News
Vatican



A visitor wears a mask for protection from the coronavirus while touring the Vatican Museums in this Feb. 29, 2020, file photo. A Vatican City official said that the Vatican Museums will have new measures and protocols in place to ensure the safety of visitors when they reopen. No date has been given for reopening the Museums, which have been closed since March 9 on account of the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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As Italian authorities prepare to slowly relax lockdown restrictions in the country, a Vatican City official said it will enact new measures and protocols to ensure the safety of visitors to the Vatican Museums.

In an interview with Vatican News published May 9, Bishop Fernando Vergez Alzaga, secretary general of the Governorate of Vatican City State, said that due to ongoing health and safety preparations, the museums "do not yet have a definite date on reopening."

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced April 26 that libraries, exhibitions and museums would be allowed to open nationwide May 18 with limited entrance if they could guarantee visitors would observe social distancing and if the institutions followed health regulations designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Following the lead of the Italian government, the Vatican had announced March 8 that it was closing the Vatican Museums, the necropolis under St. Peter's Basilica and the museum at the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo — all of which normally draw a large number of international visitors to closed and crowded places.

Vergez told Vatican News that since then, the limited staff are obliged to wear protective gloves and masks and have their body temperatures measured daily. He also said the installation of thermoscanners to measure the body temperatures of visitors is nearing completion.

Once they reopen, "the museums can only be accessed with a reservation," he said. "This will allow us to stagger the entrances during opening hours" and "visitors will be required to wear a mask."

The Vatican Gardens, as well as the museum at the papal villa at Castel Gandolfo, will also open with similar protocols in the hopes that local visitors taking weekend trips, "which today seems almost a luxury," would visit the summer residence of the pontiffs, he said.

While the pandemic has forced many institutions to rethink their business models to attract customers, including easier access on the web through virtual tours, Vergez said the museum preferred not to publicize its exhibitions and instead chose to remain in "silence."

"We saw Pope Francis alone in a deserted St. Peter's Square. Every day we see the rooms and galleries of the museums empty of people. The silence calls for prayer. That's why we preferred to stay a little aside, reduce our communication to a minimum and give a testimony in this sense," he said.

Vergez also said that while the Vatican Museums' website already provides virtual access to its collections, in this day and age "we have a great need for reality, a desperate need."

"Let's not forget that it is the people who make the museums alive and only the real experience of the museum makes people alive," he said. "Virtuality can never replace reality; to enjoy art you need eyes and heart, not screens to touch — or at least, not only those!"

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