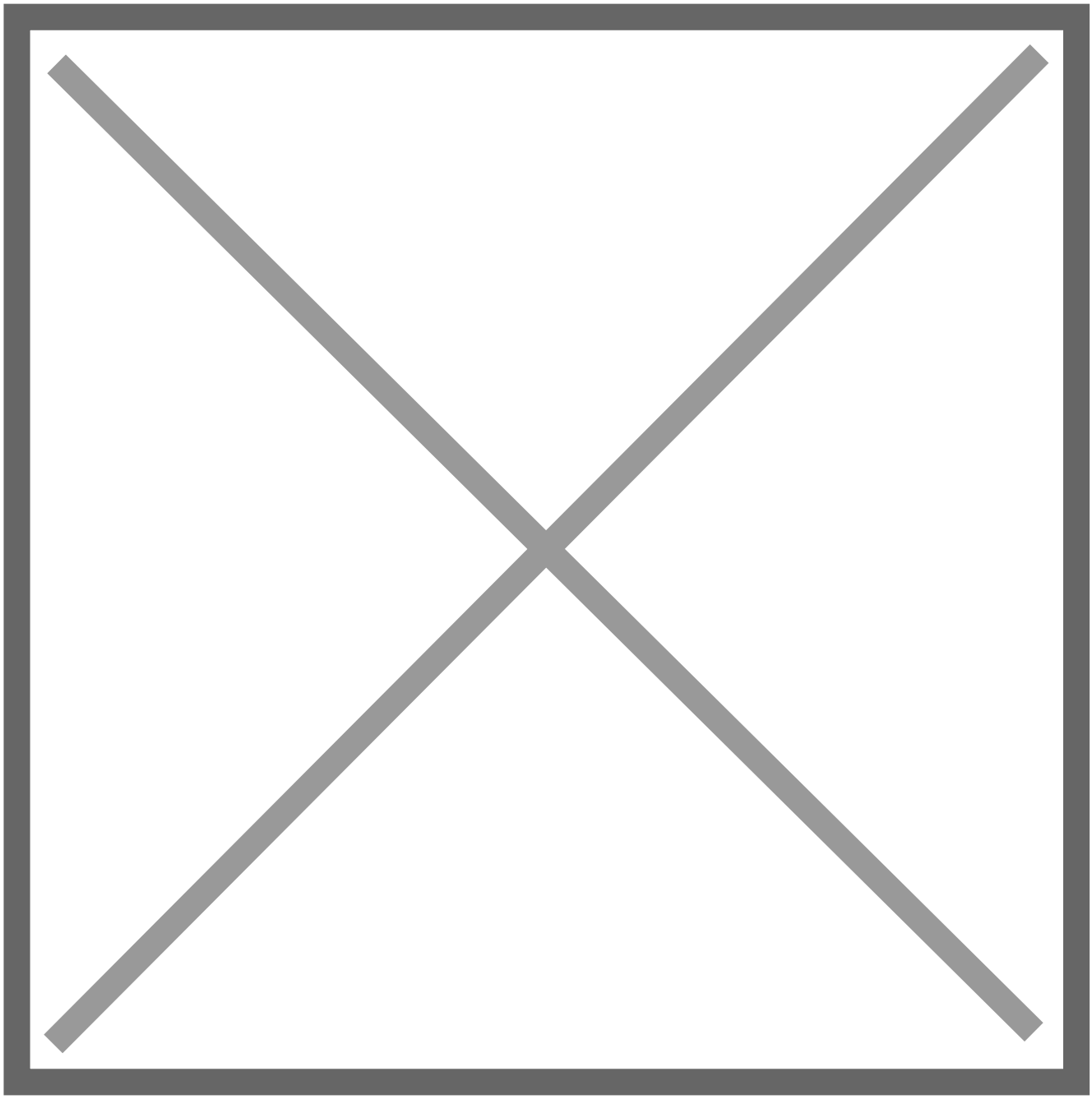
Vatican
News



Cardinal-designate Silvano Tomasi is pictured in Rome Oct. 29, 2020. Cardinal Tomasi, a retired Vatican nuncio, was born in Italy but is a U.S. citizen. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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Italian-born Cardinal-designate Silvano Tomasi describes himself as "one of those 40 million Americans who were born outside the United States, but at the same time are part of the makeup of the country."

