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ARGENTINA MASS POPE FRANCIS RECOVERY A balloon with an image of Pope Francis is seen

A balloon with an image of Pope Francis is seen as thousands of worshippers gather to attend a Mass at the Basilica of Lujan in Buenos Aires, Argentina, March 16, 2025, to pray for the pope amid his ongoing treatment for double pneumonia at Rome's Gemelli Hospital. (OSV News/Martin Cossarini, Reuters)



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Argentines working in humble barrios, or neighborhoods, and the people they serve, prayed for the health of Pope Francis at one of the country's most important Catholic shrines — a show of affection and support from a population that the Holy Father made a priority in his time as local archbishop.

The March 16 Mass was celebrated at the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján and marked the 17th anniversary of Familia Grande Hogar de Cristo, a ministry for supporting addiction recovery founded by the "curas villeros" -- a team of priests working in the country's shantytowns -- and supported by the then-Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires.

"We pray at this moment for the health of our former bishop, who 17 years ago gave the initial kick-start to begin the task that we, the priests of the slums, have been carrying out and that he has always accompanied up to the present day," said Father José de María di Paola, a prominent cura villero.

"Hogar de Cristo is a way of experiencing the church that Pope Francis teaches us: a church going to the peripheries, a church for the poor," he added. "We're interested in the lives of the most vulnerable in each of the places where we live."

Pope Francis' health remains delicate after being hospitalized for over a month with a severe respiratory condition. His ill health has prompted outpourings of concern and expressions of support from church leaders in Argentina -- especially the curas villeros -- but a somewhat muted response from society at large.

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The responses reflected the pope's complicated relationship with his native Argentina, where observers say he has been seen by some as a player in the country's messy and divided domestic politics rather than the leader of the universal church.

Archbishop Jorge García Cuerva of Buenos Aires spoke of that complicated relationship at a Feb. 24 Mass celebrated for Pope Francis in a public plaza, where he said, "We have always put him in the middle of our sterile discussions, we have put him in our political divides."

Adding to the bewilderment for many in Argentina: Pope Francis never returned for a visit after being elected in 2013 -- even though he twice flew over the country on trips to Paraguay and Chile.

As archbishop in Buenos Aires, Pope Francis championed the work of the curas villeros -- often traveling to their parishes on public transit for feast days -- while

shunning high society. He also sent seminarians to gain experience there.

The priests' work involved working with vices such as drug addiction, while confronting problems such as poverty and exclusion in barrios -- where they live with the people they serve -- often lacking basic services such as health and maintenance.

"He liked this style that we priests of the slums have, of living in a neighborhood and building the life of the church in the neighborhood, above all strengthening popular religiosity and people's organization," Father di Paola told OSV News.

Virgina Bonard, a Catholic journalist in Buenos Aires, who attended the Mass in Luján, said the Mass showed the affection the poor in Argentina continue to hold for Pope Francis.

"The basilica is huge and was packed, no one could get in. There was no room. Everyone was poor," she said. "The poor love the pope."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis' health crisis** feature series. View the full series.