Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis appears at a window of the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic in Rome, Sunday, March 23, 2025, where he has been treated for bronchitis and bilateral pneumonia since Feb. 14. (AP Photo/Riccardo De Luca)



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Pope Francis began with a thumbs up and concluded with the sign of the cross to mark his first public appearance after a 38-day hospitalization where he twice nearly died, before returning home to the Vatican to continue his recovery from double pneumonia.

"I see a lady with yellow flowers," the pope said from a balcony of Rome's Gemelli Hospital. "*Brava*."

Those were the only words uttered by the 88-year-old pontiff who was evidently still struggling to speak as he battles an ongoing respiratory infection. But the words were more than many — including prominent churchmen — expected to ever hear from him after the longest hospitalization of his 12-year papacy led some to predict he would not make it out alive.

Yet defying many odds, at 12:01 p.m. local time on Sunday (March 23), Francis was wheeled out on the fifth floor hospital balcony, where he was met with shouts of "V*iva il papa!*" and "*Papa Francesco*" from hundreds of well-wishers who had gathered to see him.

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The mix of Romans — including the city's mayor, Roberto Gualtieri — and pilgrims from around the world cheering on the still ailing pontiff was a dramatic change from several weeks ago where tears were shed, candles were being lit and prayers were being offered around the clock by those holding vigil at the hospital and fearing the worst.

It was only one week ago, on March 15, when the Vatican released the first image of the pontiff from his hospitalization. In the photo — taken from the side — Francis is seated in a wheelchair, praying in the private chapel of his hospital suite after he concelebrated Mass.

And in the few minutes that he appeared on the balcony, the pope's signature smile was finally visible, but so too were expressions of pain and shortness of breath.

Francis — who is accustomed to a full public schedule and thrives off the energy he receives from being among people — has been ordered by his doctors to avoid large crowds or other settings that could jeopardize his recovery.

At a March 23 press conference announcing his imminent discharge, the pontiff's doctors said the pope's weak voice was normal for an individual of his age who had undergone such an intensive respiratory crisis and that in time he should be able to fully heal.

At Casa Santa Marta, the pope's Vatican residence, Francis will continue to receive supplemental oxygen and physiotherapy.

Vatican spokesman, Matteo Bruni, has declined to confirm any upcoming events, including a scheduled April 8 audience with King Charles III or in the Vatican's Holy Week and Easter liturgies.

Even so, the pope's doctors have said it could be possible for the pope to recover in time to travel to Turkey at the end of May to participate in a major ecumenical gathering to mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicea.

Soon after the pope imparted his blessing to the crowd, he boarded the front passenger seat of a white Fiat to head back to the Vatican, where doctors said he has been eager to return for several days. Prior to returning to the Vatican, the pontiff made a brief pit stop at Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major where he has often visited to pray after foreign trips and other hospitalizations. While he did not go

inside, the pope met Cardinal Rolandas Makrickas, the basilica's archpriest, and gave him with flowers to place at the altar of Francis' favorite Marian icon.



Pope Francis greets well-wishers at Rome's Gemelli hospital before returning to the Vatican March 23, 2025, after 38 days of treatment at the hospital. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Among those in the hospital crowd closest to the balcony was Sr. Geneviève Jeanningros, a nun who is a close friend of Francis and who has regularly brought transgender sex workers and circus performers to his Wednesday public audiences. Jeanningros, a member of the Little Sisters of Jesus, waved vigorously to the pope, who crossed her gaze and responded with a wave of his hand and a smile.

"I can't see well with my own eyes, but I think he noticed I was there and waved," she told the National Catholic Reporter a few minutes after receiving the pope's blessing. "I have prayed a lot this month. I have lived with the hope that he would recover because we still need it so much, and I love him. I hope to see him again in person, but the important thing is that he is well."

Among the other members of the crowd were Tessy and her husband, Kuriappan, originally from India but now living in Portland, Oregon. They had planned to attend a papal audience at the Vatican during their stay in Rome for the Jubilee, only to learn later that the pope had been admitted to the hospital.

"We took a taxi from our hotel, just for this," Tessy said, her voice filled with emotion. "We were disappointed we couldn’t see him at his audience there. So we are blessed that we could see him here in recovery."

Her husband, Kuriappan, confessed to feeling overwhelmed at the pope’s health struggles. "We have been praying. He is such a holy man, a symbol ... sorry, I can’t talk," he said, covering his face and breaking down in tears. "I was so sad."

A few feet away, Vitor, a pilgrimage organizer, stood with a group of travelers from Madison, Wisconsin, and Houston, Texas. His group had left Assisi early in the morning specifically to be at Gemelli Hospital in time for the pope’s appearance.

"We were hoping to see the Holy Father at the audience in the Vatican," Vitor said, "but when he was hospitalized, our plans changed."



A crowd gathers at Rome's Gemelli Hospital on March 23, 2025 to greet Pope Francis prior to being discharged from a five-week stay. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Teresa, from Madison, wore a look of joyful disbelief. "I'm amazed we're here. It's quite a blessing to be here on the day he's going to be released. We didn't think we would see him. We thought there'd be a funeral," she admitted, her voice trembling with relief. "So this is really God's blessing to us."

Natalie, from Houston, echoed that sense of gratitude. "We prayed a rosary this morning on the way from Assisi to here," she said. "We were thanking God for this blessing, that the pope is well enough to leave the hospital today. We're all flying back to the U.S. on March 26, so it's an incredible gift to witness this before we go home."

Antonietta, a local Roman resident, arrived with a serene smile and a simple prayer book in hand.

"My most beautiful memory of him was during COVID, when he crossed St. Peter's Square alone," she recalled. "We all felt him close to us during that period of immense loneliness, and now we must be the ones to walk hand in hand in prayer with him in this difficult moment."

The Vatican also released on Sunday the prepared text of the pontiff's Angelus address.

"In this long time of hospitalization, I have experienced the Lord's patience," he wrote. "This trusting patience, anchored in God's love that does not fail, is indeed necessary to our lives, especially in facing the most difficult and painful situations."

The pope went on to express his sadness over Israel's resumed airstrikes on Gaza, which have killed some 600 people during the last week.

"I call for an immediate hush of weapons; and the courage to resume dialogue," wrote the pope.

As the pope's vehicle left the hospital compound, 72-year-old Carmela Mancuso, who was singled out and received the unexpected greeting from the pope, was still absorbing the moment.

She told Vatican News that she had come to the hospital nearly every day while the pope was being treated to bring fresh flowers.

"I don't know what to say. I didn't think I was so 'seen,' " she said. "I hope the Holy Father returns among us as before."

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