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Pope Francis blesses a nun during an audience at the Vatican with students and staff of the C

Pope Francis blesses a nun during an audience at the Vatican with students and staff of the Claretian Institute of the Theology of Consecrated Life in Rome, Nov. 7, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



by Catholic News Service

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Aging or declining membership should prompt members of religious orders to ask, "What do we do?" but not to despair, Pope Francis said.

Numbers are a real challenge, but "those who get caught up in pessimism put faith aside," the pope told students and staff of the Claretian Institute of the Theology of Consecrated Life in Rome and its affiliated programs in the Philippines, India, Colombia and Nigeria.

"It is the Lord of history who sustains us and invites us to faithfulness and fruitfulness," the pope insisted Nov. 7. "He takes care of his 'remnant,' looks with mercy and benevolence on his work, and continues to send his Holy Spirit."

Francis was helping the students and staff celebrate the 50th anniversary of the institute, which specializes in theology, spirituality and canon law specifically for and regarding religious orders.

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"The more we approach religious life through the Word of God and the history and the creativity of the founders," the pope said, "the more we are able to live the future with hope."

The pope, a Jesuit, told the group that "religious life is understood only by what the Spirit does in each of the people called. There are those who focus too much on the external -- the structures, the activities -- and lose sight of the superabundance of grace that there is in the people and the communities."

With most religious orders having elderly members, Francis also used his speech to the institute to plead with religious communities to make sure that older members are not sent off to a home where they have no contact with younger members -- "this is a crime," he said.

"The young need to spend time with the elderly, talk with them and the elderly members need to be with the young," he said.