The Italian-American cardinal-designate, who celebrated his 80th birthday on Oct. 12, has not lived full time in the United States since 1989, but he told Catholic News Service he feels "more American than anything else."

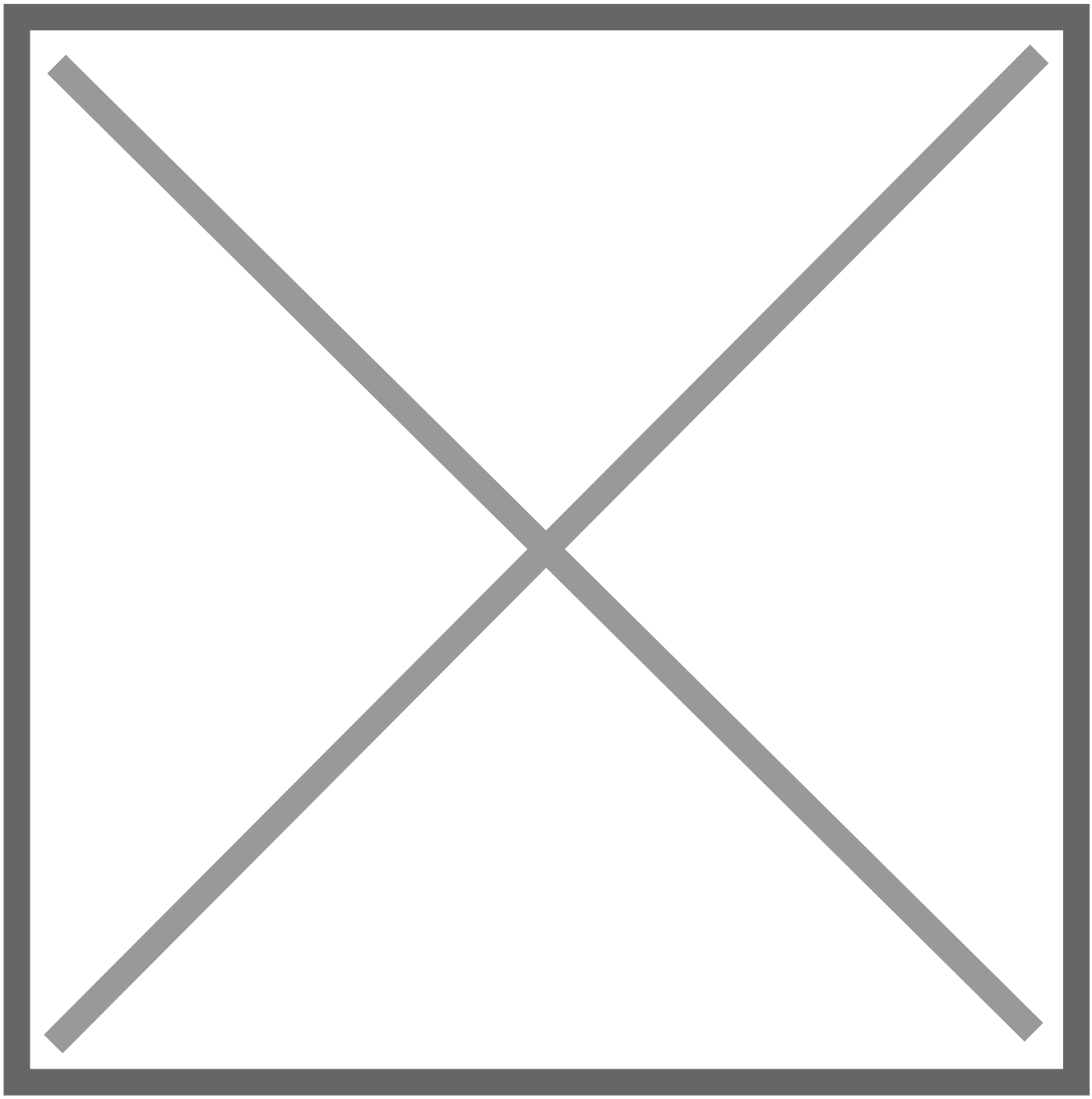
Pope Francis announced Oct. 25 that he would induct the archbishop into the College of Cardinals Nov. 28.

