cells or in the celebrations led by the chaplains," Grimaldi said.

Francis' closeness to prisoners has been a regular theme during his pontificate. He has met with prison chaplains on many occasions, supporting their ministry and highlighting the theme of mercy.

During the Holy Thursday celebrations leading up to Easter last year, he washed the feet of female prisoners, marking the first time a pope washed the feet of women. In previous years, he knelt to wash the feet of other inmates, including migrants and refugees.

Francis became the first pontiff to open a Holy Door in a penitentiary instead of at a basilica on Dec. 26, 2024. The year 2025 is considered a Jubilee Year, or an anniversary celebration for the church where faithful can cross the four Holy Doors and obtain forgiveness for their sins. Marking the event, the pope opened the second Holy Door at the Rebibbia Prison Complex in Rome, the largest penitentiary in Italy and capable of housing over 2,000 inmates.

Already breathing heavily and struggling to walk, the pope opened the Holy Door at the prison, followed by a small crowd of incarcerated people, security guards and Italian officials.

"I wanted each one of us, all of us in here and out there, to have the chance to open the doors of the heart and understand that hope does not disappoint," the pope said at the time.

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The Rebibbia prison "is a symbol for every prison in the world," Grimaldi said, "to tell the whole world to look inside our prisons."

He said, for those who are incarcerated there, the Holy Door is "a sign of clemency, a sign of closeness and hope."

This coming April, a delegation led by Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, the head of the Italian Bishops' Conference and the pope's peace envoy to Ukraine, will cross the Holy Door in Rebibbia to show the church's commitment to the incarcerated. And in December, there will be a Jubilee of Prisoners, in which prisoners are invited to make a pilgrimage to St. Peter's Square in Vatican City.

For the 2025 Jubilee, Francis also asked that countries consider "forms of amnesty and pardon" for prisoners and called for an end to the death penalty in the official papal bull for the Holy Year.

The pope's appeal is meant to stir the conscience of world leaders, Grimaldi said. He said in Italy, Msgr. Rino Fisichella, who oversees Jubilee events, is charged with reaching out to civil authorities regarding prisoners' issues. In the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops and lay organizations such as Catholic Mobilizing Network have raised awareness of the pope's plea and lobbied government officials

to consider pardons for prisoners.

Grimaldi, who spent 23 years as a chaplain in the Secondigliano prison on the outskirts of Naples, Italy, said he hopes the pope's message of openness and welcoming toward prisoners continues to be heard despite his illness and beyond the Jubilee Year.

Following the news of the pope's hospitalization, inmates at the Roman prison Regina Coeli joined in prayer for the pontiff.

"For them, the pope is a lighthouse, a star that always cares for them," said Fr. Vittorio Trani, the prison's chaplain, while speaking to the news agency of the Italian Bishops' Conference. "For this reason, they see him as someone who is close to them, attentive toward their problems and willing to make their voice heard to everyone by making it his own."

Francis is popular even among non-Catholic prisoners, Trani added, because of his willingness to promote the needs of people who are incarcerated.

"It's as if Francis were a family pope for them," he said.