Vatican

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An estimated 300 young people from around the world will come to the Vatican next month for a weeklong conference to prepare for an October meeting of Catholic bishops on issues facing youth today.

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, one of the organizers of the March 19-24 event, said at a press briefing Feb. 16 that the conference is meant to help the prelates learn to speak with young people instead of about them.

The event, Baldisseri said, will be one "in which young people are the actors and protagonists."

"We are not speaking only 'about' them but 'with' them: They will speak to us with their own language, their own enthusiasm, their sensibility," he said.

The October meeting of bishops, known as a synod, will be held Oct. 3-28 on the theme: "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment." Baldisseri, who heads the Vatican's synod office, said the March event will help the bishops direct their preparations for the later meeting.

The cardinal spoke at the Feb. 16 briefing alongside his undersecretary, Bishop Fabio Fabene, and two young people who will take part in the March conference.

The prelates said the pre-synod meeting will start March 19 with a session where the young people meet with Pope Francis to ask him some questions. The participants will then be split into groups based on the languages they speak and will be asked to discuss specific topics in view of creating a final document from their meeting.

That final document will be delivered to Francis on March 25 and will be used to help form the synod's initial working document, known in Latin as the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

"The next Synod of Bishops wants to be, in fact, not only a synod 'on' young people but 'for' young people, and also not a synod 'of' young people but 'with' young people," Baldisseri said.

The synod system was first created by Pope Paul VI following the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council as a way of keeping the council's atmosphere of discussion among church prelates alive.

Francis has held two synods in 2014 and 2015 focused on issues of family life, which resulted in the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love") in 2016.

The Vatican synod office began preparing for the 2018 meeting last year, launching an online survey that asked young people about their lives and the challenges they face. Baldisseri said at the briefing that they received about 221,000 responses to the survey, with approximately 100,500 young people fully completing it.

The cardinal said the respondents who fully completed the survey were about 58 percent female, and about 50 percent were between the ages of 16 and 19. More than half (56.4 percent) came from Europe, 19.8 percent came from South America, and 19.1 percent came from Africa. Almost three-quarters (73.9 percent) identified themselves as practicing Catholics.

Most of the young people coming for the March meeting were selected by the world's bishops' conferences, which are each sending delegates. The synod office has also invited some seminarians, young members of ecclesial movements, and students of Catholic colleges and universities.

Baldisseri said the office has also invited teachers, priests, and parish workers so the conference can "listen also to those who live next to young people and can be instruments to better understand their situation."

The synod office has prepared a *traccia di lavoro* (work outline) for the participants, which the six language groups will use to guide their work. It has three parts, and each part has five questions to help start discussion in the groups.

Fabene said the conference will also include space for prayer. He said the group would make a special visit to the Catacombs of St. Callixtus, one of Rome's largest series of catacombs, where they will pray a Stations of the Cross open to the public.

Filippo Passantino, an Italian delegate to the March meeting, said at the briefing that he and his friends are convinced of their power to "lay down seeds of hope in today's world." He said he sees the synod as "a precious occasion to invite those with responsibility of every type to not close any doors to young people."

Francis said during his trip to Chile last month that he decided to have the synod focus on young people because the church needs to learn how to be "challenged, deep down, by her sons and daughters."

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