



Catholics gather in St. Peter's Basilica to pray the rosary for Pope Francis on the night of Saturday, March 1. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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A light rain began to fall late one recent evening and, despite the inclement weather, about 400 faithful gathered in St. Peter's Square to pray for Pope Francis.

After praying the rosary, a 24-year-old Argentine who moved to Rome two years ago to work as a waiter, stood alone a few steps from the large obelisk in the center of the square, wrapped in an Argentine flag.

He was tearfully moved, clutching a wooden rosary in his hands. "I was 12 years old when Bergoglio became Francis. He really went through the sufferings of my country, then he became the father of suffering people all over the world, not just us Argentines," José told the National Catholic Reporter on Feb. 28. "This was my only night off from work and I didn't want to be anywhere else. Francis cannot die."

Every night for the past eight days, as concerns over Francis' health grow, Catholics from across the world have gathered in St. Peter's Square every night to pray the rosary, seeking strength and healing for the pontiff.



Catholics in St. Peter's Square on the night of Friday, Feb. 28, after the daily rosary (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

The prayers had particular urgency after Francis [experienced](#) two episodes of acute respiratory failure on March 3 and had to resume receiving oxygen through a ventilator as he continued his battle with double pneumonia.

That night, more than 500 faithful gathered at St. Peter's Square to pray the rosary, led by American Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost, prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops.

Those praying in the Vatican City crowds are primarily from Italy, Spain and Poland, who have traveled to Rome, some purposefully for the Jubilee Year and others by coincidence, yet all are united in their prayers.

For some in the crowd at St. Peter's Square, Francis' leadership is deeply personal. Maria Laura and her fiancé, Antonio, were both touched by the moment of his election in 2013. "I love Pope Francis very much, so I feel very much the desire to join in prayer for his health. I came on Monday and tonight," Maria Laura said, visibly in tears.

"I have a very significant memory of Francis, because he was elected while my father was dying in bed. I watched his election while I was taking care of my father. The encyclical *Laudato Si'* and everything he did for the environment marked me deeply as a Catholic."

Antonio's connection to that night is just as profound. "I wanted to feel close to the pope in prayer, hoping that he can return among us as soon as possible. My memory coincides exactly with the same as that of my partner. My father was also sick and in the twilight of life. But when Francis was elected, I ran to St. Peter's Square to see him. We were here in this square, and he greeted us as one of us. I felt he was different from previous popes; he was close to us."

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Paula and Marisol, friends from Barcelona, Spain, found themselves in the Eternal City at a significant moment. "We came to visit Rome this weekend and took the opportunity to be able to pray for the healing of Pope Francis," Paula said. For her, the pope is more than just a religious leader. "For me, this pope is a very important person. He has changed my faith journey."

Marisol echoed her sentiments, expressing hope that the Holy Father will continue his mission. "For me, this is a pope who has made a difference. I can't even imagine that he can't continue his pontificate for a while longer."

On Saturday night, the rosary, led by Cardinal Claudio Gugerotti, an Italian cardinal who is prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches, was held inside St. Peter's Basilica, probably due to heavy rain and cold weather. Those gathered were

primarily silent, when they weren't praying; many of them wept as they clasped hands, just a few feet from Bernini's high altar canopy. At the end, about 20 cardinals, seated in the front rows, lingered to bless the rosaries and religious images of some of the pilgrims — just over 300 — who had prayed in the basilica.

Rome-based congregations of sisters and seminarians of multiple nationalities have taken part in praying rosaries for the pope but when asked to share their thoughts with NCR about this, many of them politely declined to comment, saying they wanted to respect the atmosphere of silence and prayer.

"There is not much to say about that. Just that we all have a great fear that the pope will not survive this hospitalization," said one Colombian seminarian who did not want to be identified by his name. "This pope still has a lot to give us."



An Argentine Catholic prays for Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square on the night of Friday, Feb. 28. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

From Naples, Italy, a married couple, Valentina and Mariano, traveled specifically to be present in prayer in Rome. "We love Pope Francis. He deserves prayer and affection from everyone. We are here very much heartfelt," said Valentina, recalling the pope's warmth. She protected herself from the heavy rain with her umbrella just outside the steps of the basilica after the rosary ended.

"The fondest memories I have of the pope are his very affectionate, sweet greetings, and his informal manners," she said.

Mariano, too, felt compelled to act on the pope's own humble request. "He always asks us, 'Pray for me,' and we actually want to do that."

Even among those who have felt distant from Francis' papacy, the moment of collective prayer is bringing them closer. A group of three friends from Brescia in Northern Italy had planned their pilgrimage months earlier, but circumstances gave their journey new meaning, they said.

"We had already booked the trip in October to take part in the Jubilee journey. Then the pope got sicker, so we decided to come and pray the rosary. I have to tell the truth, I never felt this pope close, but being here today makes me feel him closer," one of them admitted, asking not to be quoted with her name.

Another reflected on past pontiffs, saying: "The previous popes inspired me with greater confidence compared to Francis. I came to pray tonight because of personal matters but also because of all that is going through the world these days."

This story appears in the **Pope Francis' health crisis** feature series. [View the full series.](#)