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Pope decides to hold 2014 Lenten retreat away from Vatican

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Oct. 17, 2013
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"As a good Jesuit," Pope Francis knows it is best not to try to make a retreat where one lives and works, so he has decided the annual papal Lenten retreat with Roman Curia officials will be held outside Rome, a Vatican spokesman said.

The annual retreat will take place March 9-14 at the Pauline Fathers' retreat and conference center in Ariccia, a town about 20 miles southeast of Rome, said Passionist Fr. Ciro Benedettini, vice director of the Vatican press office.

The tradition of having weeklong, preached "spiritual exercises" for the pope and members of the papal household began with Pope Pius XI in 1925. For more than 35 years, it was an Advent, not a Lenten retreat.

Pope John XXIII broke the Advent tradition in 1962 when he spent a week in September on retreat to prepare for the Second Vatican Council. His successor, Pope Paul VI, made the retreats a Lenten staple in 1964 and broadened the list of preachers, who almost always had been Jesuits.

The retreats traditionally were held in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace, beginning on the first Sunday of Lent and concluding the following Saturday morning. Pope Francis' retreat will be a bit shorter, presumably because it involves having the Curia leave the Vatican.

The Spanish Catholic radio station COPE reported Thursday that Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, four days before retiring as Vatican Secretary of State, had written to the prefect or president and secretary of every Vatican congregation and council and top officials of other Curia offices informing them of the pope's decision to hold the retreat in Ariccia and asking them to confirm their intention to attend by Nov. 30.

Confirming the story, Benedettini also confirmed that Pope Francis had chosen Msgr. Angelo De Donatis to preach the retreat. Pastor of a parish in the center of Rome, he established a spirituality center there and is well known as a spiritual director of priests and seminarians.

The Pauline Fathers' facility in Ariccia has 120 rooms, each with its own bathroom, as well as a large dining room, chapel, gardens and meeting rooms.

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