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Pope Francis poses for a photo with members of the U.S.-based Papal Foundation during an audience at the Vatican April 21. The pope is seated between Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, chair of the foundation's board of trustees, and Bishop James Checchio of Metuchen, New Jersey. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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By calling itself the "Papal Foundation" and supporting projects identified by the Vatican, members of the U.S.-based group have an obligation to promote the unity of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis said.

"Unfortunately, we see even in our day how the unity of the church is wounded by division," Francis told a delegation of about 150 people from the foundation April 21.

"The devil is a specialist in fighting against unity," the pope said. "He is a specialist!"

Division in the church, he said, often is "caused by the influence of ideologies and movements that, while sometimes having good intentions, end up fomenting 'parties' and cliques, with each one developing a certain superiority complex when it comes to insight into the practice of the faith."

The tensions, the pope said, are "further aggravated by the application of secular terminology, especially from the political realm, when speaking of the church and the faith itself."

Jesus called St. Peter to serve as "the visible sign of unity of the church," and that responsibility was passed on to his successors, the popes, he said. Encouraging and defending unity is a responsibility "shared in varying degrees by all those who directly or indirectly assist the pope in fulfilling his mission," including members of the Papal Foundation.

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The Papal Foundation was established in 1988 to respond to the pope's philanthropic priorities in developing nations around the world; since its foundation, members have allocated more than $200 million to projects, including building churches, hospitals and schools and providing scholarships for lay and religious leaders to study in Rome.

"Motivated by sincere faith and a heartfelt desire to help others," Francis said, members of the Papal Foundation "rise above these partisan divisions and foster unity through the generous funding each year of numerous projects and scholarships that provide vital assistance, without prejudice or discrimination, to our brothers and sisters throughout the world."

Francis also thanked the group for its commitment to ensuring accurate record keeping and transparency so that their funds truly benefit people in need.

"As you are aware," he told them, "the Holy See has been making strides" in ensuring its own financial dealings are marked by accountability and transparency.

"This is especially important in its service of charity, which relies on the goodwill and generosity of so many people around the world," the pope said. "While not comparable to the immense harm resulting from the failure to protect the most vulnerable from various forms of abuse, financial scandals caused by a lack of oversight and transparency also damage the good name of the church and can call into question the credibility of the faith itself."