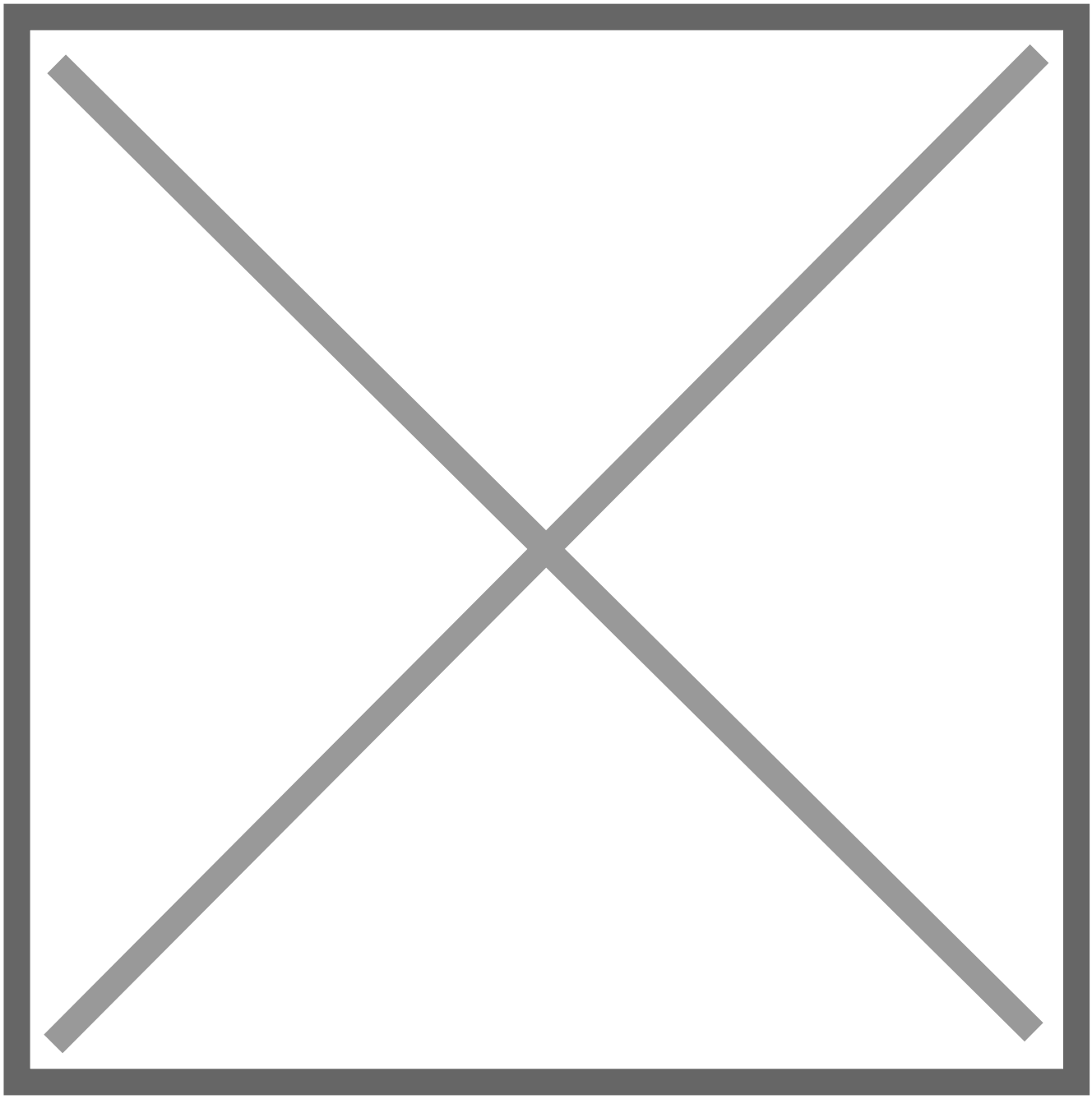
News
Vatican



Pope Francis places the red biretta on new Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington during a consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this Nov. 28, 2020, file photo. The pope created 13 new cardinals at the service, including two who joined by video link because of COVID-19 restrictions. (CNS/Reuters pool/Fabio Frustaci)

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Like everyone else, Pope Francis' 2020 was dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lockdowns, livestreamed Masses, video messages and even something akin to Zoom meetings became a regular part of his life, just like for millions of people around the world.

