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Faithful cheer as Pope Leo XIV appears in a window of the Apostolic Palace over St. Peter's Square in his first public event since his cancer surgery, at the Vatican, Oct. 18, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Matteo Minnella)



by Abby Strelow

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Sister Annette, along with 50 other Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny, had come all the way from India to stand in St. Peter's Square and catch a glimpse of Pope Leo XIV.

The sisters' hopes were briefly dashed, however, when the pope was admitted to the hospital for a lung operation on Oct. 13. But fortunately for Annette, there was another surprise: The pope's early discharge last Saturday gave her sisters, along with 15,000 other pilgrims who packed into St. Peter's Square under overcast skies, their chance to see Leo on Oct. 18.

"We prayed for him, and we are happy that he is here today," she told National Catholic Reporter while awaiting the pope's appearance at the window of the Apostolic Palace for his midday Angelus prayer. "We [were] worried whether he will be here or not."

Leo was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital two days after announcing his upcoming operation from that same window. The Vatican had announced that his schedule was cleared through Oct. 20, thereby canceling his Angelus prayer on Sunday. Yet the pope was dismissed from the hospital on Oct. 17, sooner than initial expectations, allowing him to keep his Sunday appointment in St. Peter's Square.

Upon walking to the window for his first public event since his hospitalization, the pope was greeted by signs, flags and cheers and chants of "*Viva il papa*!" ("Long live the pope!") that pilgrims shouted before joining him in prayer.



Faithful gather in St. Peter's Square as Pope Leo XIV leads the Angelus prayer from a window of the Apostolic Palace, following his discharge from hospital after surgery for lung cancer, at the Vatican, Oct. 18, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Matteo Minnella)

After praying the Angelus, the pope thanked all those that prayed for him during his hospitalization, saying he "truly sensed your support."

"This experience has made me feel particularly close to all those who are living with illness or infirmity," he said. "Now that I have overcome this delicate phase, as you know, I will gradually resume my activities, always with God's help and your prayers."

Danny and Maria, a married couple from Colombia, arrived in St. Peter's Square early to secure a good view of the pope. The two had planned a stop in Rome during their vacation to Europe in the hopes of seeing Leo at his weekly Sunday Angelus, but they had worried that they would be unable to after Leo's unexpected hospitalization.

"We prepared the visit, our trip, for this day today," Danny told NCR. "But maybe two days ago, we read that the pope is sick. ... We are all very sad about it, that we [might not] see the pope."

When they learned of Leo's dismissal from the hospital on Saturday, however, the two were thrilled to know they would indeed get to see him the next day: "It's an amazing, exciting experience that so few people in the world get," Danny said.

Ola, a Polish pilgrim from Czestochowa who came to Rome with her mother and daughter, spoke about similar feelings of fear and relief during the past week: "We are very happy that [the] pope just [came] back from the hospital because we were sure that we [wouldn't] see him today," she said. "It was like, 'Surprise!' "

She said that Sunday was "a lucky day for us, because we just were sure: 'No, we will not see him.' "

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Renée, a Catholic convert who lives in Philadelphia, was at St. Peter's Square as part of the culmination of a trip to the Vatican from her family to celebrate her recent birthday.

"I just joined the Catholic Church two years ago as a 73-year-old, and now they thought that it would be a wonderful gift to bring me here, and it was," she said. Renée joined the church a month before Leo's election, and sharing his American roots gave her a feeling of special connection with him.

"You feel like you really belong," she said. "He just seems like a good man. He almost has this glow."

Not far from Renée, nearly 40 pilgrims from Brazil, with the group Viva São Pio, held their country's flag for the pope to see while sporting matching yellow baseball caps. The group was finishing a multiweek pilgrimage on the life of Padre Pio.

Sueli, one of the group's leaders, said: "We didn't know if he would come [today]," but she said his quick recovery gave the pilgrims the prayerful arrival in Rome they had hoped for.

Other pilgrims will also have chances to see the pope in the coming weeks. The Vatican said on Monday that Leo's weekly general audiences in St. Peter's Square will resume on Wednesday, Oct. 21, just eight days after his surgery.

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