

DEATH OF BERGOGLIO

THE POPE'S LAST HOURS AMIDST CROWDS AND MEETINGS. CARDINALS CONVENED FOR TOMORROW

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Pope Francis died on Easter Monday. His last public appearance was on Easter Sunday, from

the same balcony where the world got to know him on 13 March 2013. The suffering Pope gave his blessing from the central loggia of St Peter's and wished the faithful a happy Easter. His last act of generosity involved greeting the crowds in Via della Conciliazione from his white jeep, with a special blessing to a few children lining the road.

It was supposed to be a two-month convalescence after his discharge from hospital on 23 March, but the Argentine pontiff spared no effort, visiting the Basilica, Santa Maria Maggiore, the Regina Coeli prison on Maundy Thursday and holding audiences with the authorities.

The latter was granted yesterday morning in Santa Marta to the Vice President of the United States of America, J.D. Vance, but Francis also had the opportunity to greet the Prime Minister of Croatia, Andrej Plenkovic. The day before, there had been much speculation about the presumed failure to greet the number two in the Trump administration, and there were those who had rejoiced at the missed meeting, giving the affair a political slant. All this was disproved on Easter morning by the images of the Pope, assisted by Don Juan Cruz Villalón and his health assistant Massimiliano Strappetti, giving chocolate Easter eggs to the American Vice-President's children.

The 88-year-old Pope looked very tired and his voice was very weak when he addressed the crowd shortly afterwards. Dear brothers and sisters, Happy Easter' were the last public words of a pope who has spoken so much in his twelve years as pontiff. On Thursday, at the end of his impromptu visit to the Roman prison, he had dusted off his ironic 'I'm still alive' and told journalists that he would live Easter as best he could, but the chaplain, Father Vittorio Trani, had pointed out his suffering. It was not easy to restrain a patient who described himself as "stubborn", as his almost month-long stay outside the Gemelli Hospital, after almost dying in the Roman Polyclinic, showed. From the first minutes after being discharged from hospital, when Francis, wearing an oxygen mask, made a surprise pit stop at Santa Maria Maggiore instead of returning immediately to Santa Marta. He had shown in recent weeks that he did not want to spend his final days confined to the apartment of the villa where he had lived since his election.

Bergoglio died at 7.35am and the announcement was made by Cardinal Chamberlain Kevin Joseph Farrell about two hours later. The Irish-born cardinal appeared before the cameras in the chapel of Santa Marta, flanked by the now-deposed Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, and the vicar general, Monsignor Edgar Peña Parra. Also present was Monsignor Diego Giovanni Ravelli, master of papal liturgical

celebrations, who will now play a decisive role in the preparation of the conclave: "Dear brothers and sisters," he said, "it is with deep sadness that I announce the death of our Holy Father Francis. At 7:35 this morning, the Bishop of Rome, Francis, returned to the house of the Father. His whole life was dedicated to the service of the Lord and his Church. He taught us to live the values of the Gospel with fidelity, courage and universal love, especially towards the poorest and most marginalised. With immense gratitude for his example as a true disciple of the Lord Jesus, we commend the soul of Pope Francis to the infinite merciful love of the Triune God.

The Church enters a period of sede vacante, all the heads of dicasteries are dismissed and only the Camerlengo, the Vicar of Rome, the Penitentiary and the Vicar of the Vatican remain in office. Meanwhile, Cardinal Dean Giovanni Battista Re has already summoned the Cardinals for the first meeting, which will take place tomorrow morning in the Synod Hall.