Vatican

View from the Vatican



Pope Francis is brought on stage in St. Peter's Square by his nurse, Massimiliano Strappetti, at the end of the closing Mass for the Jubilee of the Sick and Health Care Workers at the Vatican April 6, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — April 10, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Soon after Pope Francis made his surprise appearance at the end of an April 8 Jubilee Mass for health care workers, the Vatican announced that the pontiff had also gone to confession in St. Peter's Basilica that morning.

One fellow journalist joked to me that perhaps the pope — fresh off a five-week hospitalization where he twice nearly lost his life — was repenting for ignoring his doctor's request that he avoid large crowds that could jeopardize his recovery from double pneumonia.

It wasn't the pope's appearance at the outdoor Mass that necessarily raised eyebrows, but rather concern over the number of people reaching out to touch him during his first public outing since returning home to the Vatican.

When photos emerged afterward of the 88-year-old pontiff individually greeting pilgrims, more alarm bells were sounded over the possibility that some interaction could threaten his already weakened immune system, as the doctors had warned prior to the pope's hospital release.

Still, others argue that Francis is a pope of the people who is energized by being able to be among his flock and that at this moment, there is no greater medicine to aid his recovery efforts.

Following the Sunday surprise, Dr. Sergio Alfieri, the surgeon who led the pope's medical team at Rome's Gemelli Hospital, put it bluntly: "He decides. He is the pope."

In an interview with Italian TV channel TG1, Alfieri also didn't rule out that the pope could "give us other surprises" in the near future.

Advertisement

Just a few days later, on April 9, Francis held an unexpected meeting with Great Britain's King Charles III and Queen Camilla during their visit to Rome. Although the royals had originally planned to meet the pope, Buckingham Palace announced earlier this month that the meeting would be postponed for a future visit to allow for the pope's recovery. And yet, there they were in the pope's Vatican guesthouse exchanging gifts. Another surprise.

And on April 10, Francis popped over to St. Peter's Basilica to view some new construction projects. Again, more surprises.

Holy Week is the busiest time of year in the liturgical calendar, and it is intensified this year by an influx of pilgrims visiting Rome for the 2025 Jubilee. And as the Vatican prepares for the flurry of activity, there's a mix of anxiety and excitement about what lies ahead.

The Holy See Press Office said this week it was still premature to announce anything about the pope's plans for next week. But from Palm Sunday (April 13) to Easter Sunday (April 20), there are six major liturgical celebrations, all of which normally involve the pope.

Even so, there is already precedent for modification. In fact, during the last five years, there have been a number of adjustments, beginning in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to scaled-back liturgies without crowds and the cancellation of some events.

In 2022, when the pope began experiencing mobility issues due to a torn knee ligament, he no longer participated in the long processions at the start of the liturgies and senior Vatican cardinals presided over the Masses with Francis, in a wheelchair, as the celebrant.

During the past two years, Francis has opted not to attend the outdoor *Via Crucis* ("Way of the Cross") procession at Rome's Colosseum and to instead watch the video feed from his Vatican residence due to the cold weather.

> Dr. Sergio Alfieri, the surgeon who led the pope's medical team at Rome's Gemelli Hospital, put it bluntly: 'He decides. He is the pope.'
>
> Tweet this

Once again, speculation is mounting about what to expect.

During the long liturgies of Palm Sunday or the Easter Vigil, will the pope arrive to bless the palms and the Easter candle and then leave? Will the traditional *urbi et orbi* ("to the city and the world") blessing take place from the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica and to what extent will the pope speak or participate? These are all questions that are swirling but with answers that are likely only to be provided in real time.

But with all eyes on the Vatican during Holy Week, Francis will be keenly aware that beyond the spiritual realm, there is also a political reality that can't be ignored. For two months running, there have been endless rumors about a possible papal resignation and conjecture about an imminent conclave.

In 2023, after a hospitalization for bronchitis, Francis was released just days before the start of Holy Week. Similar to now, there was no shortage of those ready to prematurely pronounce him dead.

Not only did Francis participate in the liturgies, but he capped Easter Sunday off by a particularly rousing 30-minute ride in the popemobile, going not just around St. Peter's Square but all the way up the via della Conciliazione, the main road leading up to the Vatican.

As I took in the scene, enjoying a bird's-eye view atop Bernini's colonnade that overlooks St. Peter's Square, it seemed evident to me the pope was making a point that he was back.

So this Easter, in addition to the usual proclamations of "He is risen," don't be surprised to find other symbolic gestures from the pontiff that make it clear that — in the words of Alfieri — "he is the pope."

*The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.*

This story appears in the **Lent 2025** feature series. View the full series.