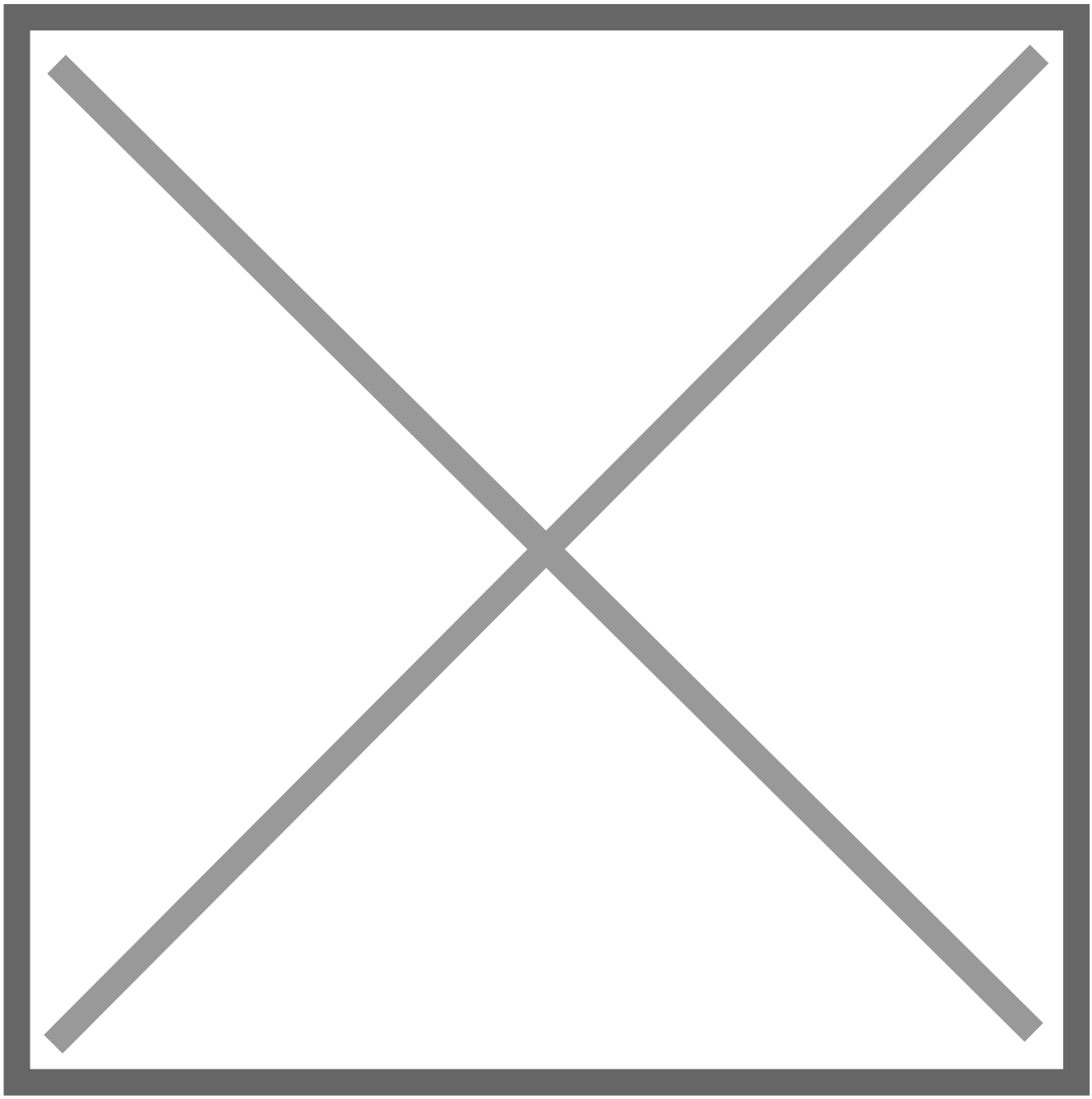


Pope Francis prays the rosary with about 160 people in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 1, 2021. The pope began a monthlong rosary marathon praying for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Cindy Wooden

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Under the gaze of a seventh-century icon of Mary, Pope Francis launched a monthlong, global recitation of the rosary, pleading for Mary's intercession for the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And he prayed May 1 that Mary would move people's consciences "so that the enormous amounts spent to increase and perfect weapons are instead used to promote research to prevent similar catastrophes in the future."

The pope and about 160 young adults and families from Rome prayed in St. Peter's Basilica and were joined remotely by people at the National Shrine and Basilica of Our Lady of Walsingham in England, the first of 30 Marian shrines around the world that will lead the rosary every day throughout May.

"At the beginning of the month dedicated to Our Lady, we join in prayer with all the shrines around the world, the faithful and all people of good will to entrust to our holy mother all of humanity so harshly tried by this pandemic," the pope said, introducing the recitation of the glorious mysteries of the rosary.

The Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization coordinated the rosary marathon, the scheduling of the shrines and the assigning of a specific prayer intention for each day of the month traditionally devoted to Mary.

The pope said those intentions would include people who have died or fallen ill with the virus, their loved ones and the medical personnel who cared for them, people who had lost their jobs and students who longed to return to school and to their friends. The prayers, he said, also would remember "the people, especially women, who endured violence within the home" during the pandemic lockdowns.

"Mother of Succor, welcome us under your mantle and protect us, sustain us in times of trial and light in our hearts the lamp of hope for the future," the pope prayed, standing before the Marian icon.

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The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception was scheduled to lead the prayers "for all world leaders and for all heads of international organizations" May 17, and the Quebec Shrine of Notre Dame du Cap was to lead prayers for "for all law enforcement and military personnel and for all firefighters" May 23.

While leaving much of the planning up to the shrines and their local expressions of faith, the pontifical council included in the outline for the prayer services one of the special prayers to Mary in the time of COVID-19, written by Pope Francis last year when the pandemic had just begun.

Pope Francis' invocations to Mary May 1 included large sections of that prayer, including a plea to "turn your merciful eyes toward us amid this coronavirus pandemic. Comfort those who are distraught and mourn their loved ones who have died, and at times are buried in a way that grieves them deeply."

"Be close to those who are concerned for their loved ones who are sick and who, in order to prevent the spread of the disease, cannot be close to them," the pope continued. "Fill with hope those who are troubled by the uncertainty of the future and the consequences for the economy and employment."

But he also prayed that government leaders would work with "wisdom, care and generosity" to aid those who lack even the basic necessities and that their recovery plans would be farsighted and marked by solidarity with the poor.

Pope Francis also added a prayer to the "beloved mother," asking her to help everyone in the world recognize that they are part of "one great family" and should care for one another, especially those most in need.

"Encourage firmness in faith, perseverance in service and constancy in prayer," he asked. "O, Mary, consoler of the afflicted, embrace all your suffering children and have God intervene with his hand."