Vatican

Pope Francis greets the crowd during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican

Pope Francis greets the crowd during his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 12. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Rome — October 13, 2022

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Pope Francis will host an online dialogue with students across the African continent next month as a follow-up to a virtual conversation that began earlier this year with young people across the Americas. The meeting is an effort to continue his promotion of the synod's commitment to direct listening to voices across the Catholic Church.

On Nov. 1, Francis will join students from nine African countries and some 27 participating African institutions for "Building Bridges Across Africa: A Synodal Encounter between Pope Francis and University Students," under the theme of "*Ubuntu*: A Culture of Encounter; We All Belong."

"We believe this is a *kairos* moment for young people to hear from the visible head of the Catholic Church and to offer a fresh mandate, fresh call to action and a fresh mission," said Nigerian Fr. Stan Chu Ilo of the Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network and one of the main organizers of the papal dialogue.

In February, Francis held a wide-ranging discussion on migration and climate change for nearly two hours with Catholic university students from across the Americas, which grew out Loyola University Chicago's efforts to participate in the 2021-23 Synod of Bishops on synodality.

The encounter not only served as a chance for students to have an unscripted exchange with the pope but also to build bridges between university students and professors on the American continents.

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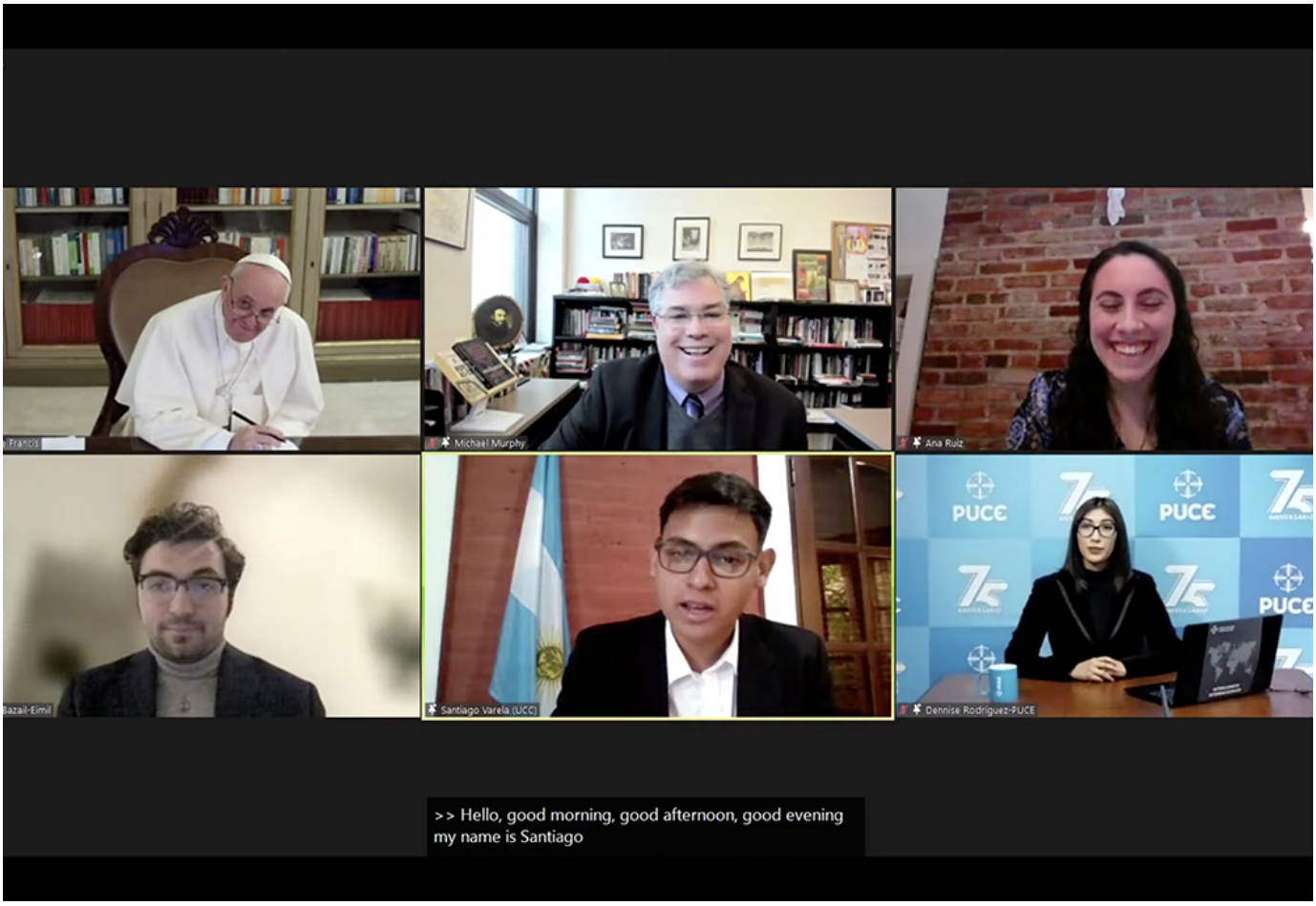
The dialogue — which university officials believe was the first of its kind that Francis held with a U.S.-based university — caught the attention of professors and theologians in Africa. During a major theological summit in Kenya in July, plans began to take off for another dialogue with participants throughout the African continent.

