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Pope Francis arrives in the Paul VI hall on the occasion of the weekly general audience at the Vatican, Wednesday, March 27, 2024. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis appeared in better health on Wednesday, walking into the Vatican audience hall on his own with a cane for his weekly general audience and delivering his prepared text with a clear voice.

The encounter was Francis' first public event since Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square, when he decided at the last minute to skip his homily, avoiding the speech at the start of a busy Holy Week that will test his increasingly fragile health.

In recent weeks, the 87-year-old Pontiff has often shown increased difficulties in walking, has asked an aide to read aloud his remarks and has been heard breathing heavily during public events.

The Holy Week schedule is challenging for popes even under the best of circumstances. But that is especially true this year for Francis, who has been battling on and off all winter what he and the Vatican have described as a case of the flu, bronchitis or a cold.

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As Francis discussed the virtue of patience during his Wednesday audience, he renewed his appeal for peace and an immediate stop in ongoing conflicts.

The pope also noted that there were two people in the Vatican's Paul VI audience hall — "two fathers" — and that one was Palestinian, the other Israeli.

He said that both of them had lost their daughters over the course of the Middle East conflict, "and they are both friends."

"They do not look at the enmity of war," Francis said. "They look to the friendship of two men who care about each other and have experienced the same crucifixion."

The Vatican press office said Bassam Aramin's daughter Abir was killed in 2007 by an Israeli soldier as she left school; Rami Elhanan's daughter Smadar was killed in 1997 in an attack in Jerusalem.

The two men's story of friendship was told in the novel "Apeirogon" by Colum McCann, a winner of the Terzani Prize who met with Francis during an audience with artists on June 23, 2023.

"Let us think of the beautiful witness of these two people who have suffered the war in the Holy Land in the loss of their daughters," the pope said.

Francis met with both men in private before the general audience and then warmly greeted the two men at the end.