

Vatican closes to tourists—but not the faithful

March 10 2020

The Vatican said Tuesday it was closing Saint Peter's Square and its main basilica to tourists—but not the faithful—as part of a broader clampdown to curb the coronavirus

The Holy See said the measures will remain in place until April 3 "to halt the spread of the coronavirus".

The announcement sparked a wave of confusion because churches are supposed to remain open across Italy as a whole during the country's month-long ban on public gatherings.

A Vatican source later clarified to AFP that anyone who expresses a wish to pray at the basilica can still pass through the police barrier and walk onto the main square.

Italy's new nationwide restrictions on [social events](#) and travel are designed to curb the spread of a disease that has killed 631 and infected 10,149 in just over two weeks.

The Vatican has so far officially confirmed one case of the COVID-19 disease caused by the new virus that was detected in a person who was using one of its public pharmacies.

It was also awaiting the results of a second person who came in contact with a virus carrier at an event organised by the Vatican at the start of the month.

Pope Francis himself was forced to break with centuries of tradition and deliver his Sunday Angelus Prayer via livestream instead of from his Vatican window to limit crowds on Saint Peter's Square.

Saint Peter's basilica is one of the world's most popular tourist attractions. Its dome—the tallest in the world—soars over Rome and is visible across the Italian capital.

It is filled with frescos and statues by great Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo.

'Go out and see'

The 83-old-pontiff is still recovering from a cold he developed about two weeks ago.

He spoke with a slight rasp in on Tuesday during a morning prayer in which he urged priests across the world to go out and meet those suffering from the new disease.

"Let us pray to the Lord also for our priests, may they have the courage to go out and see the sick, bringing them the strength of the word of God and the Eucharist, and accompany health workers and volunteers in the work they do," the pope said a video from his residence in the Vatican.

He bowed carefully and gingerly kissed the bible before delivering the prayer.

"Let us continue to pray together for the sick, the [health workers](#), so many people who are suffering because of this epidemic," he said.

The Argentine-born pope has enjoyed a life of good health and follows a rigorous schedule despite having a part of a lung removed when he was

young.

His unusual absence during the [coronavirus](#) scare prompted immediate speculation that he had contracted COVID-19.

A newspaper reported last week that the pope had been tested for the virus but was not infected.

The Vatican neither confirmed nor denied the report.

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