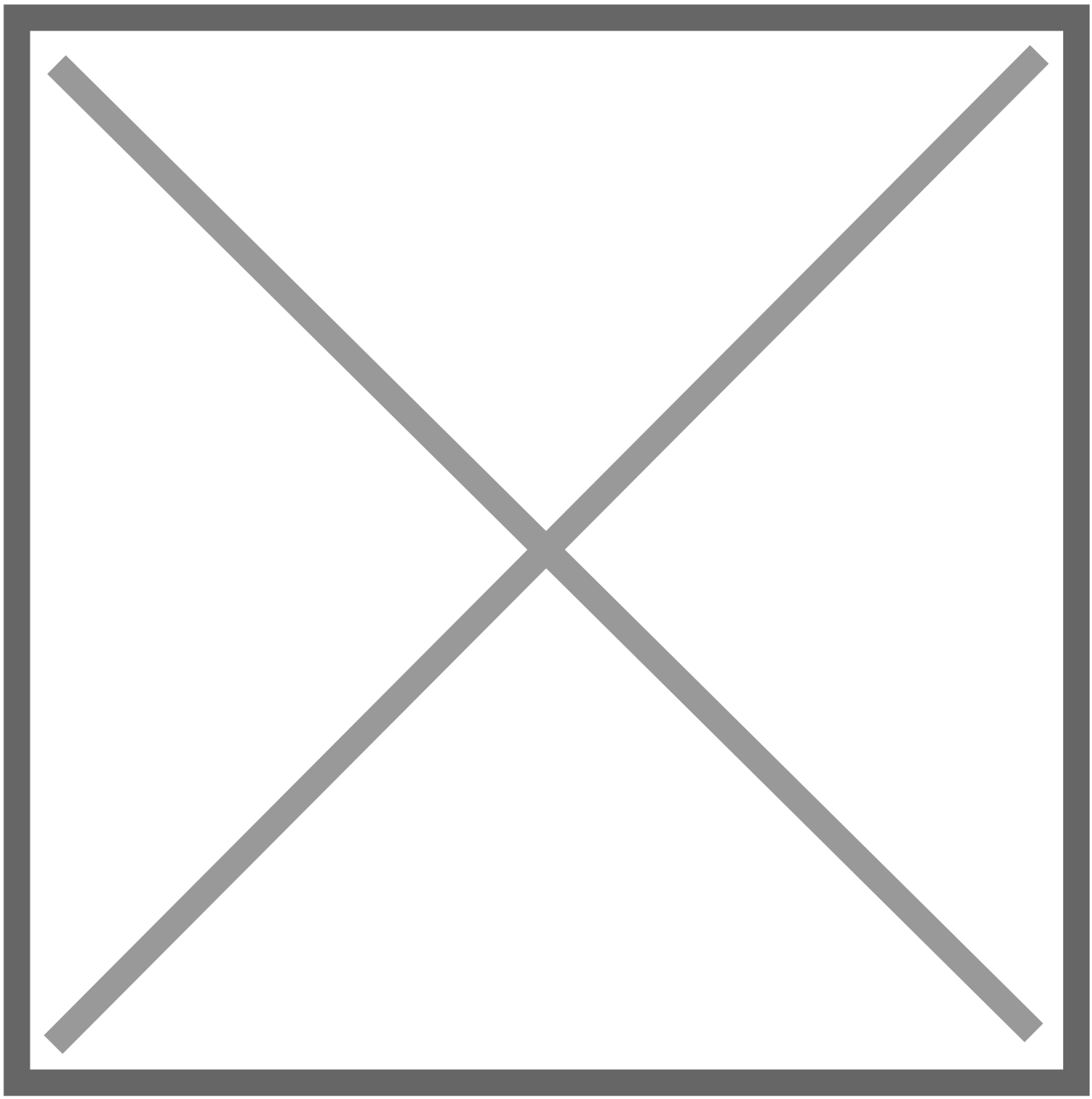
Vatican



Pope Francis sprinkles ashes on the head of a cardinal during Ash Wednesday Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Feb. 17, 2021. (CNS photo/Guglielmo Mangiapane, Reuters)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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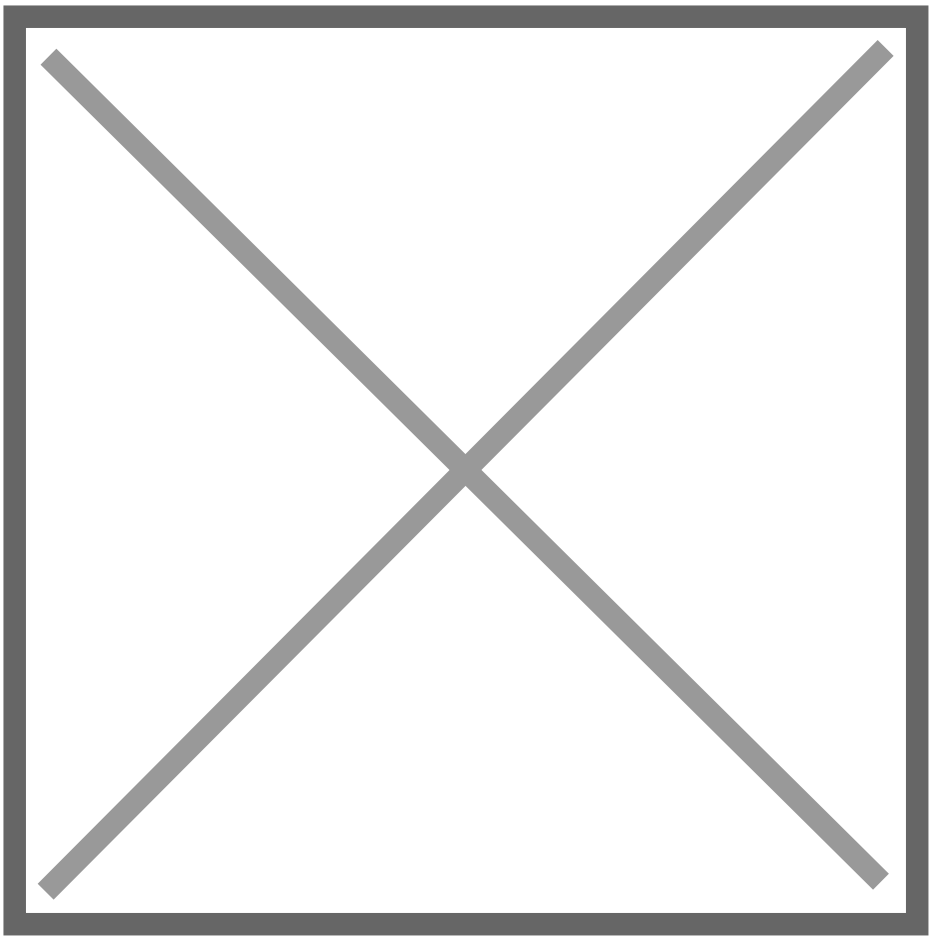
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Rome — February 17, 2021
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The Vatican's worship congregation asked Catholic bishops globally Feb. 17 to make "prudent decisions" about how their communities should celebrate Easter this year given the continuing danger of spreading the coronavirus.

In a letter sent to the heads of the world's bishops' conferences, the congregation emphasized that while some regions may be able to hold more traditional Easter services, others will not. It said measures put in place last year to allow for simplified celebrations of Holy Week remain valid in 2021.



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"We are still facing the drama of the COVID-19 pandemic which has brought many changes, even to our normal way of celebrating the liturgy," the Vatican office told the bishops.

"The norms and directives contained in the liturgical books, drawn up with normal times in view, are not entirely applicable in exceptional moments of crisis such as these," said the letter, signed by Cardinal Robert Sarah and Archbishop Arthur Roche, the congregation's leaders.

Last year, the Vatican congregation told bishops they could celebrate Holy Week without the presence of the faithful in order to comply with any local health measures. It also suggested that bishops celebrate Holy Thursday without the washing of the feet and Good Friday without the kissing of the cross.

The new letter said those indications remain valid, and suggested that bishops could encourage people unable to physically come to services to take part through livestreams or media coverage.

"The Bishop as moderator of the liturgical life of his Church is called upon to make prudent decisions in order that the liturgy can be celebrated fruitfully for the People of God and for the good of the souls entrusted to his care, while respecting the safeguarding of health and what has been prescribed by the authorities responsible for the common good," said the letter.

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Catholics and Christians around the world Feb. 17 begin Lent, the 40-day season in preparation of Easter, with the celebration of Ash Wednesday.

Pope Francis led a small service in St. Peter's Basilica with about 120 masked participants, including about 30 cardinals. In his homily, the pope called Lent "a humble descent both inwards and towards others."

"It is about realizing that salvation is not an ascent to glory, but a descent in love," said the pontiff. "It is about becoming little."

A version of this story appeared in the **March 5-18, 2021** print issue under the headline: Be 'prudent' about Easter amid pandemic, Vatican tells bishops.