Vatican



Pope Francis poses for a photo at a pre-synod gathering of youth delegates at the Pontifical International Maria Mater Ecclesiae College in Rome March 19. The meeting was in preparation for the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment this October at the Vatican. Seated next to the pope are Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, and U.S. Cardinal Kevin J. Farrell, prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.(CNS/Paul Haring)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis told a conference of some 300 young people to "be brave" and speak freely as they undertake a week of discussions to help prepare for October's worldwide meeting of bishops on youth, saying the Catholic Church must take risks in order to grow.

In an opening address March 19 to a six-day gathering of young adults from around the world, the pontiff encouraged them: "Be brave in these days. Say what you have to say. If you err, someone will correct you."

"I have faith that in these days God will speak ... through you," he said, before telling the young people: "We need to dare to have new sentiments, even if it means taking risks."

"A man or woman who does not risk does not mature," said Francis. "An institution that chooses not to risk remains a child, it does not grow up."

"That's why we need you young people, living stones of a church with a young face," he said. "You provoke us to break free of the logic of 'it has always been done this way,' which is a sweet poison that tranquilizes the soul."

Francis was speaking at the beginning of a March 19-24 meeting in Rome as preparation for an October Synod of Bishops on issues facing youth today. Attending are some 300 people between the ages of 16 and 29, selected by global bishops' conferences, Catholic institutions and the Vatican's synod office.

The pope opened the meeting, held at the Maria Mater Ecclesia pontifical college on the outskirts of Rome, with a short address before listening to testimonies from 10 young people. He then responded to five of the testimonies one-by-one, speaking freely and off-the-cuff.

The encounter showed the pontiff at his most comfortable: addressing himself directly to the young people, using colorful metaphors drawn from daily life, and

drawing applause and laughs as he sprinkled his remarks with jokes.



Pope Francis greets Australian delegate Angela Markas during a pre-synod gathering of youth delegates at the Pontifical International Maria Mater Ecclesiae College in Rome March 19. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Francis began his short address by asking the young people to speak openly and honestly during their meetings, and to listen to each other carefully. "Everyone has the right to be listened to," he said. "Just like everyone has the right to speak."

"In many moments of the history of the church, like in numerous biblical episodes, God has wanted to speak through the most young," he told them, citing the Old Testament stories of Samuel, David and Daniel.

"In difficult moments, the Lord makes the story go ahead with the young people," he said.

"I invite you to express yourselves with frankness and in full liberty," he continued. "I assure you that your contribution will be taken seriously."

Among the 10 young people who offered testimonies to Francis was Nicholas Lopez, a campus minister at the University of Dallas who was chosen as one of three delegates to attend the meeting on behalf of the U.S. bishops' conference.

Lopez said that young people need guidance in their lives but noted that many in the U.S. no longer identify as religious. He said some young people are caught between what they see as an "increasingly oppressive secular society" and a church that "can be too legalistic and not concerned with the complexities that come with young adult living."

Another of the young people to address Francis was Angela Markas, a woman who was born in Australia to Iraqi parents. She cited statistics that a third of young people in her country identify as non-religious.

"Young people’s disconnection with church is exacerbated by significant cultural changes happening around the world," she said. "Young people feel the church is distant and irrelevant in aspects of our humanity, the spiritual and the physical."

Markas pointed to her country's recent approval of same-sex marriage and said that many young people noted the church's position against same-sex unions and asked, "Why no?"

"Young people are not satisfied with simple answers, or with answers that parents of their parents gave them," she said. "Young people are seeking depth. We want, and are able, to understand the complexity of it all and be able to have a voice."

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Francis also heard from Blessing Okoedion, a Nigerian woman who said she came to Italy four years ago as a victim of human trafficking before being rescued and taken in by a local community of religious sisters. She asked the pope how the church could speak out about "the crime against humanity" of prostitution.

The pontiff told Okoedion that prostitution is born of a "sick mentality," that any man who goes to a prostitute is "a criminal and mentally ill," and that he would like young people to take up fight "for the dignity of women" in the world.

The meeting of young people in Rome is to continue throughout the week with meetings in small discussion groups, based on languages spoken.

The delegates are then to come back together into the wider group March 22 to begin preparing a final document from the meeting, which will be delivered to

Francis March 25 and used to help form the October synod's initial working document, known as an *instrumentum laboris*.

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the head of the Vatican synod office, said at a February briefing that the March meeting is meant to help bishops learn to speak "with" young people instead of "about" them.

The two other delegates selected to attend by the U.S. bishops are Katie Prejean-McGrady, a former Catholic-school teacher who is now a popular conference and mission speaker, and LaSallian Christian Br. Javier Hansen, a religion teacher at Cathedral High School in El Paso, Texas.

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This story appears in the **Synod on the Youth 2018** feature series. View the full series.