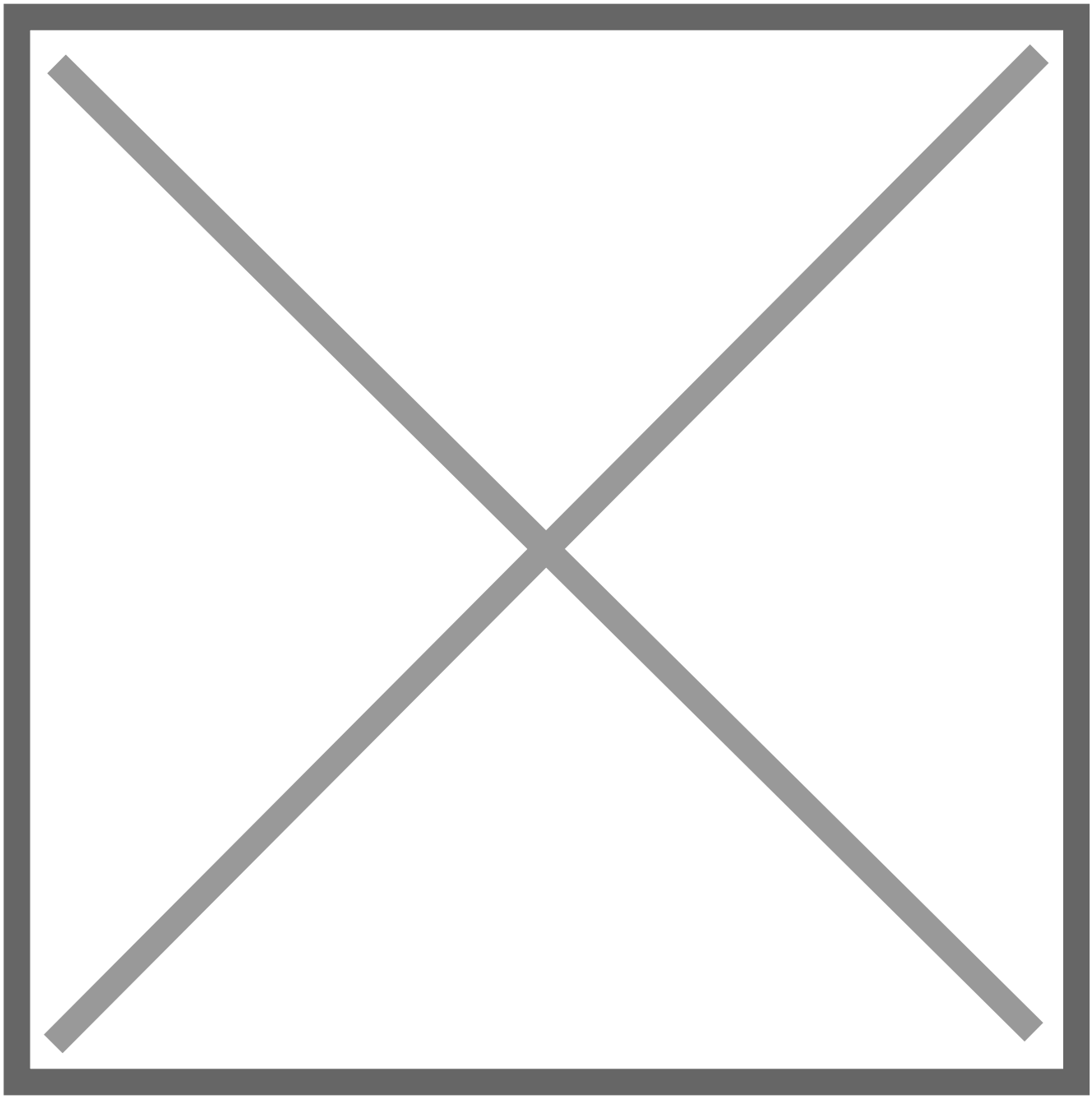
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



Standing in the window of the library of the Apostolic Palace overlooking an empty St. Peter's Square, March 29, 2020, Pope Francis blesses the city of Rome, which was under lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Italy's new COVID-19 restrictions over the holidays have forced some changes to Francis' Christmas schedule. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — December 22, 2020
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With Italy returning to a COVID-19 lockdown over the Christmas holidays, the Vatican has announced that most of Pope Francis' usual appointments will be livestreamed with few or no members of the public present.

The pope's midday blessing "urbi et orbi" (to the city and the world) Dec. 25 has been moved to the Hall of Blessings above the atrium of St. Peter's Basilica with no members of the public present.

Usually the pope delivers the blessing from the central balcony of the basilica, overlooking St. Peter's Square packed with people. This year, however, it will resemble what happened at Easter when Italy was in its first lockdown and St. Peter's Square was closed to the public.

About 100 faithful will be present for the pope's Christmas "Mass during the Night" Dec. 24. The Vatican already had announced that the Mass was moved to 7:30 p.m. local time so that the people attending could return home before Italy's 10 p.m. curfew, one of the country's measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

To prevent large gatherings and packed public transportation over the holidays, the Italian government announced Dec. 18 a new lockdown for Dec. 24-27, Jan. 1-3 and Jan. 5-6. Except for essential workers or for medical visits, people may leave their

homes only once on each of those days. They can visit a relative or friend living in the same region of the country, but no one may have more than two guests over the age of 14 in their homes each day, and a curfew is in force from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m.

In addition to the pope's Mass Christmas Eve and his blessing and message on Christmas Day, Francis has other events impacted by the restrictions. He recites the Angelus prayer, usually with people in St. Peter's Square on Sundays and feast days. He will do so livestreamed from the library of the Apostolic Palace Dec. 26 and 27 and Jan. 1, 3 and 6, the Vatican said.

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