Vatican

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A member of the College of Cardinals prays at the tomb of Pope Francis and attends vespers at the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome April 27, 2025. Cardinals and the faithful visited the Marian basilica to offer their prayers and respects. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Rome — April 27, 2025

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Members of the College of Cardinals had a chance to take a quick bus tour through Rome on their way to visit the tomb of Pope Francis, who wanted to be buried in a Marian basilica three and a half miles from the Vatican.

Three large tour buses pulled up alongside the large square in front of the Basilica of St. Mary Major, which was teeming with visitors and security, who scrambled to reposition metal barricades to allow about 110 cardinals a clear passage as they disembarked from the buses April 27.

Dozens of camera operators and journalists jammed up against the barricades. Some shouted out cardinals' names in the hopes of enticing them closer for a quote or interview. Several offered just a smile and wave.

As the cardinals ascended the steps, which were crowded with the faithful exiting the church, some people recognized a cardinal from their home country and cheered and clapped as the cardinals walked through the Holy Door.

Many people had waited two to three hours to get into the basilica, standing patiently in a line that snaked around to the back of the church and zigzagged its way down the large square behind what is Rome's largest church dedicated to Mary.

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The church had opened its doors to the public at 7 a.m. April 27 so people could pay homage to the pope, who wanted to be buried there because of his devotion to Mary and to be closer to the people of Rome, his diocese. The city's chief of police said at least 30,000 people had visited in the first six hours.

The cardinals were invited to visit the pope's tomb and pray vespers, which was presided over by Cardinal Rolandas Makrickas, coadjutor archpriest of the basilica.

After the prayer service, some cardinals did stop to speak with reporters outside the basilica. Cardinal Christoph Schonborn, retired archbishop of Vienna, went up to the barricade separating him from the people to chat and pose for photos.

"We are sad that he left us," he said of Pope Francis. But "we are happy that he is at home, and we are committed to go the way he has prayed for us" to go

When asked if he was "committed to following the progress" the pope achieved over the past 12 years, the cardinal, who is over 80 and will not be part of the conclave electing the next pope, said, "What he has achieved is to show us … that we are one human family, that we are all children of God."

There is only one way to go, he said, which is to "follow the Gospel, the joy of the Gospel, that's it."



The faithful stand in line in front of Rome's Basilica of St. Mary Major early April 27, 2025, to pray at Pope Francis' tomb. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

Schonborn was asked what he thought of seeing U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy meeting together not far from the pope's casket inside St. Peter's Basilica before the funeral April 26. "Do you perhaps think that that was another thing that (the pope) was able to achieve, even in death?" the reporter asked.

"I had this vision that Pope Francis was extending his hands over both and blessing them with this profound confidence that the good is stronger than the evil," the cardinal said. "So, I was very moved when I saw this picture."

Cardinal Seán Brady, retired archbishop of Armagh, Ireland, told reporters the atmosphere among the cardinals was "excellent, lovely."

The 85-year-old cardinal said he was happy and grateful to "God who had given us such a wonderful pope for 12 years" and that the cardinals were praying God would "send us just as good a pope" during the next conclave.



Members of the College of Cardinals pray at the tomb of Pope Francis and attend vespers at the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome April 27, 2025. The cardinals are to

meet in a conclave next week to select the next pope. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Expressing the same sentiment was Cardinal Jean Zerbo, the 81-year-old retired archbishop of Bamako, Mali. When asked what the church needed, he said "to truly follow the direction the pope left us."

Asked if the next pope would be from Africa, the cardinal said he was not a prophet, but it was important to understand that "the church is not Africa, it is not Europe, it is not America. The church is for all human beings."

Francis, who greatly expanded the number of countries with a cardinal, created a vastly diverse College of Cardinals. Was this going to cause any difficulties or benefit the cardinal electors, he was asked.

The great diversity is "a richness," he said. "The church of Christ, God is not for one group, it's not for Europe, it's not for Africa, it's not for one person. The church is for everybody, God is for everybody."

Asked if "the next pope will be conservative or like Francis," Zerbo said he did not like those labels and divisions.

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