Vatican
Francis, the comic strip
Pope Francis greets Christopher Lamb, Rome correspondent for The Tablet, during his genera

Pope Francis greets Christopher Lamb, Rome correspondent for The Tablet, during his general audience in the Paul VI hall at the Vatican Feb. 16, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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VATICAN CITY — The same love that gave St. Joseph the strength to protect Jesus and Mary must inspire Christians to love the church, especially when calling out its sins and flaws, Pope Francis said.

Love "makes us capable of speaking the truth fully in a nonpartisan way; of saying what is wrong but also of recognizing all the goodness and holiness that are present," the pope said Feb. 16 during his weekly general audience.

"Nowadays it is common, it is an everyday occurrence, to criticize the church, to point out its inconsistencies — and there are many — to point out its sins, which in reality are our inconsistencies, our sins, because the church has always been a people of sinners who encounter God's mercy," the pope said. "Let us ask ourselves

if, in our hearts, we love the church."

Reflecting on St. Joseph as the patron of the universal church, the pope said he was concluding his series of audience talks about the foster father of Jesus.

The Gospel stories involving St. Joseph note that he takes Jesus and Mary with him and obeys God's commands, thus highlighting his role as their protector, the pope said.

Departing from his prepared remarks, he added that "a very beautiful aspect of the Christian vocation" is protecting life and "protecting human development."

"The Christian is — we may say — like St. Joseph: he or she must protect," he said. "To be a Christian is not only about receiving the faith, confessing the faith, but protecting life, one's own life, the life of others, the life of the church."

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Christians, he continued, "must always ask ourselves whether we are protecting with all our strength Jesus and Mary, who are mysteriously entrusted to our responsibility, our care, our custody."

St. Joseph, "in continuing to protect the church, continues to protect the child and his mother, and we too, in loving the church, continue to love the child and his mother," he said.

Loving the church, he added, means protecting and walking with all its members.

"The church is not that small group that is close to the priest and bosses everyone around; no. We all are the church, all of us," he said. "This is a good question: when I have a problem with someone, do I try to protect them or do I immediately condemn them, speak ill of them, destroy them? We must protect, always protect!"

Pope Francis encouraged Christians to seek St. Joseph's intercession, especially in "the most difficult times in your life and the life of your communities."

"Where our mistakes become a scandal, let us ask St. Joseph to give us the courage to speak the truth, ask for forgiveness and humbly begin again. Where persecution prevents the Gospel from being proclaimed, let us ask St. Joseph for the strength

and patience to endure abuse and suffering for the sake of the Gospel," the pope said.

St. Joseph's intercession, he added, is also a source of comfort for the poor and the suffering and an encouragement for those "who serve the least, the defenseless, the orphans, the sick, the rejected of society."

"How many saints have turned to him! How many people in the history of the church have found in him a patron, a guardian, a father!" the pope said.