"It's consistent with the emphasis on missionary conversion that Pope Francis has set out as the central focus of his papacy," said Ilo, who is also a research professor of world Christianity and African studies at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University in Chicago.

Ilo noted that Francis has frequently talked about the impression that the young people left on him during his travels in Africa and has expressed his desire for new movements in the church to emerge from Africa.

"Who else can embody this better than young people?" asked Ilo. "They are the shoulders on which the new African church can really take off."

Serving as the link between the initial event in February and the forthcoming dialogue next month is Argentine theologian Emilce Cuda, secretary of the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Latin America, who invited the pope to take part in the inaugural dialogue. Part of Cuda's Vatican mandate is to build bridges between North, Central and South America.



Pope Francis listens to Catholic university students during a virtual dialogue Feb. 24, which Loyola University Chicago hosted in collaboration with Catholic universities and colleges in North, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean. (NCR screenshot/YouTube)

Cuda, who is also an adjunct professor at Loyola University Chicago, said she sees these dialogues with young people as the embodiment of Pope Francis' call for building a culture of encounter.

"This opens two avenues for encounter," she told NCR, "first between the Americas and now it connects Latin America with Africa, which is an extensive part of the global south."

Not only will young people from Africa be able to dialogue with Francis, but the dialogue will connect the African students to students from the Americas who were a part of the initial papal dialogue for ongoing collaboration.

"Young people are the top of his magisterium, in my opinion," said Cuda. "For him, young people can change situations, relationships and the economy. For Francis, young people are the present, not the future."

"And he loves young people, he always has," she added. "It was the same when he was priest, bishop and cardinal in Argentina."

Organizers of the Nov. 1 papal dialogue note that even the planning and execution of the event has been synodal in nature, meaning that it has involved the listening and participation of stakeholders at the Vatican, the Americas and Africa.

> "For Francis, young people are the present, not the future."
>
> — *Emilce Cuda*
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In addition to the Pontifical Commission for Latin America and the Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network, co-organizers include the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, the General Secretariat of the Synod, the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University and Loyola University Chicago.

"This began as an initiative to accompany students through the synodal process," said Peter Jones, interim dean of the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago. "And one step at a time new opportunities emerged."

"To see that it develops means a great deal about our community and about the spiritual sensibility of Pope Francis, as it relates to his desire for this synod on synodality to have people listen and encounter in specific kinds of ways," he told NCR.

To see the dialogue expand to another continent, he said, means "something is going right."

"We have tapped into a spirit that is not only felt by Pope Francis but by people all around the world," Jones added.

Ilo told NCR that already more than a thousand students from the 27 African institutions have been involved in the process.

More importantly, he notes, the papal dialogue will not just be a one-off event, but part of a yearlong program that continues to build the connections between students from other continents and trains cohorts of students to take the message of Francis and translate it into responding to social questions beyond their universities, in their parishes and communities.

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While Jones and Cuda said they never expected the February dialogue with Francis to have such a ripple effect, they noted that they will continue to expand the discussion and share their methodology with other continents and organize future papal dialogues, assuming Francis agrees to continue to make himself available.

"There are many institutions run by older adults that don't provide a platform for young people or newcomers," said Jones. "But it's young people and newcomers who can see things for what they are, taking for granted less, and push institutions into new forms of activity."

Ilo concurred: "We have really neglected this critical mass," he said. "The youth want action. Young people are change makers and they want to work."

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 28-Nov 10, 2022** print issue under the headline: Pope to dialogue with students across Africa.