But when he walked alone into St. Peter's Square March 27 for an "extraordinary moment of prayer," Francis was unlike anyone else.

Standing in the rain, he articulated the world's suffering.

And before blessing the city and the world with the Blessed Sacrament, he began what would become months of pleading with people to use the crisis as an opportunity to rethink the way they treat their neighbors and the way they decide what and how much to buy, as well as to ask themselves larger questions about ways to make the global economy more fair and more respectful of the environment.

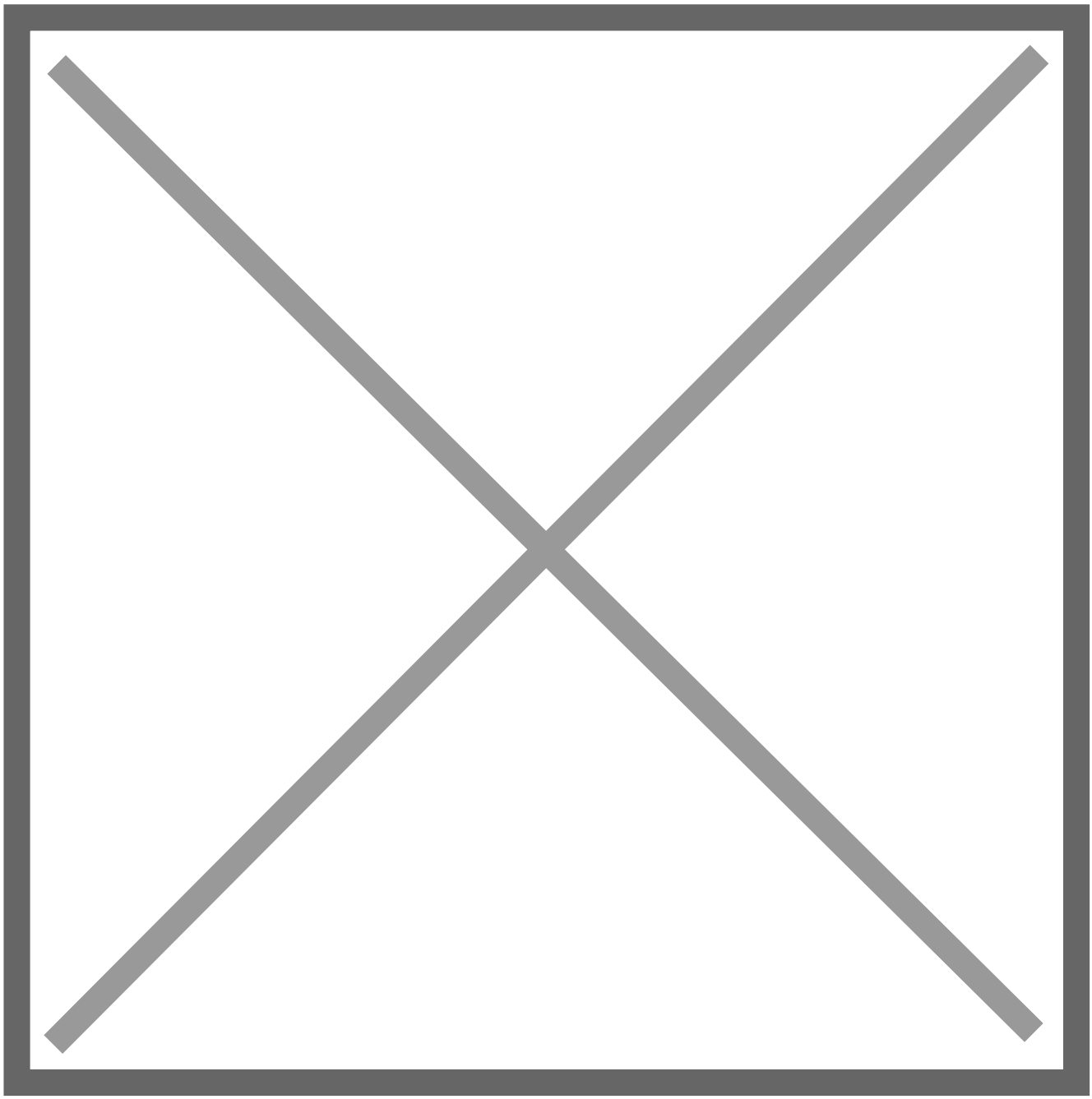
The year began normally enough. Italy's severe lockdown went into effect less than three weeks after the 15th and final group of U.S. bishops made their weeklong "ad limina" visits to Rome to pray at the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul, to meet Vatican officials and to spend more than two hours in a freewheeling conversation

with Pope Francis.

