Vatican confirms 1st virus case as pope recovers from cold

A Vatican spokesman has confirmed the walled city-state's first case of the new coronavirus

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press
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VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican confirmed the walled city-state's first case of the new coronavirus Friday and closed some offices as a precaution while Pope Francis continued recovering from a cold.

Vatican City's health clinic, which is used by Vatican employees and their families, was shuttered for sanitizing following the positive test result received Thursday, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said.
Separately, a Vatican official was put into a protective quarantine after a priest from France's Catholic church in Rome tested positive for the virus. The official isn't showing symptoms of COVID-19 disease but came into contact with the infected priest.

In another precaution, the Vatican Apostolic Library said Friday it would keep its doors shut all next week. The library welcomes scholars from around the world to consult Vatican's manuscripts and archives, and was expecting a full house given its opening this week of the archives of Pope Pius XII, the World War II-era pope.

And the Vatican's main bioethics office sent an email to all participants at a Feb. 26-28 conference on artificial intelligence that one of the participants tested positive for the virus.

The 83-year-old pontiff, who lost part of one lung from a respiratory illness when he was a young man, thanked all those who are responding to the health care emergency. With more than 3,800 cases, Italy is the epicenter of the outbreak in Europe.

"I wish to express again my closeness to those who are ill with the #coronavirus and to healthcare workers who are caring for them, as well as to civil authorities and all those involved in assisting patients and in containing the spread of the virus," Francis tweeted.

Francis came down with a cold over a week ago, and the Vatican has said that he has no other pathologies. The Argentine pope canceled several official audiences as well as his participation at a week-long spiritual retreat in the Roman countryside as a result.

Bruni said the pope’s recovery from the cold was proceeding well, and that he continued to celebrate daily Mass and perform other spiritual exercises.

Francis' cold, however, comes as the virus has spread from northern Italy to other parts of the country, including Rome, albeit in much smaller numbers.
It remains unclear how the Vatican will alter Francis’ schedule and other events inside the 108-acre territory, as well as the Vatican's Holy Week activities leading up to Easter Sunday on April 12.

Francis would normally preside over the Way of the Cross procession at the Colosseum on Good Friday, celebrate an Easter Vigil in St. Peter's Basilica and deliver a tradition “Urbi et Orbi” (“to the city and to the world”) Easter Day message in St. Peter’s Square.

The Italian government has ordered all sporting events to take place without spectators and has urged the cancellation of all mass gatherings, saying Italians should try to remain 1 meter apart from each other. As a result, it is likely that the pope's general audiences will be canceled. In addition, given Francis’ age and health, under Italian government measures aimed at protecting the elderly, the pope should stay home and limit his visitors.

Church doors have been closed for Mass in the northern Veneto and Lombardy regions, as part of measures to prevent further contagion, and on Thursday the Italian bishops conference recommended weekday Masses be canceled nationwide.

Sister Sunita Liscious, a nun from India, said the precautionary church closures were justified but said Masses could still be celebrated with small changes in how the faithful interact.

“The distance between people and not shaking hands (to exchange the sign of peace), I think they are okay,” she said as she walked through St. Peter's Square.

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Colleen Barry contributed from Milan.

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