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Young people hold a flag reading "peace" in Italian at the end of Pope Francis’s weekly gener

Young people hold a flag reading "peace" in Italian at the end of Pope Francis’s weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Aug. 23, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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If people can learn how to inflict suffering on others with ever more deadly weapons, they also can learn to stop doing so, Pope Francis said.

"If we can hurt someone, a relative or friend, with harsh words and vindictive gestures, we can also choose not to do so," he added. "Learning the lexicon of peace means restoring the value of dialogue, the practice of kindness and respect for others."

Marking International Literacy Day, Pope Francis sent a message to Audrey Azoulay, director-general of UNESCO, encouraging efforts to teach reading and writing to the hundreds of millions of people in the world who do not have basic literacy skills, but he also focused on the education needed to help all people contribute to building

sustainable and peaceful societies.

The papal message, signed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, was published by the Vatican Sept. 8, International Literacy Day.

UNESCO's mission, he said, is to promote peace "in people's minds and hearts through education, science, culture and communication. These remain the only lawful and effective 'weapons' to use for investing more resources and energies in building hope for a better future."

In addition to teaching the language of peace and dialogue, the papal message urged the international community to do more to overcome the "digital divide" of extremely limited access to the internet and to teach "digital literacy" because many people "are harmed by the divisiveness and hatred found on 'digital highways.'"

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"Added to this is the serious threat of handing over decision-making about the value of human life to the computational logic of electronic devices," it said, reiterating a complaint the Vatican has made before about algorithms potentially being used to determine, for example, who is given access to life-saving medical treatment.

"In order to prevent technology from being mismanaged, getting out of control or even becoming harmful for people, policies and laws intended to promote the acquisition of digital skills will need to be attentive to broader ethical reflection on the use of algorithms, by guiding the use of new technologies toward responsible and human ends," the message said.

Finally, the message called for efforts to promote "literacy for integral ecology," teaching people to care for the environment and for one another, which "can inspire in the long term a genuinely sustainable policy and economy for the quality of life of all the peoples of the earth, especially the most disadvantaged and those most at risk."