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Pope Francis, sitting in a wheelchair, holds the hands of a young woman wearing glasses

Pope Francis greets a newlywed couple at the end of his weekly general audience in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Dec. 13, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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Christians must be open to the Word of God and to welcoming and serving others, Pope Francis said.

" 'Be open,' Jesus says to every believer and to his church: be open because the Gospel message needs you to witness to it and proclaim it," he said during his weekly general audience in the Paul VI hall Dec. 13.

The pope also appealed for an immediate cease-fire and a resumption of negotiations between Israel and Palestine.

"I continue to follow the conflict in Israel and Palestine with much concern and sorrow," he said. "I renew my call for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire: there is so much suffering there."

Francis encouraged all parties to resume negotiations, "and I ask everyone to make an urgent commitment to get humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza who are on their last legs and really need it."

The pope also called for the immediate liberation of all the hostages, "who had seen hope in the truce a few days ago, so that this great suffering for Israelis and Palestinians might come to an end."

"Please," he said, "no to weapons, yes to peace."

In his main audience talk, the pope concluded his yearlong series of talks about zeal for evangelization.

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Since late November, Francis has had respiratory difficulties related to a bronchial infection and has been cutting back on how much of his prepared texts he reads aloud.

Reading only excerpts but adding off-the-cuff comments, the pope talked about how every Christian is called to allow "the Word of God to inspire us, to help cultivate the passion to proclaim the Gospel."

Often the Bible uses examples of people afflicted with deafness and muteness as metaphors for being "deaf" or closed off to God's word and, consequently, being unable to speak to others about faith.

When Jesus heals a deaf man who had a speech impediment, according to the reflection read at the audience, Jesus -- in the Gospel of Mark (7:31-35) -- uses an Aramaic word that means "be open," which is an invitation not just to the man who was deaf, but to all his disciples, then and today, the pope said.

"We, who have received the 'ephphatha' of the Spirit in baptism, also are called to be open" to the Word of God and to welcoming and serving others, he said.

"Christians who are closed always turn out badly because they are not Christians," the pope said, "they are ideologues" with an ideology of being closed in on themselves.

Francis suggested people ask themselves: "Do I truly love the Lord to the point of wanting to proclaim him? Do I want to become his witness or am I content to be his disciple? Do I take to heart the people I meet, bringing them to Jesus in prayer? Do I want to do something so that the joy of the Gospel, which has transformed my life, might make their lives more beautiful?"