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Pope Francis stands in his apartment window with an older white woman to his left and a whi

Pope Francis, alongside a young person who was going to attend World Youth Day and his grandmother, speaks to visitors gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before praying the Angelus July 23, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



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Young people today must be open to love and let themselves be led and accompanied by God in the face of life's challenges, Pope Francis said.

In the second edition of the "Popecast," produced by Vatican Media in Italian and released July 25, the pope responded to the stories of young people recorded ahead of World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal, scheduled for Aug. 1-6.

The first episode of the Vatican Media's podcast with Francis was released in March, in which he looked back on the first 10 years of his pontificate.

The Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life also released a podcast series meant to talk about how its work concretely impacts the lives of people in the church. Its first episode released July 23 focuses on grandparents and the elderly.

Meanwhile, the Popecast's latest episode focused on marginalized youth, and one person the pope heard from was Giona -- Jonah in Italian -- a transgender, homosexual and disabled Catholic who described how his faith helped him accept his identity and body despite his disability.

"The Lord always walks with us, even if we are sinners he comes toward us to help us," the pope said after hearing Giona's story. "The Lord loves us as we are. This is God's crazy love."

Like the prophet Jonah, "people are often stubborn," he said, "and that stubbornness closes us" to God's love. Yet the pope urged Giona to "not surrender" and recalled that "God always caresses us" and "walks with us," even if it is sometimes difficult to feel.

The pope then listened to two young men share how they resorted to crime and violence in response to their troubled backgrounds. Both had experienced run-ins with the law and were now involved with the Kayros Association, a Catholic organization supporting young people in need near Milan.

People make progress in life "with successes and mistakes," the pope said, and "many times society is cruel to us because one mistake characterizes us for our whole life."

"You were not alone on your journeys, not even when you made terrible mistakes; the Lord was there, ready to take you by the hand, ready to lift you up " Francis said. "It was he who created the circumstances in history to lift you both up."

The pope also told them to not be afraid to dream, calling dreams "seeds of hope, seeds of progress, of strength, to go forward."

"God is present in every stage of life," Francis said after hearing the experience of Arianna, a healthcare worker who has bipolar disorder.

She described living on a "seesaw" between having suicidal thoughts and feelings of extreme joy. The pope noted that life's ups and downs can become a "labyrinth" with no way out, the pope said.

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"Always look ahead and don't lose sight of the horizon, because the horizon is what leads you forward," he said. "God is the horizon and God is with you accompanying you."

Francis urged Arianna not to lose a sense of "the adventure of life" or "fall into the labyrinths of our consciousness, which don't save us in the end." He also asked that she continue pursuing medical treatment for any psychological conditions she may have.

Valeria, who will accompany a group of young people traveling to World Youth Day, shared that the young people she knows want the church as an institution to be coherent with the message of the Gospel, and that she sees the synod on synodality as a key step toward that result.

"The church is church when it walks, the contrary is a religious sect closed within itself," the pope said in response. "Each time the church has closed itself it has ended poorly, it has ended up being infertile."

Francis stressed the need for fostering "unity among diversity" in the church, which he said is achieved by living coherently with the Gospel. "Each person lives life differently, in their own way, but if it is coherent with the Gospel it's okay."

"Many times in the church there are fights among little groups, one against the other, but on the morning of Pentecost everyone spoke differently but understood each other in unity," he said. When a difference becomes akin to a political party, "it kills unity."

Speaking to Giuseppe, who said he spends most of his time playing video games, the pope said his virtual relationships to other gamers and content creators are

"sterile." Francis warned him against "becoming bored with yourself" and living his life "without poetry," before encouraging him to "open a window" and look toward a horizon in life to pursue.

Turning to all young people, Francis urged them to attend World Youth Day, responding to those who may not feel like going by saying "it is worth it to take the risk."

"In life, who doesn't take risks doesn't move forward," he said.

The pope also responded to an audio message from 9-year-old Alessandro asking if there would ever be a "World Children's Day."

"It would be nice," the pope said, "and we can ask grandparents to organize it. I will think about it and see how to do it."

"Say hello to your grandparents for me," Francis told him.

This story appears in the **World Youth Day 2023** feature series. View the full series .