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Pope Francis sits in a chair in a carpeted room with bookshelves. Attendees, including many y

Pope Francis gives his blessing to a group of young Catholics and organizers from the France-based Missionary Fraternity of the Cities at the Vatican Jan. 4, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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A person does not have to travel far from home to find people living on the margins of society and in need of hearing the message of the Gospel, Pope Francis said.

"Do not be afraid to leave your securities to be able to share the everyday life of your brothers and sisters," the pope told the France-based Missionary Fraternity of the Cities during an audience at the Vatican Jan. 4. "Many have open hearts and are waiting, without knowing it, for the good news" of the Gospel, he said.

The group, made up of young volunteers, lay organizers and priests, was formed in 2022 to create and support networks of priests in low-income neighborhoods in various French cities. The group came to the Vatican with 12 young Catholics from working-class areas in Paris to meet the pope and share their experience of faith with him.

Sabine, a 21-year-old psychology student, told the French magazine Le Pélerin before their meeting that she hoped to tell the pope "just how much our diversity is a richness."

The idea for a meeting between young people and the pope came after Paris was consumed by riots after a police officer killed Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year-old French citizen of Algerian and Moroccan origin, in June. The incident sparked protests around the country about racial profiling in policing and questions about racial integration in France.

The pope told the young people and the organizers accompanying them that they "need not go very far in your service at the heart of cities to discover the existential peripheries of our society, which are often within reach, in your neighborhood, on the street corner, on your same floor."

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Francis noted that even the first Christmas occurred in a "simple and poor place, a periphery, an outskirt of that time."

"The pastors who go to the manger are outcasts with a bad reputation," he said. "Yet it is to them that the Gospel of salvation is proclaimed. They are poor but they have open hearts."

The pope encouraged the young people to "generously live fraternity" in their neighborhoods and to work toward having "an openness of hearts, of hands, of ears, for a sincere welcome" of others.

"Fraternity is the leaven of peace that the peripheries need," he said. "It allows each one to feel welcomed as he or she is, where he or she is."

"Show the presence of a compassionate God," who remains close to wounded people even in their anger, the pope said.

While "violence, indifference and hatred can mark neighborhoods," he said, the young people should "bring God's closeness, compassion and tenderness to people who are often deprived of dignity and love."