

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 18, 2014 at 1:12pm

Is Pope Francis sick, or just taking a summer break?

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The Francis Chronicles

Vatican City — Pope Francis' abrupt decision to cancel his popular morning Mass and general audiences for the month of July has provoked fresh speculation about the health of the 77-year-old pontiff.

The Vatican has announced the pope will give no midweek general audiences in St Peter's Square during July, and the intimate Mass he celebrates every day inside the chapel at the St. Martha residence will be suspended from July until September.

"There is no sickness whatsoever," Fr. Thomas Rosica, a consultant to the Vatican press office, said, according to CNN. "If there was, we would be open about that and asking people to pray for him."

Francis will continue to lead the Angelus blessing at the Vatican every Sunday except when he travels to South Korea from Aug. 13-18.

The pope has worked intensely since he was elected in March 2013 and has also made two demanding official visits, to Brazil last year and the Middle East last month. On Saturday, he is planning to go to Cassano All'Jonio, a mafia stronghold in the southern region of Calabria to pray for 3-year-old Nicola "Coco" Campolongo who was burned to death as he sat in a baby seat when his grandfather was shot dead in front of him.

Last week, the Vatican sought to play down concern when Francis canceled two days of official engagements and his morning Mass because of a "minor illness."

"There is nothing to worry about," the Vatican's chief spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, said at the time. "His life has been very intense in the past few weeks. It is totally normal for the pope to rest."

Vatican officials have privately expressed concern at the pope's heavy workload particularly since he only has one lung. Italian media reports have also suggested he has suffered from back pain recently.

While it is customary for popes to take a vacation during the summer months and leave Rome for the papal palace at Castel Gandolfo, Francis has not yet announced any plans for a holiday this year. Last summer, Francis worked at the Vatican without a vacation.

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