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Pope Francis will hold an online dialogue with students across South Asia on Sept. 26 as part of a program that provides young people a rare opportunity to engage with him. (Courtesy of Loyola University Chicago)



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Pope Francis will hold an online dialogue with students across South Asia on Sept. 26 as part of a program that provides young people a rare opportunity to engage in frank conversations with the pontiff about challenges facing their lives and the church in the modern world.

The Building Bridges Initiative — which is organized by Loyola University Chicago, with the collaboration of the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Latin America — is part of an effort to continue the pope's promotion of synodality, and to show his commitment to directly listening to voices across the Catholic Church.

The Sept. 26 dialogue, which is expected to last approximately 75 minutes, follows virtual dialogues between Francis and students in the Americas in February 2022 and Africa in November 2022. It will take place just over three weeks after Francis returned from Mongolia, on what was his 12th trip to Asia of his decade-long papacy.

"Working with universities, professors, and students in Latin America, then Africa, and now South Asia, we continue to seek out the voices of young people everywhere, seeking to listen and learn from them and to amplify their voices and perspectives," said Peter Jones, interim dean of the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago.

During the encounter, four groups of three students will have 15- to 20-minute unscripted conversations with the pope on a range of topics, which will be livestreamed with simultaneous translations into English, Spanish and Hindi.

"I'm hearing about such things as deep anxiety around global challenges, drug abuse, gender-based violence, the commercialization of education, migration and others," Jones told NCR in anticipation of the meeting.

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Student participants are currently enrolled in Catholic higher education institutions that include Loyola Hall Research and Spirituality Center in Lahore, Pakistan; Christ University in Bengaluru, India; St. Xavier's College in Kathmandu, Nepal; St. Stephen's College in Delhi, India; Loyola College in Chennai, India; and St. Joseph's University in Bengaluru, India.

Emilce Cuda, a secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, recalled the pope's now poignant phrase during the recent World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal that the Catholic Church should be open to everyone.

"Pope Francis says 'todos, todos, todos,' " Cuda told NCR. "And so for the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, it's important to be in open dialogue between Latin America and the rest of the continents."

When it comes to Asia, specifically, she noted that Latin America not only experiences migration from Asia, but also many Asian corporations invest in Central and South America.

"The idea is to work together in search for a sustainable economy, with a social, integral ecology," she said.

And according to Jones, the meeting will allow Francis to practice his own commitment to intergenerational solidarity.

"Everywhere we look we see students with a clear vision of their situations and a desire to work for the common good," Jones said. "What they often lack is agency supported by the institutions in which they participate."

A core aim of these virtual meetings, he said, is to provide "an opportunity for young people to proceed together in synodal fashion and assert their voices and agency authentically, with institutional support, with a global audience, and with the ear of this pope, a man who wants to hear them and listen to them carefully."

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