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Pope Francis leans towards a masked priest wearing white and purple in what almost looks lik

Pope Francis goes to confession during a Lenten penance service in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican March 25, 2022, as part of the "24 Hours for the Lord" Lenten prayer initiative. This year, the Vatican said, he will open the annual service at a parish in Rome March 17. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis will open a Lenten prayer and penance initiative at a Rome parish March 17 rather than in St. Peter's Basilica as in past years.

The initiative, "24 Hours for the Lord," was begun by the pope in 2014, and invites Catholic parishes worldwide to remain open for adoration and confession for 24 hours from the Friday evening to the Saturday evening before Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Lent. This year, the vigil is scheduled to take place March 17-18.

The Vatican announced March 7 that the pope will open the celebration at a parish near the Vatican "to further portray (its) presence in parish communities." Typically, he hears confessions during the service.

Francis has celebrated the penitential service to open the initiative in St. Peter's Basilica each year since it began in 2014, with the exceptions of 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Last year, the pope consecrated Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary as part of the opening celebration.

In the initiative's first year, 2014, Francis surprised many by confessing to a priest in St. Peter's Basilica before hearing confessions himself, a practice he has continued in subsequent years' celebrations.

To help individuals and communities implement the prayer initiative, the Dicastery for Evangelization released a pastoral resource that offers reflections on the themes of "confession" and "vigil" in five languages.

It includes tips on how to make a good confession and suggestions for parishes on how to organize a vigil. It also features the conversion story of Phan Thi Kim Phúc, known as "napalm girl," who was the subject of Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph depicting her running, naked, from bombs during the Vietnam war.