Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis greets the crowd as he leaves his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Feb. 14. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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It's time to break free from fear, fake online personas and looking at the world through a digital screen display, Pope Francis told young people.

"Do not allow the spark of youth to be extinguished in the darkness of a closed room in which the only window to the outside world is a computer and smartphone," the pope told youths in his annual message for local celebrations of World Youth Day.

"Open wide the doors of your life! May your time and space be filled with meaningful relationships, real people with whom to share your authentic and concrete experiences of daily life," he said in the message, published Feb. 22 at the Vatican.

In preparation for the next international celebration of World Youth Day — which will be held in Panama Jan. 22-27, 2019 — many dioceses will have their own celebrations Palm Sunday, March 25.

The Panama gathering will focus on Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's announcement that God had chosen her to bear the child Jesus: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." The 2018 theme chosen by Pope Francis is the angel's reassurance, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Many young people today are afraid — afraid of never being accepted, of finding a good job and even of their real selves, the pope said in his message.

"Today, there are many young people who feel the need to be different from who they really are, in an attempt to adapt to an often artificial and unattainable standard," he wrote. "They continuously 'photo-shop' their images, hiding behind masks and false identities, almost becoming fake selves."

This sense of inadequacy is the root of many uncertainties and even obsessions, such as "receiving as many 'likes' as possible" on social media, he added.

No one is exempt from doubt or fear, which even can be seen in the Bible in the lives of Mary, Moses, Abraham, the apostles and many others, he said. In fact, he added, the biggest obstacle to faith in God is often fear, not skepticism.

The only way forward is to face one's fears head on, identify them clearly and come to terms with them, he said, "so as not to find yourself wasting time and energy by being gripped by empty and faceless ghosts."

People have to act, which requires faith in God and his grace, otherwise fear and doubt will make people "become inward-looking and closed off to defend ourselves from everything and everyone, and we will remain paralyzed," he said.

The pope told young people to look for God in prayerful silence and the sacraments so they could draw on the needed courage, wisdom and grace, and to turn to members of the church for encouragement and support.

God is always there to help everybody, he said. He does not ask people to present a stellar resume of their lives, "full of merits and successes."

Receiving God's grace will not mean life's problems will disappear, he said, "but it does have the power to transform our life deeply."

"The unknown that tomorrow holds for us is not a dark threat we need to overcome, but a favorable time given to us for living out the uniqueness of our personal vocation, and for sharing it with our brothers and sisters in the church and in the world," he said.

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Being with others on life's journey is always key, he said, because it helps unlock one's own gifts, inspires dreams and opens new horizons.

"Never lose the enthusiasm of enjoying others' company and friendship, as well as the pleasure of dreaming together, of walking together," he said.

That is why it is so important young people break out of the "darkness of closed room" and the virtual world so as to experience meaningful relationships with real people, he said.

Pope Francis called on adults in the Catholic Church to have courage, too, and give young people "important responsibilities."

"Young people need to know that someone truly believes in you," he said. "Please know that the pope has confidence in you, that the church has confidence in you! For your part, have confidence in the church!"

"In the sacred Scriptures the expression 'do not be afraid' is repeated 365 times with different variations, as if to tell us that the Lord wants us to be free from fear, every day of the year," he said.

The Catholic Church's annual gathering of World Youth Day "is for the courageous! Not for young people who are searching only for comfort and who withdraw whenever difficulties arise," the pope said. "Do you accept the challenge?"