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Analysis
Mural of pope francis on building

A man walks past a mural of Pope Francis in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Feb. 19 as the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires calls on all churches in Argentina, the pope's native country, to hold Masses for the pontiff’s quick recovery. Francis returned home to the Vatican March 23 after five weeks in the hospital. (OSV News/Reuters/Pedro Lazaro Fernandez)



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In 1990, as Argentina's Jesuits were divided over the church's role in the country's politics and society, frustration with the future Pope Francis' leadership style resulted in his two-year exile in Cordoba. Then-Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio used his solitary time in a Jesuit residence to pray, write and read — including a five-volume series on the history of the papacy.

Francis later would describe this period as a "time of purification" for his inner life.*

Three decades after that spiritual crisis — at age 88 — Francis is facing another spiritual crossroads as he recovers from his most serious physical challenge. His five

weeks hospitalized for double pneumonia that twice nearly cost him his life provided time to reflect on his life thus far and what he hopes to accomplish before he dies.

> 'He has a great ability to learn from life, from whatever comes, to grasp beauty even in dark moments. … I am sure that something very beautiful will come out of this experience.'
> —Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez
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In his March 30 Sunday Angelus reflection, Francis alluded to his illness, encouraging the entire church to view the current Lenten season as a time of healing.

"I too am experiencing it this way, in my soul and in my body," he wrote, saying that his health was improving.

Now back at his Vatican residence for a two-month doctor mandated convalescence, Francis' days bear some resemblance to those he spent in Cordoba: reading, prayer, celebrating Mass and light work, plus physical and respiratory therapy.

Francis' recovery has surpassed his doctors' expectations; they now estimate he will regain 90 to 100% of his previous health. But the octagenarian pope, already one of the oldest popes in history, is surely aware that time is against him.

What might this time of solitude in Rome's Gemelli Hospital and the Vatican's Casa Santa Marta be teaching — or clarifying — for him?

Pope Francis kisses his pallium as he is vested before celebrating the closing Mass for the syn

Pope Francis kisses his pallium as he is vested before celebrating the closing Mass for the Synod of Bishops on synodality in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 27. Francis has made synodality a central theme of his papacy. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez, the pope's longtime theological adviser and now head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, believes a new stage of the pontificate awaits.

"He has a great ability to learn from life, from whatever comes, to grasp beauty even in dark moments," the Argentina cardinal recently told reporters. "For this

reason, I am sure that something very beautiful will come out of this experience. We do not know what it will be, it will be the surprises of Pope Francis."

Jesuit Fr. James Hanvey, said the Jesuit tradition of openness to the world is sure to influence Francis.

"This openness and universalism, especially marked by compassion, is clearly evident in Pope Francis and it is integral to the *ressourcement* of his papacy," said Hanvey, secretary for the Service of Faith to the General Curia of the Society of Jesus.

Hanvey said that as Francis uses this period of convalescence to reflect on the *ressourcement,* or the sources of his papacy's mission, he could be guided by the important Ignatian contemplations on the Incarnation and the Nativity.

"Here St. Ignatius invites us to be present to the vulnerable Christ, newly born, 'as a poor unworthy servant,' yet attentive to the needs of the child and his family and ready to serve them in whatever way they need, no matter how small the gesture may be," Hanvey said. "There is a sense of one's own unworthiness and yet privilege at being present and of service. Here, one can see something of the humility in service that also marks Francis' papacy."

This understanding of humility, Hanvey said, is at the heart of understanding Francis' approach to governance. Francis seeks to discern where conversion is needed, both on a personal level and a structural one — a discernment that likely has only deepened during his prolonged hospitalization and recovery.

Pope Francis places a red biretta on the head of new Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, a British Dor

Pope Francis places a red biretta on the head of new Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe, a British Dominican and theologian, during a consistory to create cardinals Dec. 7 in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. Radcliffe said his recovery from a 17-hour surgery brought him knew insights to spiritual questions. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Dominican Cardinal Timothy Radcliffe understands firsthand the challenges of refocusing one's ministry after a life-threatening illness. After regaining consciousness following a 17-hour operation for cancer of the jaw in 2021, Radcliffe said he recalled being "just one body lying in the ward with so many others."

"All my claims to an important identity as a writer, speaker, priest, were as nothing," he said. "It was a stripping. But I also realized that the Lord's love was freely given to every one of the people lying there," he told the National Catholic Reporter.

A week before his cancer diagnosis, Radcliffe had agreed to co-author a book with his Polish Dominican brother, Fr. Lukasz Popko, on "conversations between us on conversations in the Bible between God and humanity."

Radcliffe recalled working on the project during his long convalescence and confronting some of Scriptures' most perplexing questions with new insights gained from time spent in prayer and reflection during his recovery.

"Questions do not just seek information. The best questions are an invitation to live more deeply, to share the life of God and of our friends," he said. "At this moment in the life of the church, when angry groups oppose each other with accusation and suspicion, we must reach out to each other with the deepest, burning questions in our hearts, beggars for the truth rather than the arrogant champions of 'our side.'

"To share our questions is not a sign of weakness, but of the strength of those who are on a journey together," Radcliffe added.

Pope Francis sits in his wheelchair to greet visitors during his weekly general audience in the

Pope Francis sits in his wheelchair to greet visitors during his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican May 1. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

For Francis, that journey — and the method for resolving those tensions — has been the synod on synodality, an ongoing process of inviting all Catholics at every level in the church to consider how a reform of its structures might lead to greater inclusion and participation. Even from his hospital bed, on March 15, Francis signed off on a three-year synod implementation plan, ensuring that it remains a priority for the global church after he dies.

Following Radcliffe's recovery from cancer and a long inability to speak, Francis tapped him to serve as the synod's preacher during the Rome assemblies in 2023 and 2024 (and made him a cardinal that same year) — a reminder that even after one's darkest tribulations, there is still important work to do.

Elisabetta Piqué, an Argentine journalist who knew Francis before he became pope, said that Francis has a "stubborn, determined character" that will be critical to navigating what lies ahead for him — and the church.

"He will see that he survived these two big health crises during hospitalization and will realize that God wants him here," said Piqué, author of Pope Francis: Life and Revolution.

Piqué said that the psychological benefit of being back home in the Vatican, his sense of humor, and his Jesuit spirituality will help him discern his direction. Further, she said, Francis is "motivated by being a pastor close to people in difficult moments."

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During the medical bulletins provided to journalists during his hospitalization, the Vatican often noted that the pope was reading newspapers.

Piqué said that the pope is painfully aware that "the world is polarized, world leaders have little respect for rule of law and there are powerful and rich people taking advantage of the poor and migrants."

All this, she predicted, "will give him the strength to say: 'My voice has to be there in this moment.' "

**This sentence has been edited to remove a quote that was misattributed due to editing error.*

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