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Pope Francis celebrates the Holy Chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at The Vatican, Thursday, March 28, 2024. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

Nicole Winfield

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Associated Press

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Pope Francis urged his priests Thursday to avoid "clerical hypocrisy" and treat their flocks with mercy as he delivered a lengthy set of marching orders to Rome-based priests at the start of a busy few days leading to Easter.

A strong-looking Francis presided over a Holy Thursday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica during which the oils for church services are blessed. Later in the afternoon, he travels to Rome's main women's prison for the annual Holy Week ritual in which he washes the feet of inmates in a symbol of humility and service.

The 87-year-old Francis, who has been hobbled by a long bout of respiratory problems this winter, appeared in good form for the morning Mass. He read aloud a long homily, after skipping his text at the last minute during Palm Sunday Mass last weekend.

In his remarks, Francis warned priests against "sliding into clerical hypocrisy," or preaching one thing to their flocks but doing differently in their own spiritual lives. Rather, he urged them to always show mercy to the faithful and not judge them, and weep instead for their own sins.

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Doing so, he said, "means looking within and repenting of our ingratitude and inconstancy, and acknowledging with sorrow our duplicity, dishonesty and hypocrisy," he said.

The Mass was the first major papal liturgy in St. Peter's since Bernini's great columned canopy over the altar, known as a baldacchino, was covered in scaffolding for a months-long renovation and cleaning.

Francis has a busy few days coming up that will test his stamina.

On Friday, he is due to travel at night to the Colosseum for the Way of the Cross procession re-enacting Christ's crucifixion. On Saturday, he presides over an evening Easter Vigil in St. Peter's Basilica followed a few hours later by Easter Sunday Mass in the piazza and his big noontime Urbi et Orbi (to the city and the world) speech highlighting global conflicts and disasters afflicting humanity.