News
Vatican



Pope Francis delivers his blessing in the Paul VI Hall on the occasion of the weekly general audience at the Vatican, Oct. 7, 2020. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)



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Editor's Note: *This column was first published at Religion News Service on Oct. 20. That same day, Pope Francis wore a mask in public for the first time at an interreligious prayer event.*

Dear Pope Francis, it is extremely disappointing that almost all the photos of you since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic have shown you without a mask. This is bad on so many levels. You should know better. Please, wear a mask.

Your friends in the media, including myself, have for the most part given you a pass on this, but I think that is a mistake. Your true friends will tell you the truth. As a brother Jesuit, I feel obligated to offer you some fraternal correction.

Here are six reasons you should wear a mask.

1. Follow the science.

As a young man, you were trained as a scientist. You should show respect for what doctors and scientists are telling us about COVID-19. Absent a vaccine, the science is telling us to wear masks, keep social distance and wash our hands. I will not belabor this because it has been well covered in the media, except by those who deny the science for partisan reasons.

In addition, you are especially vulnerable to a respiratory virus because of your age and the fact that you are missing part of one lung. If you get sick, you will be in danger of dying.

2. Be a good Jesuit.

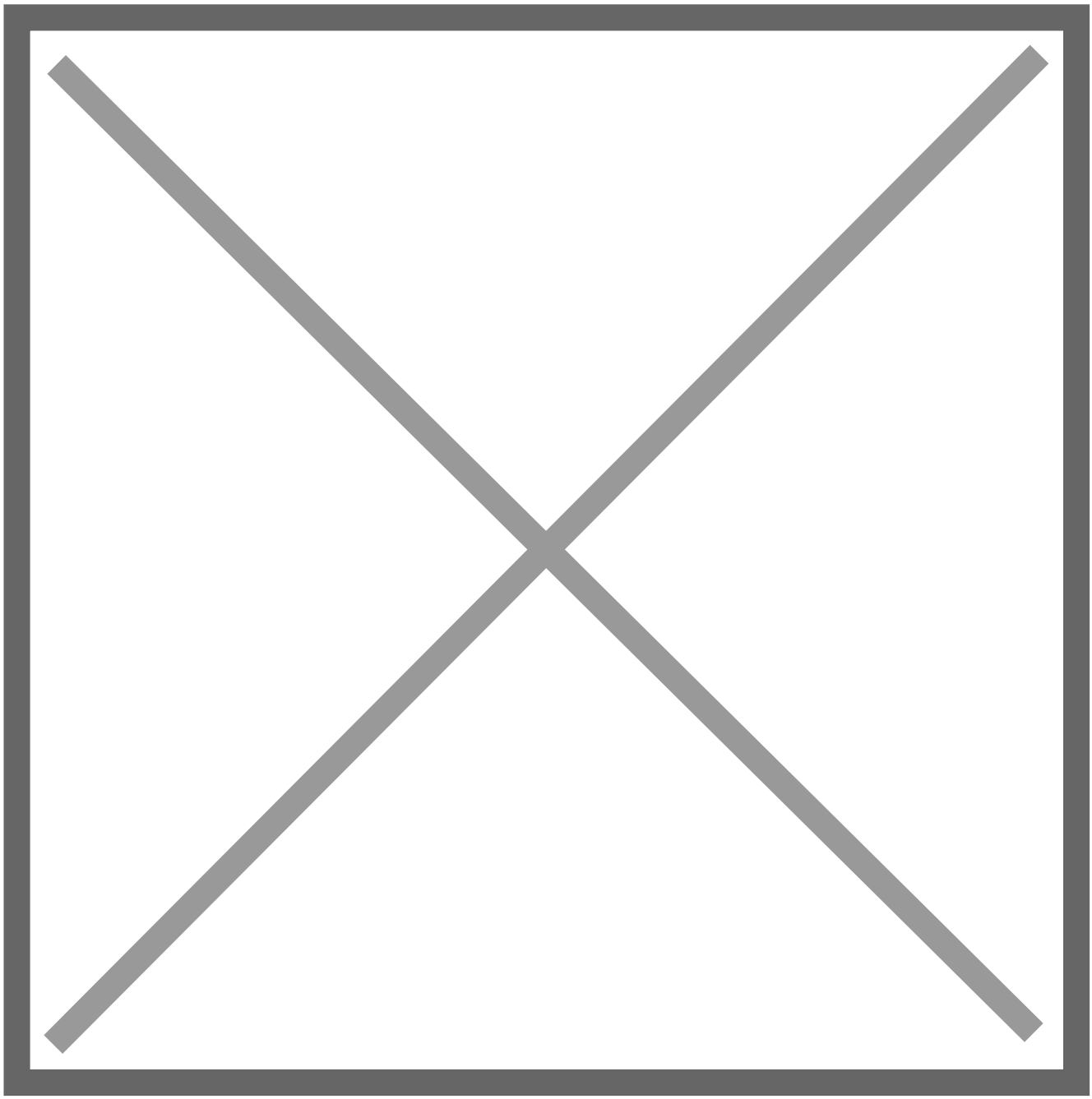
Jesuits who become bishops (or popes) continue to be Jesuits except they are no longer bound by their vow of obedience. That means that there is no Jesuit superior who can order you to take better care of your health, which is what would happen with any other Jesuit. Jesuit bishops are asked to listen to advice from our superior general in Rome, so I hope he is advising you to wear a mask and take care of your health.

