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The bicycle shop Collalti's at the Via del Pellegrino in Rome has been selling and repairing bikes since 1889. A new Vatican cycling team was accepted as a member of International Cycling Union in September 2021 at the Vatican. (NCR/Christopher White)



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On a recent sunny day, a handful of priests and religious sisters waited in line along the Via del Pellegrino, waiting for their turn to have their bicycles serviced at Collalti's, which has been selling and repairing bikes since 1889.

Cycling is not a novel activity in the Eternal City, though it is a far less common mode of transportation than it is in places like London, Paris or New York. Even so, French Cardinal Philippe Barbarin was known for [arriving via bicycle](#) for the 2013 papal conclave meetings. And [for a century](#), cyclists of world-renown have taken pilgrimage to Rome to receive a papal blessing on their sport.

Yet as of last fall, that could begin to change, thanks in part to some encouragement from the Vatican, where in September, a new Vatican cycling team was accepted as a member of the International Cycling Union.

The acceptance of Vatican Cycling, a section of the Atletica Vaticana sports club, was made formal during an Oct. 28 ceremony in Rome, where the president of the union, David Lappartient, presented Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, with official certification — and a cycling jersey for Pope Francis.



David Lappartient presents Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, with a cycling jersey for Pope Francis during an Oct. 28 ceremony at the Vatican. Lappartient, president of the International Cycling Union, also presented Ravasi with official certification of the Athletica Vaticana sports club as a member of the union. (Courtesy of Athletica Vaticana)

Ravasi, whose office oversees Athletica Vaticana, remarked that while Leonardo da Vinci did not invent the bicycle, his 16th-century sketches helped intuit what would become today's two-wheeled pedaled mode of transportation.

In other words, there's a rich history behind this sport, and the church, he believes, should be an active participant in that tradition, one that the Vatican is betting will be a practical way to help boost Pope Francis' emphasis on friendship and bridge-building.

Back on the other side of the Tiber River, when a longtime worker at Collalti's first heard the Vatican now has a cycling team, he seemed initially surprised but was

quick to offer his approval.

"What a beautiful idea," said Danielle (who asked not to give his last name), before offering a warning: Learning to cycle together in tandem — and especially in the ancient city and streets of Rome — can be a challenge.

Yet for organizers of the new Vatican team, that's the whole point: Cycling as a team sport requires coordination, dialogue and discipline — principles they believe the church and the rest of the world could stand to use a bit more of these days.



David Lappartient, third from left, presents official certification of the Atletica Vaticana sports club as a member of the International Cycling Union, Oct. 28 at the Vatican. The club's team is pictured in the center, with Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi second from the right. (Courtesy of Atletica Vaticana)

When asked how he responds to those who are surprised by the church's interest in cycling, Msgr. Melchor Sanchez de Toca, undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture, borrowed from the ancient Roman writer Terentius who declared: *Homo*

sum et nihil humani a me alienum puto.

Translation: "I am a human being and nothing of what is human is strange to me."

"Sport is profoundly human, and therefore, it has a place in the church's heart," Sanchez de Toca told NCR. "So, opening the cycling section inside *Athletica Vaticana* was a natural consequence of this principle."

Pope Francis agrees, telling an audience from the International Cycling Union [in 2019](#) that cycling "places emphasis on some of the virtues, such as patience in effort, on long and difficult climbs; courage, in trying to breakaway or making a sprint; integrity, in respecting the rules; altruism and team spirit."

For the range of workers inside the Vatican — from security personnel to a bishop that make up the *Athletica Vaticana* team — their short-term dream is to qualify for the 2024 Olympics in Paris. But for now, the team officials are hoping that the team spirit and the enthusiasm for cycling that Pope Francis has praised will spread beyond the Vatican's boundaries.

"I think cycling is a team sport, even for amateurs. You can see groups riding on local streets, pedaling together. While they ride, they chat, they share experiences. They eat together, and celebrate their goals after a tough climb with a pint of beer," said Sanchez de Toca.

"In a society tending increasingly towards isolation and individualism, team sports offer occasions for bonding, staying together, and sharing experiences: of suffering, but also of beauty, and these quite naturally can be an open window to prayer and to a spiritual relation with God," he said.

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Across the globe — in part, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic — cycling has received a [large boost](#) in recent years.

"During the lockdown, where cycling outside was allowed, you could see cycles everywhere," Sanchez de Toca recalled.

"It is so popular, we have to ask ourselves what is the reason for it, and I think cycling offers, along with a healthy physical activity, also the possibility of moving

and the feeling of freedom that moving gives," he said.

The sales at Collalti's certainly can attest to this increased interest in the sport, noting that they sold approximately 500 more bicycles in 2021 than in years past.

Incidentally, such a trend might help boost one of Pope Francis' other major goals of greater care for the environment, as a [2015 study from the University of California Davis](#) estimated that opting for cycling over passenger transportation could cut carbon dioxide emissions by 11%.

While it's unlikely we will see Pope Francis taking up cycling anytime soon (even if he wanted to, his sciatica would likely prevent him from doing so), the launch of the Vatican's new cycling team seems to be a strong signal to the rest of the world that the church is happy to be along for the ride.