Tomasi, a Scalabrinian, said Francis has not explained why he chose him, but he thinks one reason is that he belongs "to a small religious family that for over a century has been working with migrants and refugees and displaced people and people on the margins of society. And this is one of his priorities. Maybe he wanted to give a shoutout to my community and say, 'Keep moving, keep going in that direction.'"

His second guess, he said, is to highlight the importance of multilateral diplomacy, since the soon-to-be cardinal is a retired nuncio and Vatican representative to U.N. agencies in Geneva.

"The Holy See can bring to the international context values that are useful for solving problems in the long run. It does not bring the power of trade or of a military arsenal, but it brings those moral values that resonant with the heart of every person," he said.

The values and value-based solutions the Vatican proposes are not based only on theory, he said, but flow from "a reality on the ground — of the sisters, thousands of sisters, that sacrifice their lives to achieve the real development of a country, and the thousands of priests who support and educate millions of young people to be decent citizens of their countries and the world."



Pope Francis talks with Cardinal-designate Silvano Tomasi during a private audience at the Vatican Oct. 30, 2020. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Technically retired, the cardinal-designate is working on a new book, continues to meet via Zoom with a group of experts promoting nuclear disarmament and raises money for the continued expansion of the Ethiopian Catholic University of St. Thomas Aquinas in Addis Ababa, where he was stationed as nuncio from 1996 to 2003.

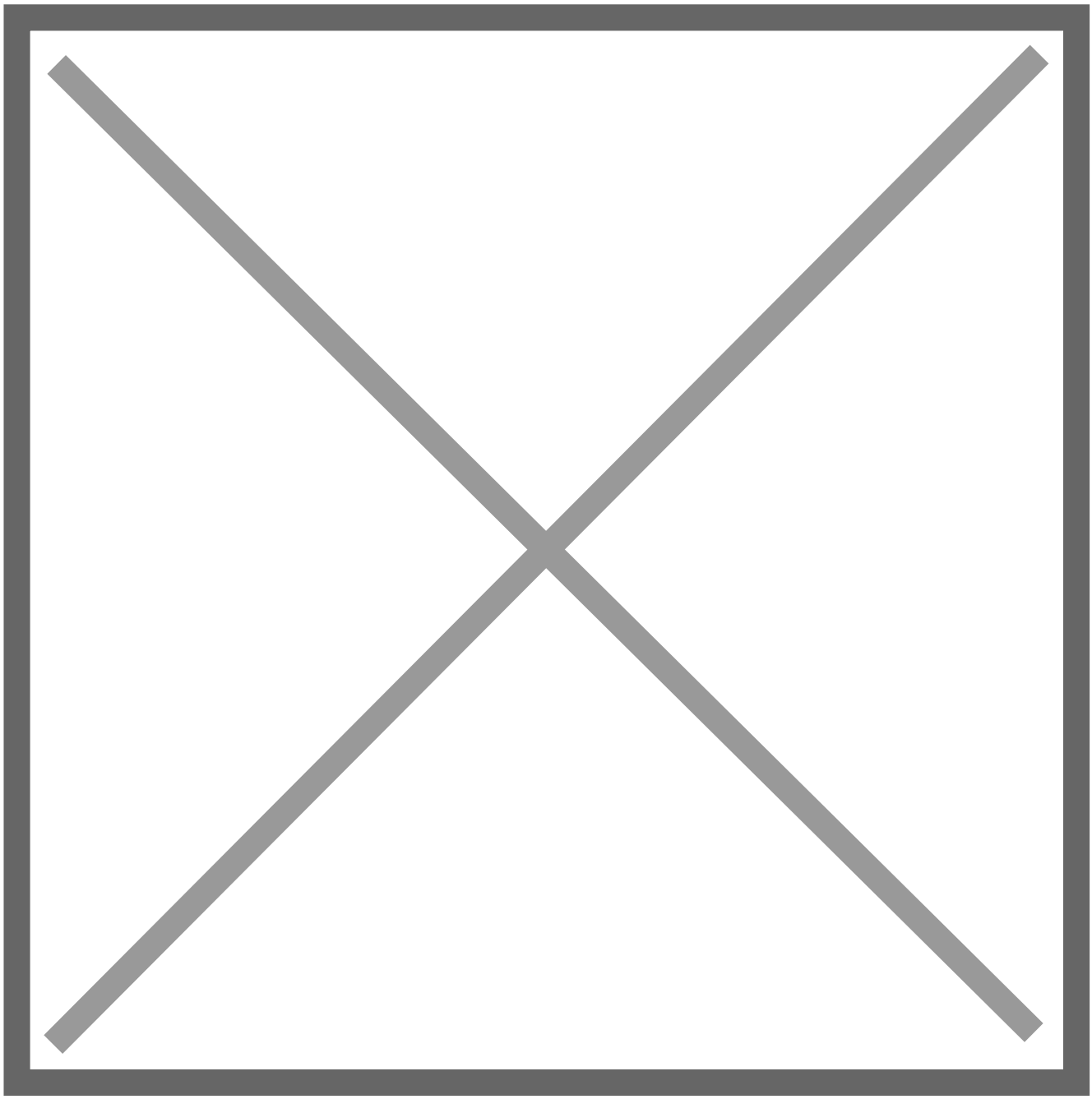
Tomasi was sent to New York at the age of 19 as an aspiring priest with the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, commonly known as the Scalabrinians. Ordained to the priesthood in New York in 1965, he studied social sciences and earned a doctorate in sociology from Fordham University.

