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Pope Francis places his hand on a small child's head. The child has blue glasses and is held by

Pope Francis greets a child after his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 15, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Being an apostle does not mean climbing up the church's hierarchy to look down on others but humbling oneself in a spirit of service, Pope Francis said.

During his general audience in St. Peter's Square March 15, the pope explained that apostleship as understood by the Second Vatican Council produces an equality -- rooted in service -- among laypeople, consecrated religious, priests and bishops.

"Who has more dignity in the church? The bishop? The priest? No, we are all Christians at the service of others," he said. "We are all the same, and when one part (of the church) thinks it is more important than the others and turns its nose up (at them), they are mistaken."

Vatican II, the pope said, did not focus on the laity's relationship with the church's hierarchy as a "strategic" move to adapt to the times, but as "something more that transcends the events of that time and retains its value for us today."

The Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity states that collaboration between the hierarchy and the laity is essential for the church to fully live out its mission.

Viewing Christian life as a chain of authority "where the person on top commands the rest because they were able to climb up (the ladder)" is "pure paganism," said the pope.

Reflecting on the passage from St. Luke's Gospel in which Jesus sends out 72 apostles ahead of him two-by-two, Francis said that service is the vocation Jesus gives to all, including "to those that seem to be in more important positions."

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"Listening, humbling yourself, being at the service of others: this is serving, this is being Christian, this is being an apostle," he said.

The pope encouraged Christians to pray for members of the church's hierarchy who appear conceited since "they have not understood the vocation of God."

Francis also asked that all members of the church reflect on their relationships and consider how that impacts their capacity for evangelization.

"Are we aware that with our words we can harm people's dignity, thus ruining relationships?" he asked. "As we seek to dialogue with the world, do we also know how to dialogue among ourselves with believers? Is our speech transparent, sincere

and positive, or is it opaque, ambiguous and negative?"

"Let us not be afraid to ask ourselves these questions," the pope said, because examining the responses can help lead Christians toward a more apostolic church.

In his greetings to the faithful, Francis also asked that religious sites in Ukraine be respected in the midst of the war. He expressed his closeness to the Ukrainian Orthodox religious community at the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra monastery complex after the Ukrainian government said it would not renew a lease for the monks who belong to the Orthodox community related to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church declared its independence from Moscow May 27, 2022, yet members of its senior clergy have since been accused of openly collaborating with the Russian army in Ukraine.