

# Virtual closeness, real community: Pope's ministry flourished online

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Pope Francis, his liturgy office and his communications team made very deliberate decisions over the past year with the goal of letting people experience how close the pope was to them in their isolation and suffering.

And people – tens of thousands of them – responded, praying with him and for him.

As the Vatican and much of Italy prepared for another Holy Week in lockdown, although a modified version compared to 2020, that dialogue continued on social media and influenced the planning of the papal liturgies, including details like the positioning of video cameras for television broadcasts and livestreaming, attention to the music and the pacing of the commentators offering translations in multiple languages.

Of course, live broadcasts have been part of the Vatican's Easter offerings for decades.

"They are a sign of the pope's closeness to the people of God," Natasa Govekar, director of the theological-pastoral office of the Vatican Dicastery for Communication, told Catholic News Service.

"Most of the faithful will never have an opportunity to come to Rome to meet the pope at an audience, a Mass in St. Peter's or another event," she said. "So, the pope draws close to people, arriving in their homes, to share with them the word of God and prayer, to communicate the Lord's mercy, to confirm them in the faith and to accompany them where they are."

The Dicastery for Communication, which includes the Vatican

television production center, always plans the coverage of papal Masses, including the camera positions, with the pope's master of liturgical ceremonies.

"The most obvious difference is that with the COVID-19 regulations we have gone from a full basilica to a situation with far fewer people, distanced at least a meter from each other," Govekar said. "That's why it was decided to move the celebrations to a more intimate part of the basilica," the Altar of the Chair behind Bernini's towering baldachin.

But there is no attempt to hide the fact that the celebrations are different. In fact, according to the dicastery staff, "there is always a camera very far" from the altar that frames not only the congregation of 100-150 people, but much of the empty space around them.

A particular challenge, Govekar said, is "relaying the community aspect" of the liturgy when the assembly is small, socially distanced and not allowed to exchange a sign of peace.

Even when it was possible to fill St. Peter's Basilica with thousands of Catholics or fill St. Peter's Square with tens of thousands for a Mass, she noted, Pope Francis still needed the help of a microphone and, in the square, megascreens.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the church is using other means, and often miniscreens, to amplify his voice and help people feel that they are there, praying with him.

Experts have estimated that in the first year of the pandemic, the use of social media – Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and others – grew by 12% as people sought ways to be connected to one another.

The Twitter ([@Pontifex](#)) and Instagram ([@franciscus](#)) accounts of Pope Francis grew as well. His Twitter accounts, in their nine language versions, had a total of more than 52 million

followers March 24 – that was a growth of almost 740,000 followers in nine months, according to the Dicastery for Communication. And, over the past year, the Instagram account grew by 1 million followers to reach 7.7 million followers in late March.

Seven of the 10 most popular tweets – those “liked” or retweeted – in the past year, Govekar said, were requests for prayer with the hashtag #PrayTogether, “creating a community around the world that was praying with the Holy Father, spiritually united despite the distances.”

The comments on social media, she said, showed that people found strength and consolation in connecting with the pope and others around the world as they prayed.

“This service was especially evident in the early months of the pandemic when almost 4 billion people around the world were confined to their homes,” Govekar said. “Through the live broadcasts of the different celebrations, Pope Francis wanted to accompany them in a time of difficulty, fear and uncertainty, and to pray with them, fortify them in the midst of tribulation and communicate hope and trust in the Lord who will never abandon us.”

Over the 69 days from early March to mid-May 2020, when the public celebrations of Mass were banned in Italy, Pope Francis decided to livestream the Mass he celebrated each morning in the chapel of his residence, the Domus Sanctae Marthae.

“We received countless comments, including through the mail, that made us see just how much people felt accompanied by the ‘homiletic magisterium’ of Pope Francis, that is, how important it was for them to be able to hear his voice and not just read quotes in an article,” Govekar said.

Social media, television, radio and the internet have helped the pope “to be near to people all over the world in a year that has been difficult for everyone,” she said. “And people

have responded in turn with their closeness to the pope. There has been a kind of virtual dialogue unprecedented in the history of the Church.”