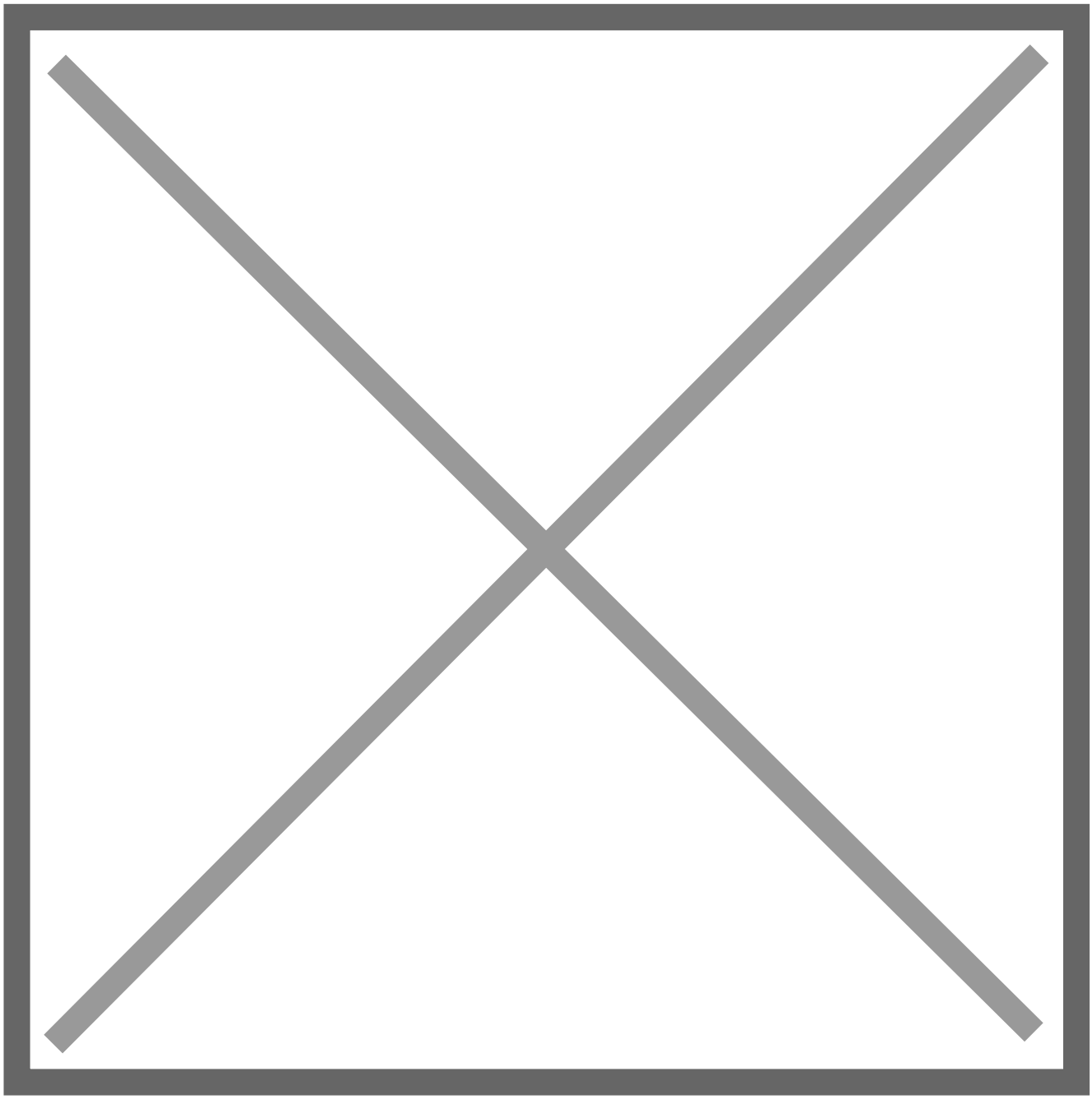
Spirituality
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis smiles as he leads his general audience in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Feb. 3, 2021. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Catholic News Service

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Pope Francis told attendees at this year's all-virtual Los Angeles Religious Education Congress to look for hope amid the pandemic — "a difficult time for all" — in the very theme of their gathering: "Proclaim the Promise!"

"We need to proclaim and to remember that we have God's promise, and God always keeps his promises," he said Feb. 18, quoting a verse from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians.

The pontiff also shared a quote from his latest encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship": "We must also remember that 'every woman and man, and every new generation, brings the promise of new relational, intellectual, cultural and spiritual energies.'"

