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Pope Francis answers questions from journalists aboard his flight back to Rome from Lisbon, Portugal, Aug. 6, after his participation in World Youth Day. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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After driving home a message to young people for several days in a row that the church is open to everyone, Pope Francis on Aug. 6 reiterated that such a message includes LGBTQ people and all marginalized groups.

"The Lord is clear," the pope said in reflecting on who is welcome in the church: "The sick, the elderly, the young, old, ugly, beautiful, good and bad."

The pope's remarks came during a 25-minute, in-flight press conference returning to Rome after a five-day trip to Portugal for World Youth Day, a major Catholic youth festival where more than 1.5 million pilgrims joined the pope during the final Sunday Mass.

Throughout the visit, the pope continued to repeat the message that everyone is welcome in the Catholic Church — at one point getting young people to repeat after him "*todos, todos, todos*" ("everyone, everyone, everyone").

Yet on the same day of those remarks, a Mass for LGBTQ pilgrims in Lisbon was interrupted by traditionalist protesters who believed the event to be sacrilegious. Organizers said the protest underscored the challenges gay and lesbian Catholics face in the church today.

"The church is a mother," he said, adding that he does not like reduction when it comes to discussing who can take part in the life of the church.

"This is gnostic," he said.

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The pope's remarks came in response to a reporter who asked how Francis can say "todos" when LGBTQ people and women are excluded from the sacraments.

The pope's response was abstract, seeming to note that in reference to the question of ordination or gay marriage that while the church has laws, it does not mean the church is closed to such individuals. Instead, he said, they must be accompanied by the church.

During his first day in the country, on Aug. 2, Francis held a private meeting with 13 survivors of clergy sexual abuse, at a time when the Portuguese Catholic Church is reeling from the crisis.

A report released earlier this year by an independent commission chronicled how Catholic clergy members in Portugal had abused more than 4,800 children since 1950. The response of the Portuguese hierarchy following the report's release was widely criticized.

En route back to Rome, Francis said he believed the local church was making progress in its response to abuse and while it was a painful experience to hear the victims' stories, he said, "it does me good" to take on their pain.

"We're looking for serenity for the victims," Francis said, while also noting that abuse is not limited to sexual abuse, but also includes women and young girls and in the labor market.

Francis said it was necessary to "grab the bull by the horns" to combat abuse within the church and society more broadly.



Pope Francis leaves a rosary before a statue of Mary in the Chapel of the Apparitions at the Shrine of Our Lady of Fátima in Fátima, Portugal, Aug. 5. (CNS/Vatican Media)

When asked about his closely watched Aug. 5 visit to the popular Marian shrine of Fátima, the pope defended his decision not to make direct appeal for peace in the war in Ukraine, as it had long been expected he would do so.

Instead, the pope prayed in silence in front of a statue of Our Lady of Fátima and offered an unscripted reflection on the virtues of Mary's intercession for Catholics.

"I prayed for peace in front of the Madonna, but I didn't make an advertisement," he told reporters.

The pope also said that the reason he repeatedly decided to abandon his prepared remarks throughout the visit was that most young people do not have a good

attention span.

"The church has to change itself with regard to the homily," he said, noting that sometimes they are "torture."

"You need a clear simple idea," said Francis, who has repeatedly called on priests to limit their homilies to under 10 minutes.

The 86-year-old pope, making the 42nd international trip of his papacy and the first since he had an unexpected hernia operation in June, told reporters the stitches had been removed following his surgery and that he is in good health and living a "normal life."

Later this month, he will travel to Mongolia, becoming the first pope to ever visit the country, and, in September, he will make a two-day visit to Marseilles, France for a meeting of bishops and political leaders from around the Mediterranean to put a spotlight on the plight of migrants.

"It's criminal what's happening to migrants," said Francis.

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

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