News
Ministry



People in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican pray the rosary for Pope Francis led by Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, March 10. Farrell and other senior Vatican officials, who were on their Lenten retreat, prayed the rosary in the Vatican audience hall while people in the square watched on video screens. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

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How's Pope Francis doing? Can you give him my get-well wishes? Can I speak with him directly?

The nuns who operate the Vatican's switchboard are fielding a growing number of calls with questions like that as the pope remains hospitalized in Rome.

"They feel like children waiting to know about their father," said Sr. Anthony, who runs the operation in a spartan office steps away from St. Peter's Basilica. "We tell them to pray for him."

The Vatican's central number is public — and the sisters of the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master make sure all who call it get a real person, not the "press 1 for English, 2 for Latin" version of the automation that's become the norm at major institutions and businesses worldwide.

"It's the Vatican's voice — a voice that despite the digitalization of communications, the Vatican wants to preserve as a human voice," said Mr. Micaela, the order's mother superior.

The Pious Disciples sisters are part of the 100-year-old Pauline orders, which are focused on communications, including landmark Catholic publishing operations around the world. In spring 1970, they were called to operate the Vatican switchboard and instructed by the then-mother superior to be "a voice that does good because through the phone wire it communicates Christ himself."

Today, often with headsets over their veils, the sisters cover the phones for 12 hours a day, seven days a week, in front of large monitors that show the incoming call's country of origin. Gendarmes, the Vatican's police, take the night shift.

About a dozen sisters hailing from Italy, the Philippines, Poland and elsewhere take calls from around the world, predominantly in Italian, English and Spanish.

Many callers just need to be directed to the right Vatican office or official, and the sisters oblige with the aid of massive yearbooks and directories, as well as a solid knowledge of protocols and a hefty dose of discretion, Anthony said.

Those who call asking for financial help are put through to the Vatican almoner's office, which has provided aid recently to victims of war in Ukraine, floods in Brazil and homelessness in Naples in southern Italy.

On a recent afternoon, standing by her office chair decorated with a flower-embroidered pillow, Sr. Gabriella took a call from a priest inquiring about jointly celebrating a Mass with other priests as part of his jubilee pilgrimage. Since 2025 is a Holy Year for the Catholic Church, with 32 million pilgrims projected to visit Rome, related calls make up a large part of the 50-70 queries the nuns answer daily.

But then there are callers with questions the sisters can't just look up or patch through — those in distress or angry or hopeless.

"We never get a call that's the same as the previous one," said Sr. Simona, who's worked the switchboard for 15 years.

Counseling or comfort

Francis has built a reputation for eschewing formalities — from his way of dressing to his personal outreach to the poor and marginalized before his hospitalization — that projects more parish priest than head of state and leader of a global religion with 1.4 billion followers.

So some callers ask the nuns to just put him on the line.

"People of simple faith don't understand that the pope cannot speak with everyone," Gabriella said.

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Others need counseling or comfort. The sisters try to provide it within the boundaries of limited time and not being misconstrued as official Vatican spokespeople.

"But if I can give consolation or hope, I think that's OK," said Anthony, who came to the Vatican a year ago from her native Philippines, where she was a provincial superior. "Some calls are very triggering."

Among those calling with concerns about the pope recently was a woman who told Anthony that she is Muslim but likes Francis, and wanted to inquire about his health.

"That's very impressive for me," the sister recalled, while adding that some callers are far less friendly. "Others are angry with the church, so we listen respectfully."

'We feel very empowered'

Across the spectrum of callers, the sisters say they're particularly happy to provide a woman's touch.

"Pope Francis often reminds that the church is a mother," Micaela said. "And to be this voice, this sensibility, this feminine approach gives a sense of reliability."

About 1,100 women, religious and lay, work at the Vatican. Francis has recently named a few to top posts, even though the priesthood and deaconate — and thus the majority of the church hierarchy — remain exclusively male.

The switchboard sisters find pride in both their unseen service and the increasing visibility of women at the Vatican.

"For me it's a blessing to be in one community with the pope and serving the universal church," Anthony said. "Knowing there are more responsibilities for women, we feel very empowered."