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Today (March 5) marks the 88-year-old pontiff's 20th day in hospital and his latest setback (?) comes right at the start of Lent, a time in which Catholics around the world are called to prayer, fasting and charitable works in the lead up to Easter.

Six miles away from Rome's Gemelli Hospital, the Vatican's Ash Wednesday service proceeded as planned at the Basilica of Santa Sabina.

[Possible quotes from Camillo's Ash Wednesday story]

A rosary prayer service will take place tonight in St. Peter's Square for the pope's health and recovery, as it has now for the last nine evenings. Italian Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, prefect of the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints, will preside at the service.

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At the start of the Mass, Cardinal Aneglo De Donatis â?? who served as the pope's delegate â?? acknowledged Francis' absence and encouraged Catholics to join in prayer for the ailing pontiff.

"We feel deeply united with him in this moment, and we thank him for the offering of his prayer and his sufferings for the good of the entire church and the whole world," said De Donatis.

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In a new [interview](#), Polish Cardinal Konrad Krajewski â?? who led the March 2 rosary service â?? said the nightly vigils will continue "until the pope returns to the Vatican."

This story appears in the **Families Separated at the Border** feature series. [View the full series.](#)