



Pope Francis prays in front of a nativity scene during the weekly general audience at the Vatican, Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2023. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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Pope Francis says he wants to be buried in the Rome basilica of St. Mary Major, not in the grottoes of the Vatican like other popes, so he can be near his favorite icon of the Madonna.

Francis, who turns 87 on Dec. 17, also said he never thought about resigning this year despite a series of health scares. He said he has a trip confirmed to Belgium next year and visits under consideration to Polynesia and his native Argentina.

"It is true that all journeys are now rethought," Francis told N+ of Mexican broadcaster Televisa. "If they're close by, they can be done. If they're farther away they are rethought. There are limits."

It was Francis' first interview since his latest bout of acute bronchitis, which forced the cancellation of a trip this month to Dubai to participate in the U.N. climate conference. Francis, who had part of one lung removed as a young man, appeared in good form and said he was now recovered and feeling fine.

While the job of pope is for life, Francis reconfirmed the possibility of resignation and said he has to prepare for any possibility. "I ask the Lord to say enough, at some point, but when he wants me to," he said.

Francis has already said if he retires, as Pope Benedict XVI did in 2013, he would want to live outside the Vatican somewhere in Rome in a residence for retired priests. Francis has long emphasized his role as bishop of Rome and has a particular devotion to an icon of the Virgin Mary on display in the St. Mary Major basilica near Rome's main train station.

After every trip, for example, Francis goes to the basilica to pray before the *Salus populi Romani* (Salvation of the people of Rome), a Byzantine-style painting that features an image of Mary, draped in a blue robe, holding the infant Jesus who in turn is holding a jeweled golden book.

"It's my great devotion," Francis said, adding that he had already decided he wanted to be buried nearby in the basilica. "The place is already prepared."

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Francis had two bouts of bronchitis this year and was hospitalized for nine days in June to repair an abdominal hernia and have intestinal scar tissue removed. He has been using a wheelchair and cane for over a year due to strained knee ligaments.

Many popes are buried in tombs in the grottos underneath St. Peter's Basilica or in side chapels of the basilica itself, including all of Francis' recent predecessors.

On travel, Francis confirmed that a trip to his native Argentina was "pending" and that the country's new president, Javier Milei, had invited him. Francis has been dogged by questions during his entire 10-year papacy about why he hasn't returned home, questions that have only intensified following Milei's unexpected victory.

During the campaign, the self-described "anarcho-capitalist" called Francis an "imbecile" for defending social justice and a "representative of malignance on Earth."

Francis, who had a long conversation with Milei after he won, seemed to have forgiven him.

"In an election campaign, things are said 'in jest' — they are said seriously, but they are provisional things, things that are used to create a bit of attention, but which later fall away by themselves," Francis said. "You have to distinguish a lot between what a politician says in the election campaign and what he or she is really going to do afterwards, because then comes the moment of concrete things, of the decisions."

Francis' planned visit to Belgium is to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the country's two main Catholic universities. In a statement Dec. 13 welcoming Francis' confirmation of the visit, Belgium's bishops said Francis was expected to stay a day or two, with a date still to be determined.