Francis told members of each group that a bishop must be close to God, close to his priests and close to his people. And, part of the way through the "ad liminas," he began talking about the importance of bishops being close to one another. Several bishops said the admonition was a recognition of how election-year political divisions in the U.S. risked dividing U.S. Catholics as well.

The topics in the "ad limina" conversations with the pope included: the clerical sexual abuse scandal; youth and young adult ministry; being joyful witnesses of the Gospel; creating a more welcoming environment for migrants and refugees; abortion and the sanctity of all human life; racism; safeguarding the environment; the growing Spanish-speaking Catholic population; and the importance of Catholic schools.

And, repeatedly, U.S. bishops asked the pope to release, as promised, a report on how Theodore E. McCarrick managed to rise to the position of cardinal and archbishop of Washington despite decades of rumors of sexual misconduct. The report finally was released Nov. 10.



Pope Francis leads a meeting with U.S. bishops from the Eastern Catholic churches in the United States during their "ad limina" visits to the Vatican in this Feb. 20, 2020, file photo. Less than three weeks after the final U.S. "ad limina" visit with the Eastern Catholic churches, Italy and the Vatican were under lockdown for more than two months to fight COVID-19. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Also in the pre-pandemic period, Pope Francis released "Querida Amazonia," his apostolic exhortation reflecting on themes discussed during the 2019 Synod of

Bishops for the Amazon. Some people were hoping or fearing that he would mention the idea of ordaining married men to the priesthood so that far-flung Catholic communities would have regular access to the Eucharist.

Instead, he focused on encouraging more missionaries to devote at least part of their lives to serving the communities and on efforts to ensure the rights of the region's poor and indigenous are respected, local cultures are preserved, nature is protected, and the Catholic Church is present and active with "Amazonian features."

While the pope said "Querida Amazonia" was his "dream" for that region of South America, his encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship," addressed burning social, political and religious issues on a global scale and his dream for a world marked by greater solidarity and concern for the poor and the Earth.

Published Oct. 4, the encyclical insisted Christians, and all people of goodwill, must recognize that they are brothers and sisters and start living that way.

Doing that, he wrote, would mean recognizing and taking concrete action against "certain trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity" and of acting as a neighbor to one another, including racism, extremism, "aggressive nationalism," closing borders to migrants and refugees, polarization, politics as a power grab rather than a service to the common good, mistreatment of women, modern slavery and economic policies that allow the rich to get richer but do not create jobs and do not help the poor.

Francis spent much of the year trying to get his own house in order, too.

On the first of the year, Jesuit Father Juan Antonio Guerrero began working as prefect of the Vatican Secretariat for the Economy, a position that had been vacant since Australian Cardinal George Pell took a leave of absence in 2017 to fight charges of sexual abuse in his homeland.

In June, the pope approved new laws governing the awarding of Vatican contracts with rules designed to prevent fraud and corruption, including barring Vatican employees from awarding contracts to their relatives.

And, as questions continued over the Vatican's massive financial loss in a property investment deal in London, in late September Francis forced the resignation of

Cardinal Angelo Becciu, who had been instrumental in making the deal before being appointed prefect of the Congregation for Saints' Causes.

In November, after the Vatican Secretariat of State missed a papally imposed deadline to hand over the management and monitoring of its financial assets to two separate Vatican bodies, Francis set up a commission to make the transfer and external oversight happen. The London property deal was made with funds from the Secretariat of State when Becciu worked there.

Throughout the year, the pope and his international Council of Cardinals also continued working on the new constitution governing a reorganized Roman Curia; as the year ended, the council was reviewing suggested amendments.

As he has done every year since 2014, Pope Francis created new cardinals, adding 13 prelates — including Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington — to the College of Cardinals in a November ceremony.

Like everything else the previous nine months, the consistory was held with COVID-19 restrictions in place. Cardinals from outside the European Union were tested for the coronavirus and quarantined for 10 days before the ceremony. Each was allowed a maximum of 10 guests, though those who came from abroad had fewer. And the public reception to greet the new cardinals was canceled.

As the year was ending, the Vatican announced it would vaccinate all its residents and employees early in 2021 and that Francis plans to travel to Iraq in March — both signs of hope that the pandemic's days are numbered.

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