

Pope hails priests, health workers as 'the saints next door'

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Francis paid tribute to priests who "offer their life for the Lord". (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

Vatican City: Pope Francis on Holy Thursday hailed priests and medical staff who tend to the needs of COVID-19 patients as "the saints next door". Francis celebrated the Holy Week evening Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, which was kept off-limits to the public because of restrictions aimed at containing the spread of the new coronavirus.

The same precautions forced the pope to forego a symbolic ritual traditionally observed on the Thursday before Easter washing the feet of others in a sign of humility.

Last year, he performed the ritual washing on the feet of 12 inmates at a prison near Rome. The ritual re-enacts Jesus' washing the feet of his 12 Apostles at their last supper before he was crucified.

Looking weary and with a subdued voice, Francis also expressed dismay that priests have been insulted or wrongly slandered because of the scandals in the Catholic Church involving pedophile priests.

"Sometimes they can't even go walk in the street because ugly things are said to them, in reference to the drama we are living through, priests who did ugly things," Francis said.

Earlier in the week, Australia's highest court dismissed the convictions of Cardinal George Pell for allegedly sexually abusing children, a former top aide of the pope, Pell spent 13 months in prison in his native Australia. Francis didn't mention him or cite a specific case in his remarks.

The pope began his off-the-cuff homily by honouring the memory of priests who gave their lives in service to others, singling out those who died after tending to sick people in Italy's hospitals. Italy has the world's highest death toll from the coronavirus pandemic.

Francis paid tribute to priests who "offer their life for the Lord". "These days, more than 60 in Italy have died, after giving attention to the sick in hospitals," he said. "Also doctors, nurses. They are the saints next door."

- AP