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Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis gestures as he leads his general audience in St. Peter's Square Aug. 29 at the Vatican. (CNS/Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters)

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While the faith of Catholics in Ireland is strong, the scandal of abuse and cover-up by church leaders has caused a decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious life, Pope Francis said.

During his weekly general audience Aug. 29, the pope led pilgrims in praying a "Hail Mary" to Our Lady of Knock so "the Lord may send holy priests to Ireland, that he sends new vocations."

"In Ireland there is faith; there are people of faith, a faith with great roots. But you know something? There are few vocations to the priesthood. Why? This faith doesn't flourish because of these problems, the scandals, many things," he said.

In his audience talk, the pope reflected on his visit Aug. 25-26 to Ireland for the World Meeting of Families.

The thousands of families participating from around the world, he said, were "an eloquent sign of the beauty of God's dream for the entire human family."

"God's dream is unity, harmony and peace, the fruit of fidelity, forgiveness and reconciliation that he has given us in Christ," the pope said. "In the mystery of his love, he calls families to participate in this dream and make the world a home where nobody is alone, unwanted or excluded."

The witness given by couples during the meeting, he continued, was a reminder that love in marriage is a gift from God that is "cultivated every day in the domestic church" and spreads "its beauty in the great community of the church and of society."

"How much is the world in need of a revolution of love, of tenderness!" the pope said. "This revolution begins in the heart of the family."

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Pope Francis said that although there were moments of great joy during his trip, there were also moments of "pain and bitterness" caused by the suffering endured by survivors of abuse and "the fact that church leaders in the past did not always know how to adequately address these crimes."

His meeting Aug. 25 with abuse survivors left "a profound mark," and he said he prayed for forgiveness "for these sins, for the scandal and the sense of betrayal" felt by survivors and members of the church.

"I prayed that Our Lady would intercede for the healing of victims and give us the strength to firmly pursue truth and justice," the pope said.

The Irish bishops, he said, have taken "a serious path of purification and reconciliation" with those who have suffered and have worked alongside government authorities to establish "a series of severe norms to guarantee the safety of young people."

"In my meeting with the bishops, I encouraged them in their efforts to remedy the failures of the past with honesty and courage, trusting in the promises of the Lord and counting on the profound faith of the Irish people, to inaugurate a season of renewal of the church in Ireland," Pope Francis said.