News



Pope Francis hears confession during a penitential liturgy with juvenile delinquents in Las Garzas de Pacora Juvenile Detention Center in Pacora, Panama, Jan. 25. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis encouraged young detainees at a juvenile prison here Jan. 25 to embrace the possibility of change by seeking out those who might help them make better decisions once they are released from incarceration.

Choosing to spend the morning of his third of five days in Panama with the 192 young people held at the Las Garzas Juvenile Detention Center in the small town of Pacora, the pontiff advised them: "Each of us is more than our labels."

"You are part of the family; you have a lot to share with others," Francis told the detainees. "Seek out and listen to the voices that encourage you to look ahead, not those that pull you down."

"Keep fighting, all of you, to seek and find the paths of integration and transformation," he said. "The Lord will bless, sustain and accompany you."

Francis is visiting Panama Jan. 23-27 for World Youth Day. The Vatican says the visit to the detention center is the first for a pontiff during the triennial global Catholic event, and is meant to bring the celebration to those who would otherwise be unable to take part.

The pope spoke in a homily during a penitential liturgy, during which he also heard confessions from five of the detainees.

Before making his remarks, Francis listened to a testimony from one of the detainees, a 21-year-old man. He stood face-to-face with the prisoner, his head slightly bowed, as the man recalled committing a crime and doing "very deep damage" to his loved ones.

The camera providing the feed for the event was stationed behind the prisoner, so as not to show his face publicly.

Francis reflected in his homily on the passage in Luke's Gospel recounting how the Pharisees questioned Jesus for eating with tax collectors.

"Jesus is not afraid to approach those who, for countless reasons, were the object of social hatred, like the publicans ... or like those who were called sinners because of the gravity of their faults, errors and mistakes," he said.

"Whereas the Pharisees and the scribes were content to grumble or complain, restricting and blocking any kind of change, conversion and inclusion, Jesus approaches and engages, even putting his reputation at risk," he said. "He asks us, as he always does, to lift our eyes to a horizon that can renew our life and our history."

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Francis also denounced the way that society can impose labels on people, which he said separate groups of persons into "good" and "bad."

"This attitude spoils everything, because it erects an invisible wall that makes people think that, if we marginalize, separate and isolate others, all our problems will magically be solved," said the pontiff.

"When a society or community allows this, and does nothing more than complain and backbite, it enters into a vicious circle of division, blame and condemnation," he continued.

Francis' five-day visit to Panama is focused almost entirely on World Youth Day. Later Jan. 25, he is to take part in a Via Crucis procession with young people along the main highway running along Panama City's shoreline on the Pacific Coast.

Crowds in Panama have been fewer than past celebrations of the triennial event, partly due to the choice to hold the event in January, which allows more Latin American students to take part during their summer but inconveniences North Americans and Europeans, who are still in school during their winter.

About 111,000 people completed official registration, according to organizers, which is short of earlier estimates that at least 150,000 would be attending. Among those present are 86,000 pilgrims, 450 bishops, 2,250 priests, 2,500 journalists, and 19,500 volunteers.

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