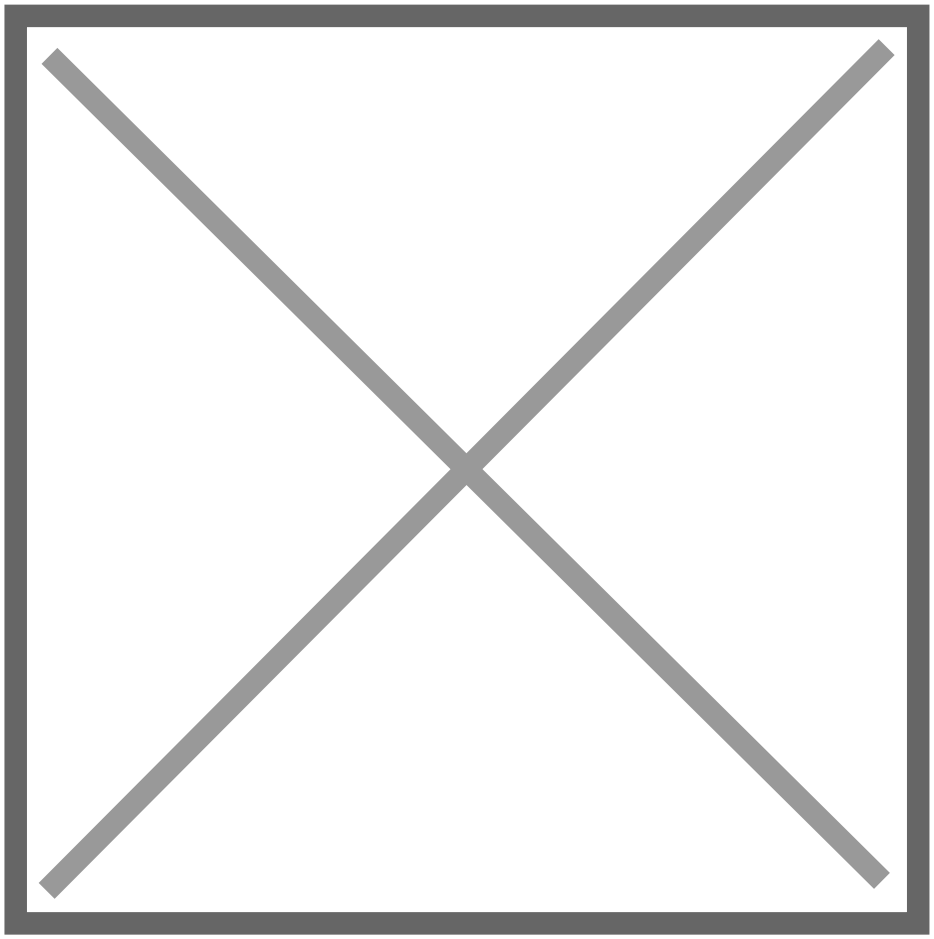
The pope delivered a video message the opening night of the Feb. 18-21 congress, which for this first time in its 65-year history had to be virtual, due to the pandemic. An English translation of the pope's remarks made in Spanish was released by the Vatican.

"The pandemic has marked the life of the people and history of our community," Francis told the congress. "Faced with this and other situations, it is necessary to build tomorrow, to look to the future and, to do so, it takes effort, strength and dedication on the part of everyone."

"We need to act in the style of the Samaritan, which involves letting ourselves be affected by what we see, knowing that suffering will change us, and we must engage

with the suffering of others," he continued. "The witness of generous and gratuitous love that we have witnessed throughout these months, so many testimonies, have left an indelible mark on consciences and also on the social fabric of society, teaching us how much closeness, care, accompaniment and sacrifice are necessary to nurture brotherhood."

This witness and these actions are "the proclamation and fulfillment of God's promise," he said.



This is a screen grab of the Los Angeles Archdiocese's Religious Education Congress website. The congress draws tens of thousands each year, but this year's event, Feb. 18-21, takes places virtually for the first time in its 65-year history due to the pandemic. (CNS screen grab)

"Let us remember a universal principle: You never come out of a crisis the same, you come out better or worse, but you never come out of it the same," Francis said. "In crises, one's heart is revealed: its solidity, its mercy, its greatness, its meagerness.

Crises confront us with the need to choose and to commit ourselves to a path."

Quoting again from "Fratelli Tutti," he told congress attendees that "by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity. ... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together and to look ahead!"

The pontiff especially greeted the young people participating in the congress, inviting them "to hope, which 'speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning.'"

He urged young people to be "the poets of a new human beauty, a new fraternal and friendly beauty."

Francis also told attendees to remember that dreams "are built together."

"Let us dream, then," he said, "as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth, which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all."

Ahead of the pope's video message, Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez in a prerecorded message of his own welcomed congress participants and said he was happy they could join the conference "even in this challenging time."

"I want to thank you all for your ministries and your service to the church," the archbishop said. " It has been beautiful to see so many of you doing everything you can to bring hope to our people as together we face this pandemic. Thank you for your creativity, your love for Jesus and your zeal for our brothers and sisters."

The congress theme of "Proclaim the Promise!" is "our duty, our beautiful mission. To proclaim the beautiful promises of God. To proclaim his great plan of love for our lives and our world," the archbishop said. "I pray that these days will be a time of renewal and spiritual growth for you, a time for reflecting on our mission and calling in the church."

The congress usually has drawn about 40,000 people from all over the country; it is the largest annual gathering of Catholics in the United States.

This year's programming is similar to any other year — but all virtual. The four-day event was to include presentations, liturgies, scheduled broadcasts, live workshops and on-demand content. There also was a dynamic virtual exhibit hall.

The congress theme "is an invitation to believe that our lives and our world are sustained by God's promise. Now more than ever, we need hope and a vision for our future," said Sr. Rosalia Meza, senior director of the Los Angeles Archdiocese's Office of Religious Education.

"We invite the faithful to explore and live this call to 'Proclaim the Promise!' Our world is in much need of a future filled with hope!" she said in a statement issued ahead of the opening of the congress.

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