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Pope Francis uses a walker to walk towards a long line of African children holding various colo

Pope Francis arrives for a meeting with children and teens from across Africa, as well as with their parents and ambassadors to the Holy See from the continent, May 29, 2023, in the Vatican audience hall. The audience marked Africa Day, the anniversary of the founding of the African Union. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Celebrating Africa Day at the Vatican, Pope Francis encouraged the continent's children to study hard, be ambassadors of peace and be friends to their peers who live in poverty or danger.

He also told them to spend time with their grandparents.

Meeting dozens of children and teens from a variety of African nations May 29, Francis told the young people, "Dare to be different, to bear witness to the beauty of generosity, service, purity, courage, forgiveness, the struggle for justice and the common good, love for the poor and social friendship."

The audience, which included African ambassadors to the Holy See and many of the children's parents, marked the celebration May 25 of Africa Day, commemorating the founding of the African Union in 1963.

The celebration, Francis said, is a reminder of "the struggle of the entire African continent for liberation, development and economic and social progress, as well as for the strengthening and deepening of Africa's cultural patrimony."

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Spending time listening to one's grandparents and other elders, he said, is an important way to learn one's culture and to strengthen one's roots, which is necessary for growth.

When young Africans see the challenges facing their continent, challenges that include "terrorism, bad governance, corruption, massive youth unemployment, migration, conflicts between communities and the climate and food crisis," the pope said, they might feel helpless and discouraged.

"My dear friends, I want to say to each of you: Never give up on your dreams, never completely bury a calling, and never accept defeat. Keep seeking at least partial or imperfect ways to live what you have discerned to be your real calling."

Francis asked them to study hard so they can contribute to the human and integral development of their societies, and he asked them to find ways to assist and be friends to child soldiers and children who are victims of violence "so that they do not feel rejected and stigmatized."

"Be ambassadors of peace so that the world can rediscover the beauty of love, of living together, of fraternity and solidarity," the pope told them.