



A Vatican Swiss Guard wears a face mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the San Damaso courtyard ahead of Pope Francis' general audience Sept. 2 at the Vatican. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, file)

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Four Swiss Guards have tested positive for coronavirus and were showing symptoms, the Vatican said Monday, Oct. 12, as the surge in infections in surrounding Italy penetrates the Vatican walls.

The Swiss Guards, the world's oldest standing army, provide ceremonial guard duty during papal Masses, man the Vatican gates and help protect the 83-year-old Pope Francis.

The four are in isolation while their contacts are being traced, the Vatican said Monday. They join three other Vatican residents who tested positive in recent weeks plus the dozen or so Holy See officials who tested positive during the first wave of the outbreak.

Despite the positive cases among his own guards, Francis on Monday was seen once again without a mask. He warmly [greeted Cardinal George Pell](#) in his private studio, and neither man wore a mask. Also unmasked were Pell's secretary and the Vatican photographer.

Francis, who lost part of one lung to illness when he was a young man, has drawn sharp criticism in social media for shunning a mask during his Wednesday general audience, held last week indoors. He was seen shaking hands with clerics and otherwise mingling with the masked crowd. His bodyguards were similarly maskless.

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Italy is seeing a sharp surge in COVID-19 cases, with the Lazio region around the Vatican among the worst-hit in this second wave of the pandemic. Lazio currently has more people hospitalized with the virus than any other region, at 911, with 69 in intensive care.

The Vatican last week amended its mask mandates to conform to that of Italy, requiring them indoors and out. The Vatican didn't immediately respond when asked why Francis wasn't wearing one to receive Pell.

The guards, famous for their billowy blue, red and yellow striped uniforms, are all single Swiss men under age 30 and must be upstanding Catholics. They sign up for two-year tours of duty and live communally inside the Vatican City State.

During their annual swearing in ceremony, usually held in May but postponed until Oct. 4 because of COVID-19, none of the recruits donned a mask, even though they wear them while standing guard at the entrances to Vatican City.