News
Vatican



A member of a religious congregation walks down the hall as lay students wait between classes at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome in this Sept. 20, 2013, file photo. The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education has asked pontifical universities to reopen in the fall with students present but many are making back-up plans. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Cindy Wooden

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The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education has asked pontifical universities and faculties to plan to reopen in the fall and teach with students present.

The universities in Rome are making those preparations, but many of them also are devising backup plans in case the COVID-19 pandemic continues, and many students are prevented from traveling to Rome.

The pontifical universities and other "ecclesial faculties" — those granting Vatican-recognized degrees in theology and canon law — are to be "places of dialogue and of communion," said a note dated May 6 and posted on the website of the Congregation for Catholic Education. "Thus, teaching and research must develop in an environment where students and teachers carry out their activities in contact with others, in communion and sharing."

"Distance learning is no alternative to this methodology and can be used only in part, and for particular situations, and always with the previous authorization of the Congregation for Catholic Education," said the note, signed by Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, prefect.

Italy ordered the shutdown of all schools and universities March 5. That included the pontifical universities in Rome, which had just begun spring semester courses. The universities moved as quickly as possible to online lessons; many of the students from the United States, Italy and other parts of Europe headed home and followed their courses online.

In the same note, Versaldi formally — and retroactively — gave the chancellors of the universities the power to grant dispensations from any rules requiring the students to be present for the spring 2020 semester and from obligations to sit exams in person in June, the normal end of the semester.

Salesian Father Mauro Mantovani, rector of the Pontifical Salesian University and president of the conference of rectors of pontifical universities in Rome, told the Vatican newspaper the transition was "quick and positive."

The Salesian University ended up being a COVID-19 "hot spot" with 62 residents of the campus testing positive for the virus; one staff member, Polish Salesian Father Grzegorz Jaskot, died at the age of 67.

Mantovani told L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, that the university had already been experimenting with distance learning. "We know well that the best technology can never substitute the value of the educational relationship of presence," he said, but the online courses saved the semester.

The Salesian University also has a faculty of psychology and, he said, so in addition to classes, "we have activated a service of psychological support for our students and their families, aware of the related psychological damage the virus is spreading."

At the Benedictine-run Pontifical Athenaeum of St. Anselm, which includes the Pontifical Liturgical Institute, 120 of the 700 students did not leave. They live at the abbey's college, said the rector, Benedictine Father Bernhard Eckerstorfer.

The monastic lifestyle has provided the students with ongoing spiritual, social and recreational opportunities, he said, but also "the guarantee of health safety. No one leaves the abbey except for absolute necessities."

The majority of students are not Italian and since no one knows what travel restrictions may be in place in the fall, he said, the Benedictines are investing the equivalent of about $7,500 in each lecture hall for cameras and the other technology needed to share lessons online.

"I think at the end of this pandemic, we will be stronger than before," Eckerstorfer told L'Osservatore Romano.

Jesuit Father Mark A. Lewis, vice rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University, said the institution began preparing for remote learning in late February when the pandemic began spreading.

Planning for the 2020-2021 academic year is in the advanced stages, he said. The lecture halls and classrooms are being modified to ensure social distancing, and the Italian lessons, which new students usually take in person in August and September, are being taped for those who may not arrive in Italy that soon.

The university will keep its fees as they were for this year, he said, "but we hope that the global economic uncertainty does not diminish the vital flow of scholarships that Propaganda Fide and other benevolent foundations distribute to our students."

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