Vatican
Vatican News



Pope Francis, flanked by the Rev. Mauricio Rueda Beltz, right, and the pope's spokesperson, Greg Burke, left, rubs his eyes as he arrives to talk with journalists during his flight from Lima, Peru, to Rome, Jan. 21, 2018. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Vatican City — November 24, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis saw the "gates of hell" when he realized the depths of the clergy sexual abuse scandal and experienced mystical visions of the devil throughout his ministry, according to excerpts of his personal diary published Tuesday by the Vatican.

"The Private Diary of Pope Francis" also reveals the Argentine pope suffered a profound spiritual crisis in 2021-22, connected to his own temptations to exercise power omnipotently. He overcame the crisis by entrusting himself entirely to God's mercy.

The book, released globally in several languages, offers a deeply personal view of Francis' mind and heart, revealing his innermost fears, insecurities, dreams and temptations. It shows him as incredibly hard on himself, lamenting his own sense of worthlessness and shame, and his utter trust in God to lead him, even from the depths of despair.

The book was curated by a close aide, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, the Argentine theologian who heads the Vatican's doctrine office and writes that Francis wanted the papers published. Fernández is listed as the author, as his comments contextualize Francis' diary entries.

Written in a leather-bound calendar used as a notebook, it starts in 1992, when Jorge Mario Bergoglio was auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires. It continues through his time as cardinal in the Argentine capital and finally pope. The last entry is Aug. 18, 2024.

Francis tells of encounters with the devil

The most moving sections are Francis' revelations of his own spiritual torments and what he described as encounters with the devil — visceral, tangible and seemingly terrifying visions. Two occurred in Buenos Aires, and the third after his disastrous 2018 trip to Chile.

"A few days after returning to Rome, I was in a meeting. I saw him and heard his voice, triumphant possessing everything. ‘Now I've gotten everything I wanted,'" Francis quoted the devil as saying in a Jan. 24, 2021, entry. "Just as I can't forget his eyes from the previous two, in this case, I can't forget the powerful raspiness of his voice."

During the 2018 Chile trip, Francis created an uproar by discrediting victims of Chile's most notorious abuser. After journalists, including from The Associated Press, challenged him during the in-flight news conference returning home, Francis commissioned an investigation and realized the victims were right, that he was wrong and had been misled by the Chilean hierarchy.

"Devastated because of the situation in Chile and the dialogue with the journalists on the airplane," Francis would write later. "I became aware of how serious the problem was. … It was hard for me to admit what happened in Chile; I didn't think it was so serious."

Francis wrote on June 7, 2018, that in the Chile scandal, he "saw the entrance to hell. Pagan seduction in full force."

As he dealt with the fallout in the next two months, he wrote: "What shame and evil this has brought on the church!" and "Once more the gates of hell. … May holiness and conversion abound in the midst of so many scandals."

But Francis' spiritual crisis wouldn't come until 2021.

Advertisement

The diary reveals a spiritual crisis in 2021-22

The book dates the onset of the crisis to Jan. 24, 2021. The day before, Francis canceled several public appearances due to what the Vatican said was a bout of sciatica.

Fernández reveals, however, that Francis was suffering from "insupportable" pain from an intestinal problem that in July 2021 landed Francis in the hospital for 10 days for surgery to remove 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his colon.

In January 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vatican was in utter upheaval over a massive financial investigation authorized by Francis.

In September 2020, he had fired a onetime close collaborator, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, convinced Becciu had embezzled money from the Holy See. The scandal — and Francis' belief that a web of corruption had engulfed the Vatican's secretariat of

state — led to an unprecedented Vatican investigation and years of legal proceedings through which Francis sought to show his willingness to crack down on financial misconduct.

The trial resulted in some convictions, including against Becciu, but much of prosecutors' theory of a vast conspiracy of corruption was thrown out. The appeals process is ongoing, with Francis' own role in the investigation a key question for the defense.

There is no mention of the trial in Fernández's text, though he hints at it by revealing Francis' later musings that the 2021-22 spiritual crisis was "mixed with governance issues, pressure regarding decisions to make, and aridity and desolation."

Fernández writes that the crisis was primarily related to Francis' exercise of power, the temptation to omnipotence and belief that he was above the world. It's a vice Francis admitted to publicly in 2013, in his first interview as pope, when he acknowledged a tendency to wield power in an "authoritarian" way.

It is significant that Francis was tormented by something his critics often faulted him for: an authoritarian, go-it-alone governing style in an absolute monarch and supreme leader of the world's 1.4 billion Catholics.

For Francis, the temptation to omnipotence was the devil tempting him to "reductive curiosity," or believing he alone could solve everyone's problems, and essentially thinking of himself as God.

By Dec. 30, 2022, Francis had apparently overcome the crisis, by entrusting himself to God. Fernández writes that Francis realized that what began on Jan. 24, 2021, "was a powerful invitation from the Lord to become aware of an accumulation of interior darkness that he had to overcome so he could be free."

Fernández notes that the final two major teaching documents of Francis' life, a 2023 text on confidence in God's merciful love, and a 2024 encyclical on Christ's human and divine love, are deeply spiritual texts borne out of the crisis. They differ in tone and content from the texts often associated with his pontificate.

The most confidential parts are in code

While the book reveals some of Francis' innermost thoughts, Fernández says Francis wrote his most confidential thoughts in an indecipherable code, which is not reproduced, presumably to prevent anyone from trying to decipher it.

The reader is also left wondering what Fernández left out of his selection of diary entries, and what more context he could have provided as one of Francis' most trusted advisers.

Fernández writes that the diary includes hardly any information about church matters, and is truly a spiritual repository. He said he omitted entries affecting third parties, though he does include some of Francis' personal musings, including about then-Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV: "A great pastor, a generous missionary and an irreproachable man."

Pope Leo approved the work

Francis had shown Fernández the diary and told him, "From this, you will all see," essentially entrusting the writings to him after his death on April 21, 2025. Fernández said Francis wanted them known because he thought they would help others.

Fernández said he mentioned the writings to Leo after his election, and feared they would end up in a Vatican warehouse with Francis' other personal items that were sealed upon his death.

"I added that I wished to study these materials — to make them known and interpret the exact meaning of their contents," Fernández wrote. "The Holy Father showed interest and, a few days later, sent me the cardboard box with those texts, so I could care for them and do the work I hoped to do with them."

The posthumous publication of a pope's innermost spiritual musings is not unusual.

Pope John XXIII's autobiography, "Journal of a Soul," was published in 1960. St. John Paul II had wanted his personal notes burned after his death, but his secretary defied his wishes and had the writings published in 2014.