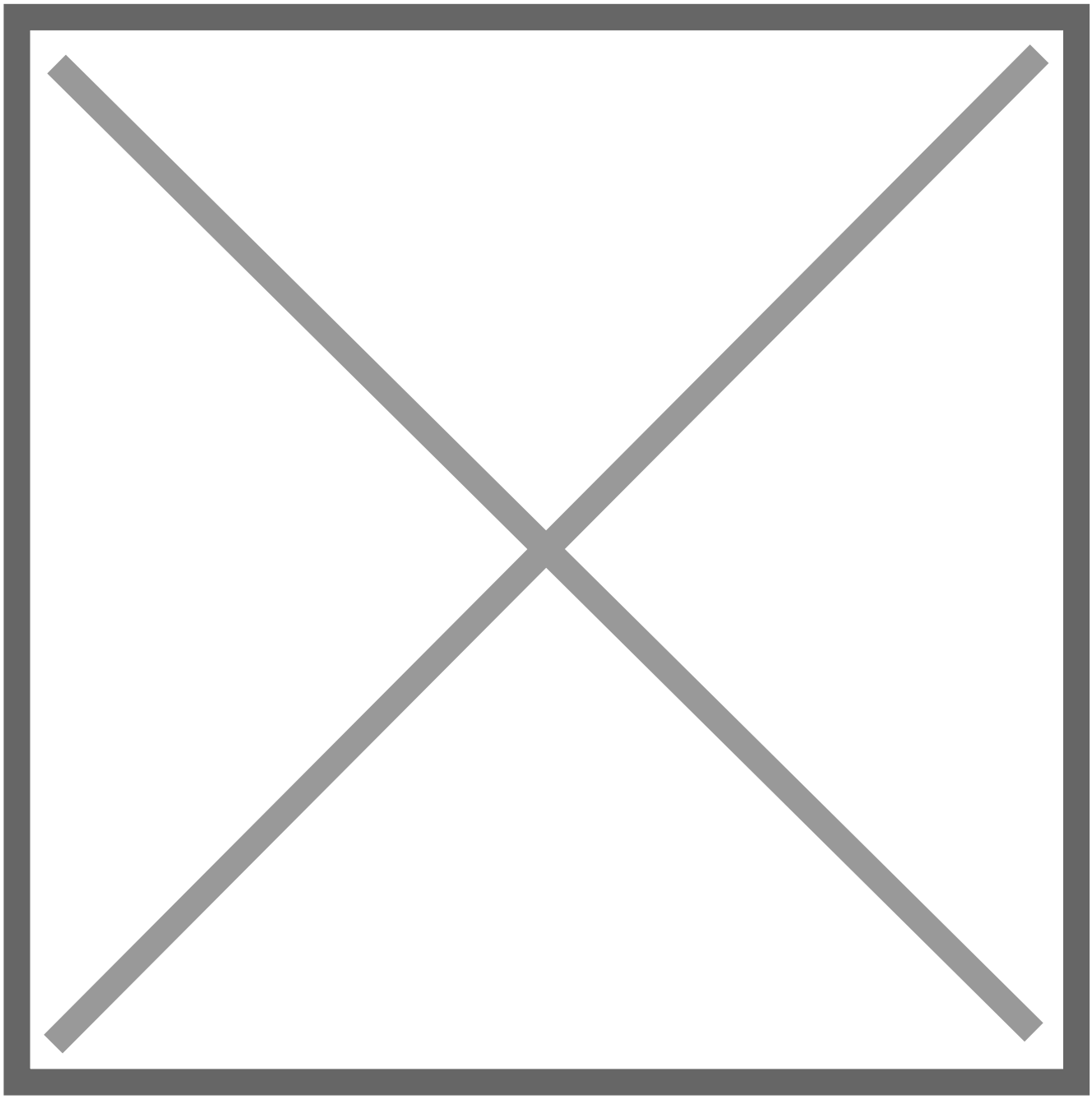
Spirituality
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leads the Angelus from the window of his studio overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Feb. 28, 2021. In his Angelus address, he encouraged people to read the Gospel during Lent and fast from gossip. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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People should fast from gossiping and spreading hearsay as part of their Lenten journey, Pope Francis said.

"For Lent this year, I will not speak ill of others, I will not gossip and all of us can do this, everyone. This is a wonderful kind of fasting," the pope said Feb. 28 after praying the Sunday Angelus.

Greeting visitors in St. Peter's Square, the pope said his advice for Lent included adding a different kind of fasting "that won't make you feel hungry: fasting from spreading rumors and gossiping."

"And don't forget that it will also be helpful to read a verse from the Gospel every day," he said, urging people to have on hand a pocket-size edition to read whenever possible, even if it is just a random verse.

"This will open your heart to the Lord," he added.

The pope also led a moment of prayer for the more than 300 girls who were kidnapped by unidentified gunmen Feb. 26 in Jangebe in northwestern Nigeria.

Adding his voice to statements made by Nigeria's bishops, the pope condemned the "vile kidnapping of 317 girls, taken away from their school," and he prayed for them and their families, hoping for their safe return home.

The nation's bishops had already warned of the deteriorating situation in the country in a Feb. 23 statement, according to Vatican News.

"We are really on the brink of a looming collapse from which we must do all we can to pull back before the worst overcomes the nation," the bishops wrote in response to a previous attack. Insecurity and corruption have put into question "the very survival of the nation," they wrote.

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The pope also marked Rare Disease Day, held Feb. 28 to raise awareness and improve advocacy and access to treatment.

He thanked all those involved in medical research for diagnosing and coming up with treatments for rare diseases, and he encouraged support networks and associations so people do not feel alone and can share experience and advice.

"Let us pray for all people who have a rare disease," he said, especially for children who suffer.

In his main address, he reflected on the day's Gospel reading (Mk 9:2-10) about Peter, James and John witnessing the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain and their subsequent descent back down to the valley.

The pope said pausing with the Lord on the mountain "is a call to remember — especially when we pass through a difficult trial — that the Lord is risen and does not permit darkness to have the last word."

However, he added, "we cannot remain on the mountain and enjoy the beauty of this encounter by ourselves. Jesus himself brings us back to the valley, amid our brothers and sisters and into daily life."

People must take that light that comes from their encounter with Christ "and make it shine everywhere. Igniting little lights in people's hearts; being little lamps of the Gospel that bear a bit of love and hope: this is the mission of a Christian," he said.