Vatican
News
A member of a religious congregation walks down the hall as lay students wait between class

A member of a religious congregation walks down the hall as lay students wait between classes at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome in this Sept. 20, 2013, file photo. The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education has released guidelines on the use of distance learning in ecclesiastical universities and faculties. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — August 3, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education encouraged pontifical universities to expand educational opportunities to those who would normally be unable to attend classes in-person full time, but could manage coursework online, such as prisoners, migrants, the homeless, monks, contemplative nuns and even busy bishops.

"By making use of distance learning, ecclesiastical faculties could broaden the academic formation they offer, to reach those who, in one way or another, are involved in evangelizing activities," such as pastoral workers -- including bishops,

members of institutes of contemplative life and people on the "peripheries," the congregation said in a new instruction on the use of distance learning in ecclesiastical universities and faculties.

"The poor, the sick, the marginalized, migrants, itinerants, circus workers, stateless people, prisoners, people who are alone, and those who live and work on the sea or on the streets are those who should be assisted, taken care of and humanly, socially and spiritually helped," it said.

Pope Francis' 2018 norms for ecclesiastical universities and faculties included the possibility of the Vatican approving plans of studies in which some courses could be offered through distance learning "as long as certain conditions were fulfilled as regards the students' formation as part of a community."

"In fact, Catholic education is never a mere process of passing on facts and intellectual skills: rather, its aim is to contribute to the person's holistic formation in its various aspects -- intellectual, cultural, spiritual, etc. -- including, for example, community life and relations within the academic community, in close contact with the teachers, administrative and service personnel and the other students," said the new instruction, which was released by the Vatican press office Aug. 2.

Advertisement

To help guide universities and faculties that wish to integrate distance learning into their programs and still offer high-quality Catholic education, the congregation consulted with educational institutions, specialists in the field and other members of the Roman Curia over the past three years to come up with the new rules and guidelines that were expected to evolve over time as new technologies and capabilities arise.

In-person instruction and formation on site with a community are still very important and an absolute priority for students pursuing their foundational "first cycle" baccalaureate studies in theology or philosophy, Archbishop Angelo Zani, the congregation secretary, told Vatican News Aug 2.

For that reason, distance learning will not be permitted for mandatory subjects, assignments or seminars for a baccalaureate degree, except for specific cases. Distance learning will be permitted for up to a maximum of 30% of credits of

elective or optional subjects, the instruction said.

As students pursue higher studies with a licentiate, there will continue to be mandatory in-person instruction and testing; however, there will be more flexibility in determining which coursework can be online for a maximum of 30% of total credits. "A part of" all credits needed for a doctorate can be offered online, it said.

However, the instruction underlines the important opportunities online learning can offer nontraditional students who may not be in a position to attend classes in-person or on-site full time but would benefit from online instruction.

Archbishop Zani said distance learning is particularly suited to such individuals, including religious living in monasteries around the world, pastoral workers in remote locations, bishops who could do "refresher courses" and those "on the peripheries." These are the kind of individuals that could qualify as the "specific cases" mentioned in the instruction.

"There are many professionals who would like to acquire some theological, philosophical or anthropological formation, and they are knocking on the doors of our institutions; we can't ask them to attend like young students who are just beginning their academic journey," the archbishop said.

The instruction mandates that the platforms chosen for online learning: meet strict standards in quality, security and privacy; facilitate instruction, communication and group work; and make resource and library materials available.

"In case of real need — for example, natural disasters, health emergencies, etc. — the Congregation for Catholic Education can dispense from the obligation to observe any article of this instruction, as well as of the plans of studies approved by an ecclesiastical university or faculty," it said, recognizing the limitations posed by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The instruction is available online in six languages at www.educatio.va, and it "will enter into force on the first day of the academic year 2021-2022 or of the academic year 2022, according to the academic calendar of the various geographical areas."