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Pope Francis arrives at the Vatican, on June 16, 2023, nine days after undergoing abdominal surgery. Francis said Thursday June 22, 2023 he was short of breath and still feeling the effects of anesthesia from abdominal surgery two weeks ago. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, File)

by Associated Press

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Rome — June 22, 2023

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Pope Francis said June 22 he was short of breath and still feeling the effects of anesthesia from abdominal surgery two weeks ago.

Francis made the comments to explain why he chose not to deliver a prepared speech to visiting charity workers for Eastern rite churches. Instead, the speech was handed out.

"I'm still under the effect of anesthesia," Vatican News quoted Francis as saying. "My breathing isn't good."

The 86-year-old pontiff underwent three hours of surgery under general anesthesia July 7 to repair a hernia in his abdominal wall and remove intestinal scar tissue. He was discharged on July 16, with his surgeon saying he was "better than before."

Francis has complained previously about feeling the effects of anesthesia long after surgical procedures, including after an operation in 2021 to remove 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his large intestine. He had cited that reaction in part in refusing surgery to repair strained ligaments in his knee.

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His surgeon for both the 2021 and 2023 operations, Dr. Sergio Alfieri of Rome's Gemelli hospital, has stressed that there were no adverse reactions to anesthesia either time, though he acknowledged that "no one likes" to be put under and operated on.

Francis had part of one lung removed as a young man following a respiratory infection and had a three-day hospital stay this past spring for bronchitis. He often speaks in a whisper and can seem out of breath, especially when physically strained.

Part of his rehabilitation after the most recent surgery involved respiratory exercises.

Alfieri has urged Francis to take it easy so that the scar can heal and he can fully regain his strength before upcoming trips in August to Portugal and Mongolia. Francis hasn't exactly followed doctors' orders, holding a normal slate of audiences in recent days including high-profile meetings this week with the Cuban and Brazilian presidents.