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People wearing protective masks walk in front of Rome's Trevi Fountain Aug. 19. The government issued a decree Aug. 17 that states face coverings must be worn between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. near bars and pubs and in areas where gatherings are more likely. (CNS/Reuters/Guglielmo Mangiapane)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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As my wife and I emerged from Italy's strict, nine-week-long Coronavirus lockdown in May, we tentatively began to mark the "firsts."

First time we went for a walk outside. (During the lockdown, we could only walk in circles on our building's roof.) First time I went back to the Vatican press office. (After about 90 days away… by far the longest I'd not seen the place since we moved here six years ago, thanks to the wild reality we call the year 2020.)

Since we are both rather cautious people, some of our firsts have come much later than those of others here. We've only met friends for dinner out a total of four times, and always outside and in a small group. We only just saw one of my closest colleagues, someone I would see nearly every day in any other year, last week.

Now, I find myself wondering: What will be our "lasts" before the next lockdown?

Although the number of COVID-19 cases have been on a long lull since most countries across Europe imposed measures similar to Italy's, the figures have been sharply rising in past weeks. Italy's Civil Protection agency, which updates a country-wide dashboard on a daily basis, reported 320 new cases Aug. 17. On Aug. 23, it was 1,210; and on Aug. 27, it was 1,411.

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The drastic rise appears at least partly due to a tradition no decent Italian would ever forego: the month-long August holiday, when all head away from the cities to the beaches or the hills to escape the heat and the oppressive *afa*, or muggy humidity.

The figures have sparked something of a golden age of memes for caustic Italian humor. One showed a man on the beach holding a shell to his ear, saying he heard the sound of himself in September, filling out the forms we'll have to use to leave our houses in the new lockdown.

Another advertised coming episodes of a new television series called "The Decree," an allusion to how Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte could order people back to their homes.

As I write, I'm realizing this may all sound very weird to an American not living abroad. Not many states put in place measures as strict as Italy's, and the numbers here are nothing like those in the U.S.

Italy has reported a total of only some 263,949 cases since February, and the number of deaths attributed to the virus hasn't yet reached 36,000. The U.S. is now reporting more than 5.8 million cases and 179,604 deaths, according to the latest figures.

All this is to say that we worry, worry, worry for you all — our readers, our friends, our family. That, of course, isn't something to which there will be a "first" or a "last."

For those on the fence about lockdowns, or social distancing, or wearing masks: Please, learn from Italy's experience. They work.

When Conte announced his initial coronavirus prevention measures March 7, he called on Italians not to be *furbi*, or cunning, in trying to flout the rules. "We have to take care for our own health, the health of those close to us, of our parents, and most of all, of our grandparents," he said.

If there is a second lockdown here geared toward protecting the vulnerable, we'll be content to return to it. (Maybe content is a bit far. We'll be prepared.)

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent and international news editor. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

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