

## Gerry O'Connell - From his Hospital Room on 13 March Pope Francis marked 12 Remarkable Years Leading the Catholic Church

March 13 marked the 12th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis as the 265th successor of St. Peter. As he enters the 13th year of his ministry as bishop of Rome, Francis is not in the Vatican; he is instead a patient in Rome's Gemelli Hospital, where he has been treated for double pneumonia for the past 35 days and is now out of imminent danger and recovering.

Gemelli Hospital has become a second Vatican, a Vatican 2, one might say, because Francis continues to govern the church from there. He receives top Vatican officials, reads briefs, approves decrees to declare new saints and blessed, nominates bishops for dioceses worldwide, responds to Jubilee events and expresses concern for the world's conflict situations, including in Israel-Palestine, Ukraine, Lebanon, Sudan and Myanmar and for the flood victims in his homeland.

On March 13, we learned that Francis celebrated his 12 years as pope with a cake and candles with his medical personnel at the hospital, at their suggestion. During the day, he continued with his medical and respiratory therapies and his motor physiotherapy and received high-flow oxygen through nasal tubes. As he has done since last Sunday, he followed the Spiritual Exercises for the Roman Curia personnel by video-link.

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was the 76-year-old Jesuit archbishop of Buenos Aires when 115 cardinals from 47 countries gathered in conclave voted to elect him pope on Wednesday afternoon, March 13, 2013. His surprise election caused a seismic shift in the Catholic Church with its 1.3 billion members and transferred the church's leadership for the first time in history from Europe to Latin America, where nearly 40 percent of the world's Catholics live.

When Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who was presiding over the conclave, asked if he would accept the election, Cardinal Bergoglio responded, *"I am a great sinner, [but] trusting in the mercy and patience of God, in suffering, I accept!"* And when asked by what name he wished to be called, he responded: *Francesco* (Francis). The name, after St. Francis of Assisi, indicated a program, the lodestar for his worldwide ministry.

One hour later, Pope Francis appeared on the central balcony of St. Peter's Basilica and won the hearts of some 100,000 people from all continents gathered in St. Peter's Square with his first greeting: *"Fratelli e sorelle, buona sera!"* (Brothers and sisters, good evening!). He astounded them again soon after when, breaking with tradition, before giving them his blessing, he asked them *"to pray to the Lord that he will bless me: the prayer of the people asking the blessing for their bishop."* That was the beginning of Francis' revolution and reform of the papacy that has so changed the Catholic Church and its image in the world over the past 12 years. It began with a papal conversion, as Francis eliminated many symbols of status and decided to live in a small apartment in the Santa Marta guesthouse instead of in the papal apartment of the apostolic palace. The first Jesuit pope has sought to bring people close to Jesus, both by his deeds and words. His homilies have had a major impact, especially during the Covid-19 epidemic, as he spoke in a language that ordinary people understood. His gestures, like when he embraced the man with a badly disfigured face, have also made a great impact.

As pope, he has sought to change the mentality of those working in the Vatican before changing its structures. His pre-Christmas talks, aimed at this goal, resemble those of a director of the Spiritual Exercises. He has also insisted on taking the Roman Curia to a retreat center outside of Rome for the same reasons. He has also changed the structures and priorities of the Roman Curia by introducing reforms in its new constitution, *"Praedicate Evangelium"* ("Preach the Gospel"), that put evangelization as the top priority. From day one, Francis wanted a missionary church, and a mission-oriented Roman Curia, that would be at the service of both the pope and the bishops.

I remember when Francis met some 6,000 representatives of the world's media (who had come to cover the conclave) in the Paul VI Audience Hall on March 16, 2013. He told us, *"How I would like a church that is poor, and for the poor!"* Following through on this over these past 12

years, he has put the poor at the heart of his ministry as pope, as he has reached out to the homeless, the victims of human trafficking and the world's discarded people, and went to the geographical and existential peripheries of the world. He did this especially on his 47 foreign journeys when he visited 67 countries, many of them war torn, including Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Myanmar and South Sudan. Last September, he continued going to the peripheries when he undertook an arduous 12-day journey to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore.

Even from his hospital bed, he has never ceased to be concerned at the plight of the Ukrainians, as Russian drones and missiles hit the country's electrical power plants, and at the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza. Last Sunday, he appealed for a stop to the violence and killings in Syria, whose people have suffered so much from almost 14 years of war. From the hospital, he remarked, "war seems even more absurd from here".

As he enters his 13th year as pope, Francis stands tall as the moral authority in today's world, a voice pleading for humanity, peace and respect for the dignity of all people, irrespective of race, religion or nationality. For him, we are all God's children, called to love and respect each other as brothers and sisters, as he stated so clearly in "*Fratelli Tutti*" ("Siblings All"). It is a message hard to proclaim in an increasingly polarized world, where the rule of the strongest trumps the rule of international humanitarian law, but he continues trying to convince people to build a better world. His voice is needed even more today than when he was elected, given the dramatic situation we are facing. As he looks ahead, Pope Francis will want to ensure that the synodal process, the most significant undertaking of his papacy, will continue to progress and to shape the future of the Catholic Church, with important consequences for the promotion of Christian unity. He approved the synod's final document without changing anything and established study groups to respond to important topics that had emerged at the synod. He now hopes that many, if not all, of these groups will bring him their conclusions by the end of June, to enable him to move another step forward with the synodal church.

On Dec. 24, 2024, Pope Francis opened the Jubilee Year, centered on the theme of hope. He called on believers to be "**pilgrims of hope**" in a polarized world and a world at war. Some 30 million people are expected in Rome during this Jubilee Year, which ends on Jan. 6, 2026. Due to his hospitalization, Francis has only been able to participate in the first two Jubilee events: for the world of communications and for the armed forces and police. He has had to miss the Jubilee events for artists, deacons and volunteers. As the historical record shows, however, the presence of the pope is not an essential element of the Jubilee, since this is first and foremost a pilgrimage to the tombs of the apostles, St. Peter and Paul, and a passage through the Holy Doors to gain the Jubilee plenary indulgences that the pope has granted. Pilgrims, of course, want to see the pope and receive his blessing, and Francis certainly wants to meet them. But today, as in the past, popes are not always present for the entire period of the Jubilee Year...But only once in the 700-year history of the Jubilee has one pope opened the Jubilee Year and another closed it: The Jubilee of 1700 was opened by Innocent XII and closed by Clement XI. Pope Francis, who opened the Jubilee 2025, hopes also to close it on January 6, 2026, and pilgrims are praying for this.

Francis is now 88 years old and, according to the historical record (certainly for the second millennium), is said to be the third oldest pope to lead the church. The oldest pope was Leo XIII (1810-1903), who died at the age of 93 years and 140 days; the second oldest was Celestine III (1106-98), who died at the age of 92.

In the weeks since Francis' hospitalization, much has been written and discussed in the media as to whether he would follow Pope Benedict XVI's example and resign, given that it is also envisaged in canon law. In the past, Francis praised Benedict for resigning and said he has "opened the door" that others could go through. On the other hand, in conversations with Jesuits in Kinshasa, the Jesuit pope stated clearly that he saw his election as pope as an election for life. He also said on more than one occasion that "*one governs the church with the head, not with the legs.*"

Cardinals who know him well told me they are convinced that, like St. John Paul II, he will not resign. Right now, Francis will likely have to remain in the hospital for at least another few days until he is fully recovered from pneumonia. Once he reaches that stage, he will return to the Vatican to continue the mission God has given him for as long as God wants.