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Vatican
Pope Francis waves as he arrives for a meeting with thousands of young people taking part in

Pope Francis waves as he arrives for a meeting with thousands of young people taking part in a pilgrimage organized by the Italian bishops' conference in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 18, 2022. (CNS photo/Remo Casilli, Reuters)

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VATICAN CITY — Young people should not allow the darkness of fear to overwhelm them and instead allow the light of Easter to illuminate their lives and give them courage, Pope Francis said.

Fears "must be brought to light. And when fears, which are in darkness, come into the light, the truth bursts out. Do not be discouraged: If you are afraid, put it to the light and it will do you good!" the pope told thousands of young men and women gathered in St. Peter's Square.

The April 18 event, titled "Seguimi" ("Follow Me"), was organized by the Italian bishops' conference and brought young teens from all of Italy for a prayer vigil in Rome. While initial projections expected 57,000 people at the event, the Vatican

said an estimated 100,000 young people were present.

It was the first large-scale gathering of its kind in St. Peter's Square since the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered all public events in the country in 2020.

After riding around and greeting the crowd on his popemobile, Pope Francis welcomed them and said the "square has long been waiting to be filled with your presence, your faces, and your enthusiasm."

"Today, all of you are together, coming from Italy, in the embrace of this square and in the joy of the Easter that we have just celebrated," he said.

However, the pope said that although Jesus' resurrection "conquered the darkness of death," there are still dense clouds "that darken our time."

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"In addition to the pandemic, Europe is experiencing a terrible war, while injustices and violence continue in many regions of the earth that destroy humankind and the planet," he said. "Often it is your peers who pay the highest price: Not only is their existence compromised and made insecure, but their dreams for the future are trampled on. Many brothers and sisters are still waiting for the light of Easter."

Reflecting on a Gospel reading from St. John, in which the risen Christ appears to his disciples while they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee, the pope said young people, like the disciples, can experience moments in life that "put us to the test" and "make us feel naked, helpless and alone."

In those times of uncertainty, he continued, young people must not keep to themselves, because "fears must be said, fears must be expressed in order to be able to drive them away."

"Darkness puts us in crisis; but the problem lies in how we manage this crisis," the pope explained. "If I keep it only for myself, for my heart, and I don't talk about it with anyone, it doesn't work. In times of crisis, you have to talk, talk with the friend who can help, with your dad, your mom, your grandfather, your grandmother, with a person who can help. Crises must be illuminated to overcome them."

He also encouraged the young men and women present to not be afraid of life and all that it entails but instead to be afraid "of the death of the soul, of the death of the future, of the closure of the heart."

"Life is beautiful, life is meant to be lived and to give it to others; life is meant to be shared with others, not to close it in on itself," he said.

Like children who call on their mother when in need, Pope Francis said Christians can call upon Mary who, in her adolescence, "accepted her extraordinary vocation to be the mother of Jesus."

"May Our Lady — the mother who was almost your age when she received the angel's announcement and became pregnant with him — teach you to say: 'Here I am!'" the pope said.