You should also remember that Part 3 of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus tells us to show "great patience and obedience toward the physician and infirmarian." All good doctors and infirmarians are telling us to wear masks, so be a good Jesuit and wear one.

3. Follow your own rules.

The Vatican is clearly not a virus-free zone. There have been about two dozen confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Vatican, including 11 Swiss guards and a resident of Casa Santa Marta, where you live.

The Vatican City State has established procedures for dealing with the pandemic, one of which is to wear masks. You're the boss; you should follow your own rules. When the clergy hold themselves above the rules, we call that clericalism, a sin that you have loudly denounced. You should follow the rules that apply to everyone else in the Vatican.



Pope Francis arrives to lead his general audience in Paul VI hall at the Vatican Oct. 21, 2020. The previous day, Oct. 20, he had worn a mask in public for the first time at an interreligious prayer event. (CNS/Paul Haring)

4. It is a sin not to wear a mask.

Being a hypochondriac is, of course, silly. But God expects us to take care of the body he gave us. Recklessly endangering our health is a sin. You have a duty to

protect your health so you can keep working as long as God wants you to be pope. Not wearing a mask is suicidal.

John Paul I did not take care of his health and look what happened to him. Go to confession and wear a mask.

5. Be a good example.

As a Christian, let alone pope, you have an obligation to be a good example to the rest of the world. You are currently giving bad example. As the head of the Christian family, you need to give better example by wearing a mask.

6. Do you really want to be like Trump?

There is another major world leader who does not wear a mask, Donald Trump. Do you really want to be in company with a man who builds walls rather than bridges, who demonizes refugees and immigrants, who turns his back to the marginalized? I don't think so, but that is where you are as long as, like Trump, you do not wear a mask.

I convey this message with love and concern. I want you to have a long and fruitful papacy. There is much God still wants you to do. It is too soon to have another conclave.

So, forgive me, but I am asking your friends to give you a bad time until you regularly wear a mask. They should leave you a message on Twitter @Pontifex. Since you do not have an official email address, they will have to write you at:

Pope Francis 00120 Vatican City

Maybe we could even get a few signs or banners in St. Peter's Square calling for you to wear a mask.

I hope also that my fellow journalists will start badgering the Vatican on this. Every cardinal must be asked, "Have you advised the pope to wear a mask?" Every person who meets with the pope should be asked the same question. Every press conference should begin with a question on whether the pope is wearing a mask.

The people of God want you to stay healthy. You need to listen to them.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*.]

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