

Pope Francis in 'more pain' but resting after respiratory crisis, doctors say

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Candles with pictures of Pope Francis are seen under a statue of St. John Paul II outside Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic in Rome, February 19, where Francis has been hospitalized since February 14. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

In a statement from the Vatican, doctors at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome where Pope Francis is being treated for pneumonia and bronchitis say the pontiff suffered a respiratory crisis Saturday, requiring an intervention to support his breathing.

“The conditions of the Holy Father continue to be critical,” the statement read, adding that the pope had a “prolonged asthmatic respiratory crisis” that necessitated the application of high-flow oxygen.

Francis was also given blood transfusions, according to the Vatican statement, after blood tests revealed he was suffering from thrombocytopenia, meaning the platelet count in his blood was too low, a condition the doctors said is associated with anemia. Infections and medical treatment may lower platelet count.

Despite the concerns, the statement said that Francis was still alert and out of bed. "The Holy Father continues to be vigilant and spent the day in his armchair even if he was more in pain than yesterday," the statement said. "At the moment the prognosis is guarded."

Francis admitted himself to the hospital February 14 after struggling with bronchitis and experiencing difficulty breathing for the previous 10 days. At the time he was admitted, his doctors said he was suffering from a polymicrobial infection that caused pneumonia in both lungs.

At 88 years old, Francis is among the oldest pontiffs to reign in the church's history and has a long history of respiratory illness. As a youth in Argentina, he had a portion of his right lung removed and has since then been susceptible to infections in his lungs and respiratory tract.

He has also intermittently suffered from sciatica, cataracts, and chronic knee pain. Visitors to the Vatican are accustomed to seeing the pope struggle to walk when not seated in a wheelchair. In recent weeks he has allowed others to read his homilies for him at mass, and he has skipped his public audiences and weekly Angelus prayers.

At a news conference at the Gemelli Hospital on Friday, his doctors had said the pontiff was "not out of danger," adding that while he had shown slight improvement, he remained in critical condition. —Religion News Service