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Pope Francis, accompanied by Cardinal Manuel Clemente of Lisbon, Portugal, arrives at Tejo P

Pope Francis, accompanied by Cardinal Manuel Clemente of Lisbon, Portugal, arrives at Tejo Park in Lisbon for the closing World Youth Day Mass Aug. 6. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Lisbon, Portugal — August 6, 2023
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With war raging in Europe and ever increasing polarization throughout the world, Pope Francis on Aug. 6 told a massive gathering of more than 1.5 million young

people to choose dialogue over isolation and to be "beacons of hope in dark times."

Christians, the pope said, are called "to love our neighbors as they are, not only when they agree with us, but also when they are unkind or disagreeable."

"You young people are capable of that kind of love, and thus able to break down certain walls and prejudices, and to bring the light of Christ’s saving love to the world," Francis told them.

The pope's remarks came during the closing Mass for the World Youth Day celebrations, which drew hundreds of thousands of young people from more than 200 countries here to the Portuguese capital for the weeklong festivities.

In what local authorities were describing as the largest event in the history of the nation, young people slept out all night along the banks of the Tagus River to be present with the 86-year-old pope, who consistently used the week's events to underscore the importance of intergenerational relationships.

The pope, who arrived in the country on Aug. 2, used his final remarks to encourage the youth to follow the example of Jesus and be "sensitive to situations all around us, to other cultures, to the pleas of the poor and vulnerable, and to the cry of our wounded and mistreated earth."

"How good it is to listen to Jesus, to listen to one another, and thus to become capable of dialogue in a world where so many people go through life alone and concerned only with themselves," he said.

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Flags from almost every nation on earth — from countries as diverse and far away as Ukraine, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Samoa — flew high above the crowds as the pope spoke. On the ground, sleeping bags, tarps, inflatable mattresses and leftover food were scattered about from what was nearly a 24-hour stay in the open air for some pilgrims.

Some 700 bishops and 10,000 priests joined the pope for the closing Mass, which marked the conclusion of his fourth World Youth Day, where Francis continuously repeated the immortal phrase of the event's founder, Pope John Paul II: "Do not be

afraid!"

On Saturday evening, Aug. 5, the pope presided over an evening vigil with Eucharistic adoration that also drew crowds of more than 1.5 million young people — many of whom walked for hours to reach the park and waited in near 100-degree heat for the pope's arrival.

During his speech — where Francis tossed his prepared remarks to speak off the cuff — he told the young people that they are called to be "joyous missionaries" in today's world.

"You don't find joy closed up in a library," he said, insisting that it can only be found in encountering other people.

At the end of the Sunday Mass, Francis said that he hoped all who were present would continue that encounter, announcing that the next World Youth Day will take place in Seoul Korea in 2027. It will mark only the second time Asia has played host to World Youth Day, the first being in the Philippines in 1995.

Ahead of that, a special event for young people will be hosted in Rome, as part of the highly anticipated Jubilee Year in 2025 that is expected to draw some 35 million people to the Eternal City throughout the course of the year.

Before saying farewell, Francis offered a special prayer for Ukraine and said that he possesses a "dream of peace, the dream of young people praying for peace, living in peace and building a peaceful future."

"You are a sign of peace for the world, showing how different nationalities, languages and histories can unite instead of divide," he told them. "You are the hope of a different world."



Pope Francis celebrates Mass for World Youth Day at Tejo Park in Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 6. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Enver Browne, 22, who traveled to Portugal with a group of 15 people from the British Virgin Islands, said "it's been amazing, being in fellowship with so many people from around the world."

Browne told NCR that World Youth Day had "definitely" strengthened his faith.

"It's amazing to see so many other young people that share the same faith as me," he said. "I know the faith is alive and very strong. It's strengthened within myself knowing that there are many of us around the world, and even more."

Fr. Wilson Fernandes of Brazil told NCR in his native Portuguese that the atmosphere in Lisbon was made especially festive and joyful after the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world in 2020 and pushed back the gathering by a year.

"It's as if everyone is in a hurry to love and to be together here at World Youth Day, where one is understood despite differences of language and culture," said

Fernandes, who added that he was busy working as a volunteer when the 2013 World Youth Day was held in Rio de Janeiro.

"So now, being here like a pilgrim participating, it's a huge emotion for me being here in Lisbon celebrating World Youth Day," he said.

Savannah Kleeman, 22, of Washington, D.C. was attending her first World Youth Day and said the overnight stay with poor sleep was "not so much a sacrifice, but an opportunity."

"We all get to come together, to celebrate and praise together and see the universality of the Catholic Church. It's an incredible opportunity, and I feel blessed."

Kleeman also said the event had particular resonance after several years of COVID-19 lockdowns and isolation, which she noted only contributed to the mental health challenges and loneliness by today's young people.

"This call to remind us that we're not alone, that we're all in this together. It's beautiful," she told NCR.

After a meeting with some of the 25,000 World Youth Day volunteers, Francis will fly back to Rome, during which an inflight press conference is expected.

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