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Cardinal Ángel Sixto Rossi, 66, archbishop of Cordoba, Argentina, right, watches the motorcade transporting the body of Pope Francis, a longtime friend, from St. Peter's Square to Santa Maria Maggiore, where he was laid to rest. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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Rome — April 26, 2025
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As tens of thousands walked somberly out of St. Peter's Square under a clear Roman sky, one of Pope Francis' oldest Jesuit friends stood watching jumbo screens projecting the motorcade of the popemobile taking a simple coffin through the streets of Rome.

Cardinal Ángel Sixto Rossi, 66, archbishop of Cordoba, Argentina, his red robes catching the soft late-spring breeze, offered reflections to nuns, pilgrims and a journalist about the man he called "a true father and a true friend."

Rossi, who spent a decade alongside the future pope as a Jesuit during their time in the same order, stood grieving as Francis' cortege wound its way to the Basilica of St. Mary Major, where the pontiff was laid to rest.

"For all that his pontificate meant, he leaves a legacy that hopefully we take, and we do what he carried in his heart," Rossi said in a brief interview.

As Rossi described Francis' 12-year pontificate that placed the poor at the center of the church's mission and championed a return to the heart of the Gospel, the Argentine cardinal clearly was looking ahead.

On Monday (April 28), Rossi will participate in the general congregations to discuss the next pope and the future of the church. The congregations — meetings of the College of Cardinals — precede the conclave that will elect the new pope, expected to begin May 5. Of 252 cardinals, 135 are under age 80, meaning they are eligible to vote to choose the next pope. Ninety cardinals, or two-thirds, are necessary to be elected.

Asked how the church might now carry forward Francis' vision and legacy, Rossi said, "By being faithful and having the courage that he always had to really live the

Gospel. Francis' revolution is to return to the Gospel."

The cardinal's words resonated with many in earshot, some wiping away tears. Rossi spoke of the simplicity and humility that defined Francis' papacy. These were not merely political slogans or grand gestures, he said, but rather an "evangelical pontificate" rooted in love, mercy, and the brotherhood of all.

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Would the next pontiff continue the work Francis began – the emphasis on humility, simplicity, and fraternity?

"If we want an evangelical pontificate, certainly," Rossi said. "Certainly, it will be so if God wills."

Flags from Argentina, the homeland of Francis and Rossi, waved gently among the crowds, and many clutched rosaries, silently following the coffin’s passage on the screens. The day's solemnity was punctuated by moments of spontaneous prayer and song in the square.

As the bells of St. Peter's tolled, Cardinal Rossi turned once more to the gathered faithful, urging them not to let Francis' teachings be buried with him.

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