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Faithful gather to pray a rosary for the late Pope Francis, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Monday April 21, 2025 (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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The morning before boarding a flight for Rome, Catholic radio show host and commentator Katie Prejean McGrady had a gaggle of suitcases lining the hallway of her home in Lake Charles, Louisiana, when she awoke Monday (April 21) to the news of Pope Francis' death.

"My heart sank," said Prejean McGrady, who hosts "The Katie McGrady Show" on Sirius XM's The Catholic Channel. "There's the logistics of the work component of it, for me, the coverage, but from a personal perspective, the past 12 years I've encountered Pope Francis a few times up close and personally. And so I very much miss the Pope. I'm very sad at his loss."

Francis, who died on Monday morning at the age of 88, was known for his pastoral style of leadership and his emphasis on mercy. Recovering from a long hospital stay for double pneumonia, he died of a stroke at the Vatican.

Prejean McGrady is one of tens of thousands of people who had planned to attend the canonization of Carlo Acutis, the first millennial saint, whose canonization had been scheduled for April 27. Acutis died of leukemia at 15 in 2006 and has since generated astounding devotion among Catholics, especially other young believers.

Millions more had already made plans to come to Rome during this Jubilee year, celebrated every 25 years, seeking forgiveness and spiritual nourishment — and perhaps a view of the pope.

Prejean McGrady, her parents, her husband and her daughters, ages 4 and 7, briefly recast their plans to be in Rome in time for Francis' funeral. She ordered black dresses for her daughters and swapped out clothes in her suitcase to be "funeral ready."

Then came word that Prejean McGrady, who will be providing coverage for Sirius XM and CNN, will be going to New York instead. With Acutis' canonization suspended — "you cannot canonize without a Pope," said Prejean McGrady — the family, which

has taken Acutis as its patron saint, said they will hope to go when it is rescheduled.

Alexis Love, a pilgrim from Emmitsburg, Maryland, was surprised by the passing of the pope, who had been seen riding in his popemobile on Easter. Love was in Padua, Italy, visiting the burial site of St. Luke, when the city was suddenly flooded with the sound of church bells ringing. It was only when Love checked her phone that she realized it was because of the pope's death.

"It was really more shocking because of his appearance yesterday," said Love, who came to Italy with her husband (a seminary professor at Mount Saint Mary's University), mother-in-law, three nieces and nephews and eight children for Acutis' canonization. When she heard the pope had died, Love said, she immediately gathered with her family, who knelt and prayed the perpetual light prayer and a Hail Mary.

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The family decided to return for the canonization after encountering Acutis' tomb last year while visiting Assisi with some of her children. "We really experienced a profound closeness with him," Love said. "The three kids who have already experienced that surge of devotion to him are very disappointed."

Love initially planned to meet up with 14 other friends and family, mostly from their home school group, to attend the canonization. Now, they plan to swap the canonization for the funeral, something Love says she could have never planned for.

"I really feel honored, and it feels like an important task has been laid before me and the people I'm here with to intercede for the next pope, and not only for the pope's soul, which we will absolutely do, but also for the upcoming Conclave," she said.

Steve Kerekes, founder of Phoenix, Arizona-based JMJ Youth Pilgrimages, which organizes pilgrimages for young Catholics, said several JMJ Youth-affiliated groups from across the U.S. are leaving today for Rome and had expected to be there for Acutis' canonization.

"The only responses (from pilgrims) I've gotten so far, and I haven't spoken to everyone yet, is that this is a special time, and God had ordained it as it is, and it's truly a pilgrimage," said Kerekes. "So whatever is happening, what we're

experiencing is something that God had already planned for."

Kerekes noted that the Jubilee of Teenagers, an event to celebrate the devotion of young people, is expected to continue as planned but without a celebratory music festival or the canonization.

Tim Moriarty, director of the forthcoming film "Carlo Acutis: Roadmap to Reality," emphasized the importance of adopting an attitude of "surrender" in the wake of the pope's passing.

"There's the logistical challenges, there's emotional and spiritual processing of losing the Holy Father. And I think for me, I think for our team, too, there's just been a real sense that you need to surrender the plans that we have, and realize that we need to take the time necessary to mourn the loss of the Holy Father, to honor his legacy," said Moriarty, whose film was scheduled to premier Monday in Washington, D.C., with the Vatican premiere scheduled for April 24.

Moriarty said the D.C. premiere will now be a stripped-down private screening, without press, and with a "rosary for the repose of the Holy Father's soul." He added that they are "on standby" for a decision on the Vatican premiere but that the U.S. theatrical release, originally planned for April 27 to coordinate with Acutis' canonization, will go ahead as planned.

"I think it shifted a bit to celebration of Carlo and what he represents as part of this legacy of Pope Francis," Moriarty said. "We do see it still as an opportunity for folks around the country to gather together."

As she processes the pope's passing, Prejean McGrady says a small part of her is wondering if the pope knew his passing was imminent and had made recent public appearances as a farewell.

"He popped out at the Jubilee for the sick. He went through Saint Peter's because he specifically wanted to go to confession and through the Holy Door. He went to Saint Mary Majors, which is his favorite church. And then we got one final Easter Sunday and one last Pope Mobile ride around Saint Peter's," said Prejean McGrady.

"I think these final few days, from April the sixth to today, was the Francis goodbye," she said, "and I'm so grateful that we had those moments with him."

This story appears in the **The Legacy of Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.