Vatican

Vatican News



Tens of thousands of young people attend the World Youth Day welcome ceremony at Eduardo VII Park in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 3. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Lisbon, Portugal — August 3, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As Pope Francis officially launched a gathering of hundreds of thousands of Catholic young people here in the Portuguese capital, one direct message was repeated throughout multiple speeches — lest anyone forget it: Everyone is welcome in the church.

"There is room for everyone in the church and, whenever there is not, then, please, we must make room, including for those who make mistakes, who fall or struggle," the pope told a crowd of nearly 500,000 young people gathered here in Lisbon's Edward VII Park on Aug. 3 for the official welcome ceremony of World Youth Day.

"The Lord does not point a finger, but opens wide his arms: Jesus showed us this on the cross," Francis continued. "He does not close the door, but invites us to enter; he does not keep us at a distance, but welcomes us."

The pope's emphasis on openness is simple and has come to define much of his 10-year papacy as he has continually tried to preach a message of welcome to historically marginalized groups in the church, including women, the divorced and remarried, and LGBTQ Catholics.

But it has been met with fierce resistance, including inside the church.

Just hours before World Youth Day began, Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, took to social media to lament the "tragedy" of World Youth Day, which he said had "fallen prey to the current trend to secularize the Catholic Church." And last month, a biographer of Pope John Paul II — the founder of World Youth Day — criticized the event for lacking a "Christocentrism."

Advertisement

Here in Lisbon, over the course of the last two days — and by explicitly pointing to the life of Christ — the 86-year-old pontiff's message seems intent on making sure a younger generation knows they have a home in the Catholic Church, regardless of their life's circumstances.

"Let these be days when we fully realize in our hearts that we are loved just as we are," the pope told a sea of young people draped in their country's respective flags, many of whom waited in the park for several hours to greet the pontiff.

Francis recalled that he had received letters from young people who have felt unwelcome in the church because of mistakes.

"Everyone needs to know that God is near, and that all he needs is a small response on our part in order to fill our lives with wonder," he told them.



Pope Francis speaks to students at the Catholic University of Portugal Aug. 3 in Lisbon. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Despite his age and recent health issues, the octogenarian pope — who has made intergenerational solidarity an elevated theme of his papacy — seems reenergized by being among young people and by being back on the road.

In the midst of an already overpacked schedule during his five days here, Francis also met privately today with a group of pilgrims from Turkey who had been affected by the massive earthquake in the country in February, along with a group of 15 pilgrims who had traveled to Portugal from Ukraine. The Vatican said the pope listened to their stories and shared in the sorrows, and an official photo from the event showed the pope kissing the Ukrainian flag.

Earlier in the day, during a speech at the Catholic University of Portugal, the pope used his remarks to a crowd of some 6,500 students and young people to take aim at Catholics who seek to erect barriers of entry to the faith.

"Christianity cannot be lived as a fortress surrounded by high walls, one that raises the ramparts against the world," he said.



Pope Francis kisses a Ukrainian flag held by a World Youth Day pilgrim from Ukraine during a private meeting Aug. 3 at the Vatican nunciature in Lisbon, Portugal. The Vatican said the pope spent half an hour with the Ukrainian young people, listening to their stories and praying for their war-torn country. (CNS/Vatican Media)

And in an unscripted dialogue with Portuguese young people in the nearby seaside town of Cascais, the pope reflected on the parable of the good Samaritan. He recalled that in the Gospel, a man had been left alone on the side of the road to die and that both a priest and a Levite would not stop to care for him because it was against the law to come into contact with blood.

Even today, Francis lamented, legal purity continues to be prioritized over getting close to others in need.

Those words echoed that of his message on Aug. 2, when in speaking to the country's priests, bishops, seminarians, and women and men religious, he said that it was their job to welcome everyone in the church, using the Spanish word *todos* ("all" or "everyone") more than a dozen times.

Among the hundreds of thousands of young people, it's a message that, so far during this World Youth Day, seems to be resonating.

"He's not afraid of saying things," said 19-year-old Matielde Caeral after the pope's speech at the Catholic University of Portugal, where she is a student.

"He's really direct," she told NCR. "He upsets some people, but he tries to do what's best for all of us, and I agree with that. It doesn't make any sense for us to exclude anyone for just one thing or one area in their life."

João Gaspar, 22, concurred: "He's so down to earth," he said. "I think the church has to take that step so that everybody feels that they fit it. He's not like the other popes."

At least one young person in the crowd seemed to agree, as she waved at Francis with a banner that read in Portuguese: "Pope Jorge, you made me believe again."

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