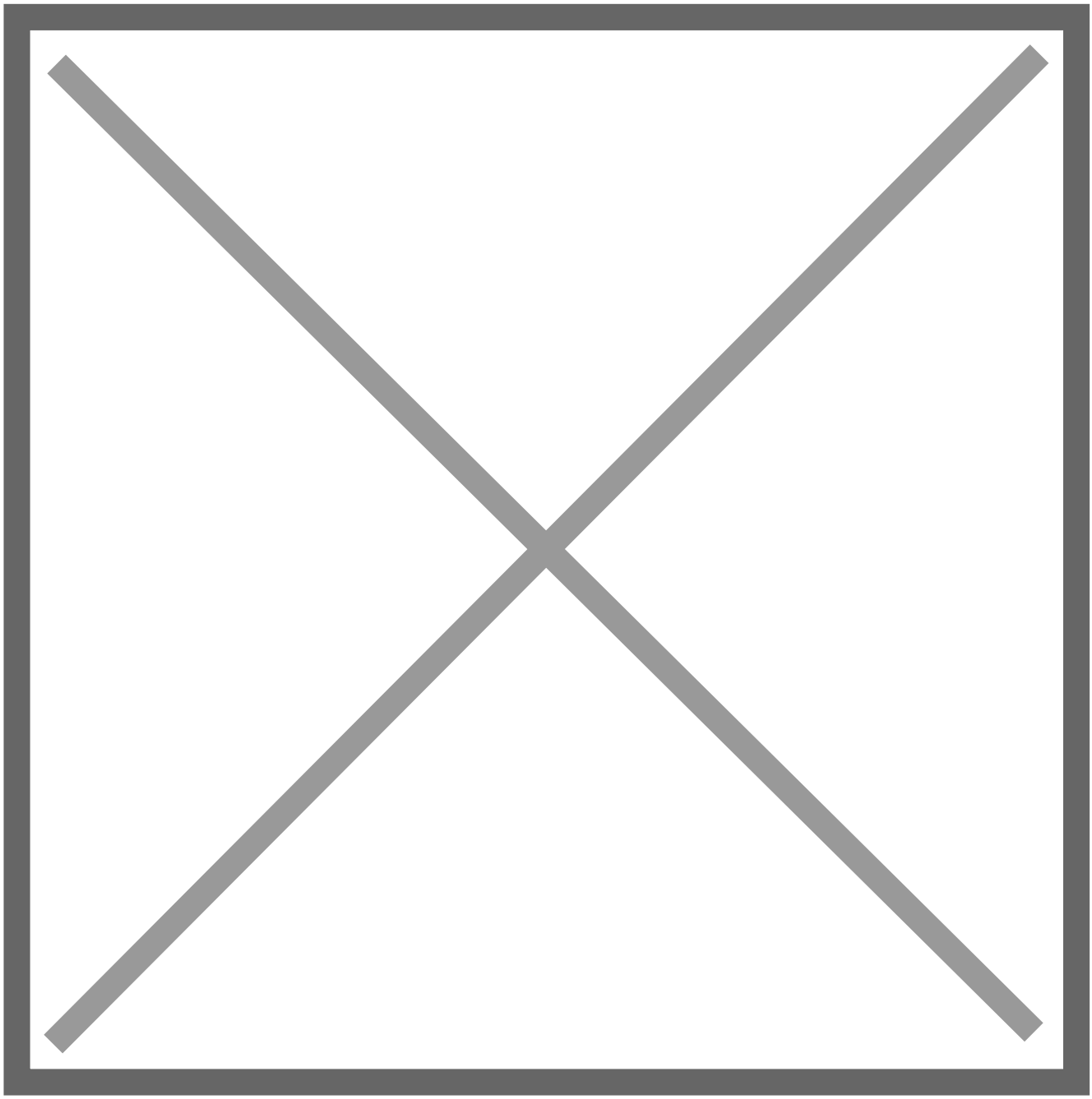


Pope Francis speaks in a video message Feb. 4, 2021, to an online conference on church music. The conference was sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Culture. (CNS photo/Holy See Press Office)

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While protocols to slow the COVID-19 pandemic have silenced many concert halls and restricted the use of congregational singing in many churches, Pope Francis prayed that musicians were using this time to listen.

Good music, like any kind of effective communication, needs both sound and silence, the pope said in a video message Feb. 4 to participants in the Pontifical Council for Culture's international meeting on the church and music.

Recognizing the impact the pandemic has had on musicians around the world, Pope Francis expressed his sympathy to "the musicians who have seen their lives and professions disrupted by the demands of distancing; to those who have lost their jobs and social contact; to those who have had to cope, in difficult contexts, with the necessary training, education and community life."

But he also recognized how many of them, inside the church and out, "have dedicated significant efforts to continue to offer a musical service endowed with new creativity" whether online or at open-air venues.

The international conference Feb. 4-5, also held online because of the pandemic, focused on the theme, "Text and Context."

"In the liturgy, we are invited to listen to the Word of God," the pope told participants. "The Word is our 'text,' the main text," and "the community our 'context.'"

The person of Jesus and the sacred Scriptures enlighten and guide the path of the community gathered in prayer, he said. But the story of salvation must be narrated "in idioms and languages that can be well understood."

Music, the pope said, "can help the biblical texts to 'speak' in new and different cultural contexts, so that the divine Word can effectively reach minds and hearts."

Pope Francis praised the conference organizers for paying attention to "the most diverse musical forms," which reflect a variety of cultures and local communities, "each with its own ethos. I am thinking particularly of indigenous civilizations, in which the approach to music is integrated with the other ritual elements of dance and celebration."

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When music and local cultures interact in that way, he said, "engaging narratives can emerge at the service of evangelization. Indeed, the integral experience of musical art also includes the dimension of corporeality," because as some people say, "To be well is to sing well, and to sing well is to be well!"

Music also builds community and draws people together, creating a sense of family, he said.

The pandemic has made that difficult, he said, but "I hope that this aspect of social life can also be reborn, that we can return to singing and playing and enjoying music and singing together. Miguel de Cervantes in Don Quixote said: 'Donde hay musica, no puede haber cosa mala' — 'Where there is music, there can be nothing bad.'"

At the same time, the pope said, "a good musician knows the value of silence, the value of pause. The alternation between sound and silence is fruitful and allows for listening, which plays a fundamental role in every dialogue."

The pope asked musicians to think about the pandemic and ask themselves, "Is the silence we are living empty or are we in the process of listening?" and, "Afterward,

will we allow the emergence of a new song?"

"May voices, musical instruments and compositions continue to express, in the present context, the harmony of God's voice, leading toward a 'symphony,' that is, universal fraternity," he told them on the U.N.'s International Day of Human Fraternity, a celebration of interreligious dialogue.