He and his brother, Scalabrinian Fr. Lydio Tomasi, founded the Center for Migration Studies, and he taught at City University of New York and at the New School for Social Research. He also served a term as the U.S. provincial of the Scalabrinians. From 1983 to 1987, he traveled the country as director of pastoral care in the U.S. bishops' office of Migration and Refugee Services.

His order's practice of sending seminarians to study in a foreign land wasn't simply to help them learn the local language, he said, but also to help them absorb the customs and culture.

At first, he said, he was puzzled by "how Americans were proud of their flag," but then he recognized it as an expression of their sense of "belonging to the country no matter where you come from or what your background was."

"It's a sign of a substantive integration of a variety of experiences and traditions," Tomasi said. In the United States, "this happens independently of your status, your formation as a person, your job or profession. It's something that binds people and gives people an identity. You know who you are — even without reflecting on and analyzing it from a sociological or psychological point of view. It's something that you are."



Cardinal-designate Silvano Tomasi greets students at The Catholic University of America in Washington Jan. 30, 2020. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

Tomasi, who would visit the United States several times a year before the COVID-19 pandemic, said he could not say if that sense of everyone belonging is as strong today as it was 30 or 40 years ago.

But his international travels lead him to believe the rest of the world sees the United States differently today.

"I sense that the Trump Administration, by trying to emphasize the 'America first' policy, economic approach and military role, has really not created the concrete possibility of reaching what they said they aimed at reaching: Making America 'great again,'" Tomasi said.

At least internationally, the cardinal-designate said, the result has been "a sense of suspicion" even regarding aid from the United States. Many people question whether it is "philanthropy or generosity anymore, but is it the ambition to control?"

When Tomasi was a student, he said, there was "the feeling that America was there to help, to give a hand when an emergency was exploding [and] that you could rely on it for the defense of fundamental freedoms."

Still, Tomasi said, many countries could learn from the U.S. experience of integrating people from all over the world — a process supported by generations of Catholic sisters, priests, parishes and other institutions.

"Pioneers in Solidarity with Migrants," his most recent book, was released in Italian in July, and he's working on the English version. It is based on correspondence between Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini and St. Frances Cabrini, discussing ministry to immigrants in the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The book, he said, makes it clear that the first step always must be "the defense of the rights of migrants; they are human beings like everyone else."

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