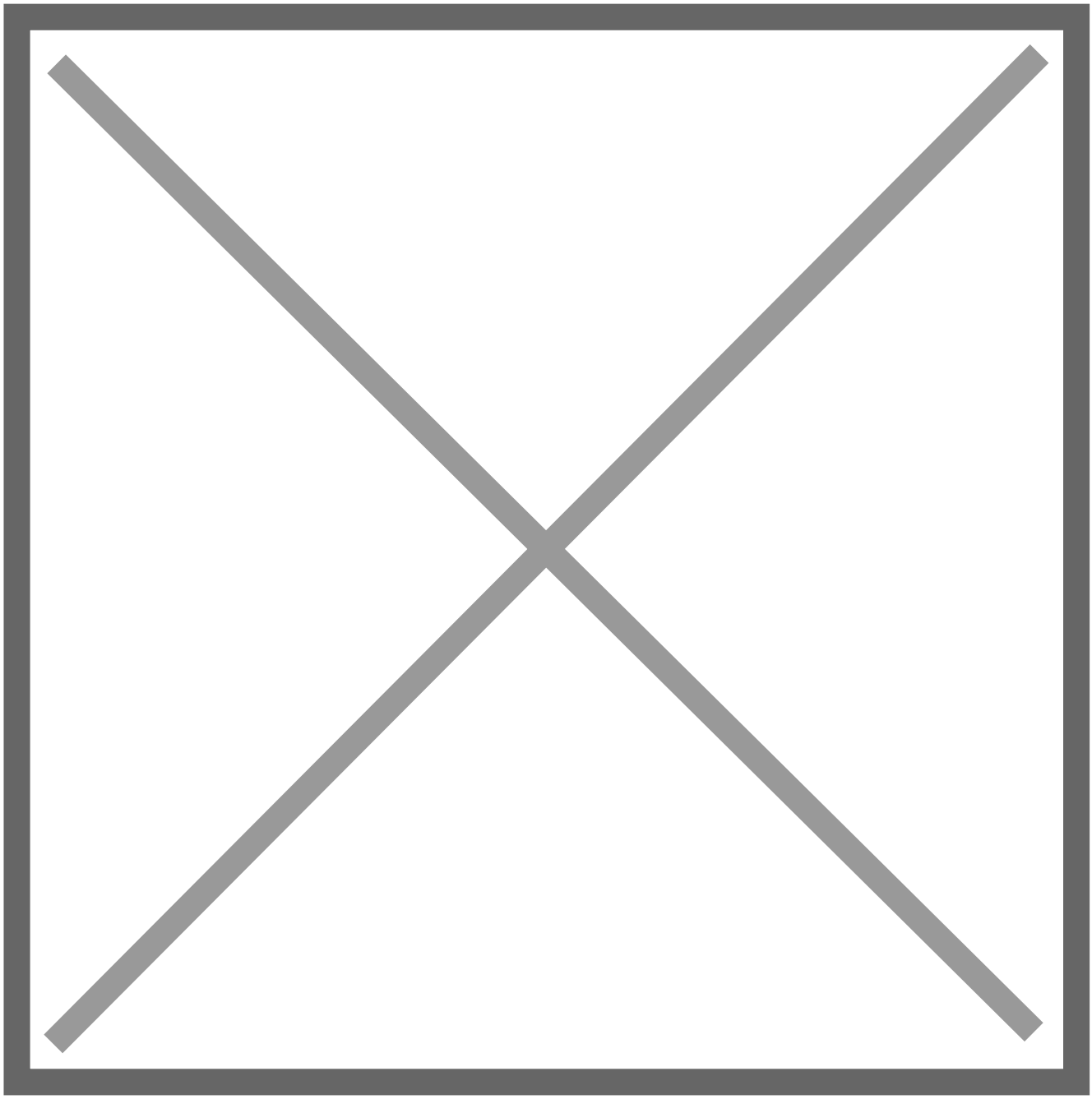
News
Vatican



Pope Francis speaks during his general audience in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican Jan. 19, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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ROME — The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked an "infodemic," Pope Francis said during a Jan. 28 meeting where he praised a Catholic media group combating vaccine misinformation.

"We can hardly fail to see that these days, in addition to the pandemic, an 'infodemic' is spreading: a distortion of reality based on fear, which in our global society leads to an explosion of commentary on falsified if not invented news," said the pope.

Francis, who has been a consistent proponent of COVID-19 vaccines and advocated for their equitable distribution, said that "to be properly informed, to be helped to understand situations based on scientific data and not fake news, is a human right."

His remarks came during a meeting with representatives of Catholic Fact-checking, a consortium of various Catholic media outlets launched in March 2021 that has sought to counter misleading claims about COVID-19 vaccines. Among the Catholic media outlets affiliated with the network are Aleteia, Our Sunday Visitor and I.Media .

"Pope Francis, the Holy See and bishops' conferences from around the world have spoken out about the importance to get vaccinated to respect not only one’s own

life, but also that of others," the group states on their website.

But by standing with the pope, the organization has also come under attack by ultraconservative websites, such as LifeSite News and Church Militant.

Francis, however, was happy to give the group his seal of approval.

"At a time when we are feeling the effects of the pandemic and of divisions in society, the fact that you are networking as Christian communicators is itself sending a message," he said.

"Correct information must be ensured above all to those who are less equipped, to the weakest and to those who are most vulnerable," the pope continued.

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While praising the work of those fighting misinformation, Francis also expressed the need to adequately address the doubts or concerns of vaccine skeptics in a manner that seeks "to accompany them without ever dismissing them."

"We should work to help provide correct and truthful information about COVID-19 and vaccines, without digging trenches or creating ghettos," he told them.

While many Catholic vaccine skeptics have sought to undermine the global vaccination campaign by alleging that some vaccines are "tainted" by the use of cell lines derived from abortion, the Vatican has insisted that all COVID-19 vaccines are "morally acceptable" and necessary to protect one's individual health and that of the common good.

Other Catholics, including prominent prelates and media personalities, have used their platforms to spread false information about the safety and efficacy of vaccines.

Fabrizio Mastrofini, the spokesperson for the Pontifical Academy for Life, which has helped lead the Vatican's push for vaccinations, said that the widespread use of social media has meant anyone with a phone or a computer can post information online, regardless of its veracity.

This, he told NCR, has led to what some researchers have dubbed "information disorder."

Mastrofini, who took part in the pope's meeting with the Catholic Fact-checking group, said he believes it is important for the church to be a part of the effort to push back against misinformation.

"Enormous economic interests are in play. Political propaganda has benefited from it and unscrupulous groups can now gain the consent of voters just by exploiting their credulity," he said, noting that the Pontifical Academy for Life has also come under attack by such groups for seeking to implement Francis' magisterium.

"How many people have really read his speeches?," Mastrofini asked about those who are swayed by misinformation about the pope.

Yet despite pushback in some Catholic quarters, the pope is not deterred, using his Jan. 28 address to again double-down on his pro-vaccination message and praise Catholics who are doing their part to provide accurate information to others.

"Access to vaccines and healthcare must be ensured to all, including the poor," Francis told them. "We will get better if we get better together."