Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis waves as he looks out on St. Peter's Square after leading the "Regina Coeli" from his library in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican May 24, 2020. It was the first time the public was allowed in the square given the ongoing easing of restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Vatican Media)

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St. Peter's Square was open to the public May 24, the feast of the Ascension, and scores of visitors turned up for Pope Francis' noonday prayer and blessing.

Since Italy announced a nationwide lockdown March 9, the pope has been offering his Sunday remarks livestreamed from his library in the Apostolic Palace and had been giving his blessing from the window to an empty square.

With the progressive easing of restrictions, St. Peter's Basilica was open to the public May 18 and the square reopened May 20.

So, the feast of the Ascension was the first opportunity for scores of visitors, many wearing masks and keeping their distance from others, to watch the pope's remarks being shown on large screens in the square. The pope briefly emerged at his window, waved to the small crowd, which cheered and clapped, and silently imparted his blessing.

The day also marked World Communications Day, celebrated at the Vatican and in most dioceses May 24. The pope's message, released Jan. 24, focused on the importance of sharing "knowledge of the Lord" and meaningful memories, stories and experiences, so that they may transform people's lives.

After reciting the "Regina Coeli," the pope said he hoped the day would encourage people to tell and share "constructive stories that help us to understand that we are part of a story that is bigger than ourselves and that we can look to the future with hope if we truly take care of each other like brothers and sisters."

In his remarks before the prayer, the pope said the feast also celebrates the risen Christ's final encounter with his disciples on the mount, where he entrusts them to continue his work and proclaim his word on earth.

Although people may recognize their weakness and limitations, and not feel up to the task, there is no need to be discouraged, the pope said, because Jesus promised,

"I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Even though the risen Christ has ascended into heaven, he maintains his presence on earth "through his Spirit that leads the church to journey in history like a travel companion for every person," Francis said.

Christ is always with and among his people — offering them strength, perseverance and joy. His presence is revealed in the Word, the sacraments and the constant working of the Holy Spirit, he added.

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