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Pope Francis and his cousin Carla Rabezzana sit down for lunch in her home in Portacomaro, near Asti, Nov. 19, 2022. The pope traveled to the northern Italian town to help celebrate Rabezzana's 90th birthday, to visit other relatives and to celebrate Mass the next day in the Asti cathedral. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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This story was originally published on March 18, 2025. We republish it here in the event of Pope Francis' death.

In the quiet Italian town of Portacomaro, nestled in the rolling hills of Piedmont, Carla Rabezzana, 93, sits in her modest home, her television flickering with updates from the Vatican. She is not just any viewer — she is the cousin of Pope Francis, or as she has called him since she was in her 30s, "Giorgio."

She sighs talking about her beloved cousin's health conditions after a recent concerning report from the hospital. "We hoped the pope wouldn't have any more relapses, but unfortunately, things always happen. These things probably happen as the illness progresses. We have to wait for him to recover. For now, he hasn't recovered yet," she said in a telephone interview with the National Catholic Reporter.

For Rabezzana, these days are filled with anxiety as she rides a roller coaster of emotions as the pope improves, then relapses and improves again. Over the weekend, the Vatican news releases took an optimistic turn as the Holy See Press Office issued positive reports about the pontiff's improving health condition and released a photo of him in the chapel that is part of his suite of rooms at Rome's Gemelli Hospital.

While the pope's health struggles have left her uneasy, the lack of direct contact has also heightened her anxiety. She watches the news diligently, hoping for updates, but, early on, each report only reinforced her fears.

His illness, she believes, follows an inevitable course, and all she can do now is wait for his recovery.

What troubles her most right now is the silence. Unlike in the past, when the pope would call her frequently, now the family must rely on public news broadcasts for information. His demanding schedule and the restrictions placed on him during his

hospitalization make communication nearly impossible. Even his nephew — a Jesuit priest and the son of his sister — was only allowed one brief visit before being told that the pope needed rest and had to limit his interactions.

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Still, that visit brought a small consolation. Francis has personally asked his nephew to relay a message to Rabezzana and the rest of the family, assuring them that he was being well cared for at Gemelli Hospital in Rome, and that as soon as he returned to Casa Santa Marta, he would call them. But since then, there has been only silence.

It wasn't always this way. In the early years of his papacy, Francis made a point to stay in touch with his family, calling Rabezzana at least once a month. Over time, as his responsibilities grew, the frequency of their conversations dwindled, though he never failed to check in on special occasions. Birthdays, Easter, Christmas — he always remembered.

"He never forgets my birthday, not only mine but also those of my cousins. I asked him, 'Giorgio, do you have a calendar where you write down all our birthdays?', and he replied, 'No, no, I have them all here in my head.' He has a phenomenal memory."

She laughs heartily recalling their conversations over the phone. "I couldn't even tell you, because on the phone we talked about everything except current affairs. We used to have a wonderful time laughing. Every time he had a new joke. Every now and then he would come up with a new one and then he would tell it to me and then he would tell me some oddity that had happened there at Casa Santa Marta."

"I would say, 'Be careful, Giorgio, there's someone who wishes you ill,' and then we would laugh out loud together, like the usual things between relatives."

Her fondest memory of him remains the day he visited her in Portocomaro in November 2022. That day, she recalled, was a whirlwind of excitement. The entire town was in a frenzy — some playing music, others making endless phone calls, and she herself scrambling in the kitchen, overwhelmed but overjoyed. When Francis arrived, he greeted her in his usual playful manner, giving her a light slap on the face.

"Listen, you're not going to heaven!" he said to Rabezzana.

"Why not?" she responded.

"Because you're a sinner!" he said, before hugging her for a few seconds.

"He always did that as a joke. Giorgio has a wonderful personality, he's cheerful, always ready with a joke, he never takes anything seriously," she said.



Pope Francis greets his cousin Carla Rabezzana before celebrating Mass Nov. 20, 2022, in the cathedral of Asti, Italy. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Their bond was strong long before Francis' papacy. Rabezzana first met him when she was 38, and he was a young Jesuit studying in Frankfurt, Germany. Whenever he traveled there for exams, he would carve out time to visit her. From Frankfurt, he would journey to Turin, Italy, and then to her home in Portocomaro, where he would stay for a few days.

Together, they explored basilicas and historic churches. Later, as his career in the church progressed, his visits became less frequent, limited to occasions when he had business in Rome. But whenever he could, he made the effort to stop by, gathering with family for meals, catching up on stories, and sharing in the joy of their company.

Her voice softens as she recalls the moment Francis became pope. That day remains etched in Rabezzana's memory, though the way she found out still makes her laugh. The evening before the conclave, Francis had called to bid her farewell, explaining that once inside the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel, he would no longer be able to communicate. He had no expectation of being elected and had already planned his return to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Rabezzana had no reason to think otherwise.

"I'm calling to say goodbye because tomorrow I'll enter the conclave and won't be able to call you anymore," Francis said to her on the night of March 11, 2013.

"He was a thousand kilometers away from becoming pope, he wasn't even remotely thinking about it. So, I said, 'Okay Giorgio, see you whenever you can.' I was also sure that they wouldn't make him pope," Rabezzana said.

Then came the news. She was in the middle of washing dishes when she heard that the conclave had reached a decision a few minutes after 7 p.m. on March 13. Curious but unconcerned, she casually wondered who the new pope might be.

Then the announcement came: "*Habemus papam*. Georgium Marium ..." The shock was so great that she nearly collapsed, dishes still in hand, she said. The next morning, Francis called her immediately.

But for Rabezzana, her cousin's elevation to the papacy was bittersweet. While the world celebrated, she felt a personal loss. "Let me tell you something," she said with a sweet, melancholic voice. "It may be an honor to be a relative of a pope, but in my heart, if they hadn't made him pope, I would have been happier."

The reason is simple. "Because before that he used to come and visit us, he came to our house, we spent time together, we had a wonderful family life. Now he's far away and we can't go and see him when we want to. He's no longer ours, he belongs to everyone!"

"Giorgio has such a wonderful personality. When he left my house, I would cry for two days. He was exceptionally good company. He could cheer you up with just a few words. I may be biased, but that's how it is for me."

Her closeness to the pope is why she said she was worried again and "not doing too well," after his respiratory crises on March 3. But she maintains her focus on steady prayers now, as her cousin continues to recover.

"I say prayers for him every night as always. He always tells me, 'Pray for me!' Now I've increased the number of prayers, but I always say, 'Lord, thy will be done.' "

This story appears in the **Pope Francis' health crisis** and **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series.