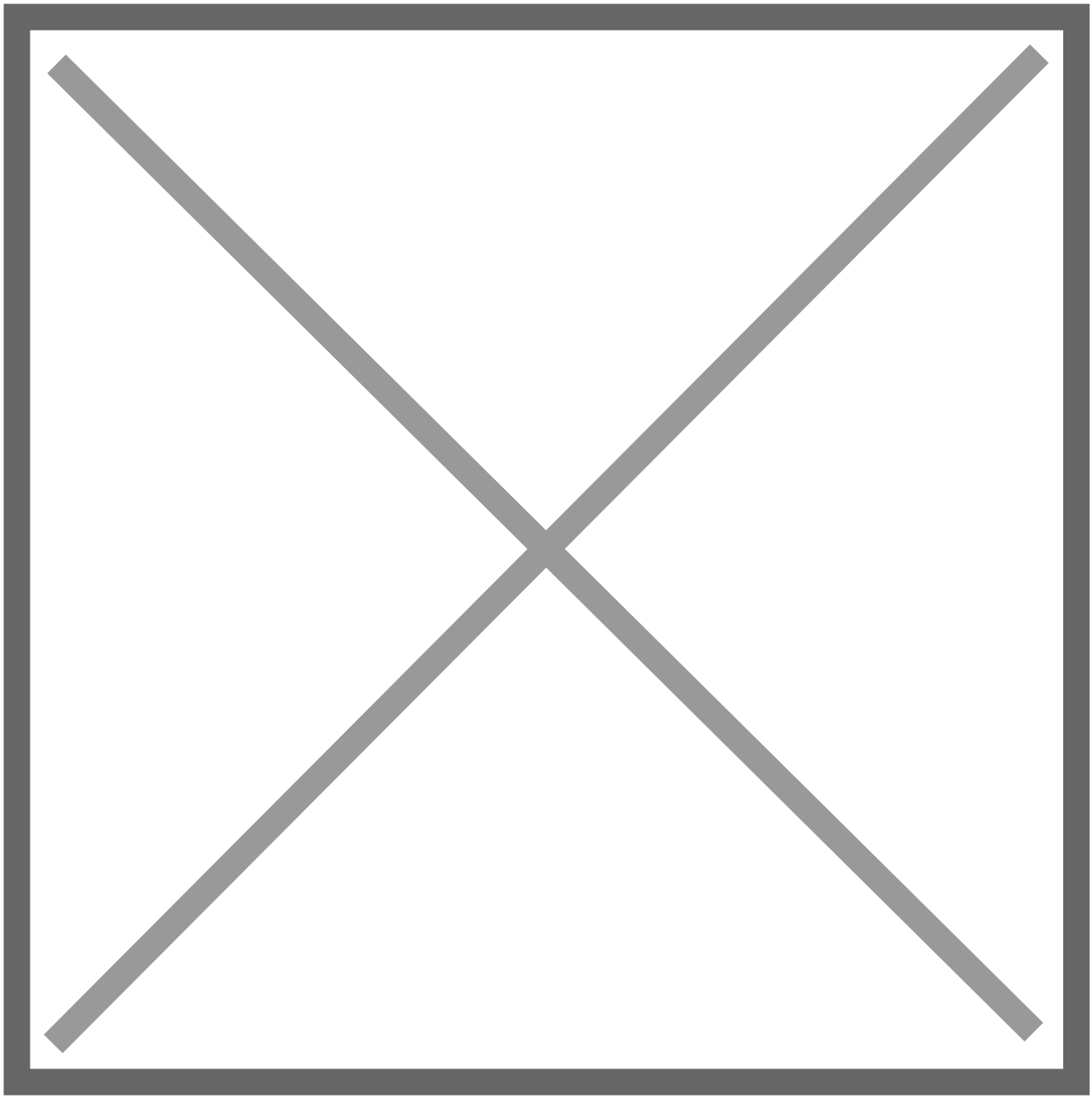
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



An elderly priest is pictured in a file photo walking to his residence at Our Lady of Carmen Church in Panama City. (CNS/Bob Roller)

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Vatican City — September 17, 2020

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Pope Francis reminded elderly and ill priests that they need not be afraid of suffering because Christ is always there to help them carry that cross.

With God's grace, their situation, which was made even more difficult and risky because of the COVID-19 pandemic and strict protocols for containing its spread, can be "an experience of purification," he said.

For priests, fragility can be like a fire that refines and soap that purifies, and which, "raising us up to God, refines and sanctifies us," he said.

"We are not afraid of suffering; the Lord carries the cross with us," he said.

The pope's message was sent to priests taking part in an annual day of prayer and fraternity for elderly and sick clergy Sept. 17 in Italy's northern Lombardy region — the region that had been hit hardest by coronavirus infections and deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Vatican released the message the same day.

Over the past several months, the pope said, "we have all experienced restrictions. Days spent in confined spaces seemed endless and always the same."

"We have missed the affection of those dearest to us and of friends; the fear of infection has reminded us of our precariousness," and, he added, it has also given people an idea of what many elderly people experience every day.

Francis said he hoped this period would help everyone understand how "it is necessary not to waste the time that is given to us; that it will help us to enjoy the

beauty of encountering others, to heal from the virus of self-sufficiency."

He said he was pleased the group could travel with their bishops to the town of Caravaggio and pray at the city's Marian sanctuary.

He thanked them for their faithful and silent witness, and their love for God and the church.

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