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Pope Francis listens to a question as he meets with about 200 children at St. John Vianney parish on the far eastern edge of Rome, where he went April 11, 2024, to inaugurate his "School of Prayer" initiative in preparation for the Holy Year 2025. He spoke to the children about prayers of thanksgiving and answered their questions. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis took over the catechism classes at St. John Vianney parish on the far eastern edge of Rome to inaugurate his "School of Prayer."

The pope went, unannounced, to the parish after school April 11 and met with about 200 children, Vatican News reported.

He spoke to them about prayer and answered their questions. He also brought them chocolate Easter eggs and rosaries.

Archbishop Rino Fisichella, pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization's section for new evangelization, which is coordinating preparations for the Holy Year 2025, had announced the "School of Prayer" in January.

The archbishop said the project would be like the pope's "Fridays of Mercy" initiative during the extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in 2015-2016, when the pope visited people on the "peripheries," including babies in a neonatal unit, a center for the blind and a housing project to illustrate the corporal works of mercy.

Francis has asked Catholics around the world to observe 2024 as a "year of prayer" in preparation for the Holy Year.

The pope's lesson for the children focused on the theme of prayers of thanksgiving, the Dicastery for Evangelization said in a statement afterward.

"It is important to say thank you for everything. For example, if you go into someone's house and you don't say thank you or may I or hello, is that nice?" he asked. "The first word is 'thank you.'"

Francis gave each of the children a large folder with his coat of arms on the cover and, inside, a special prayer of thanks composed for the occasion; the prayer thanked God for the gift of life, the gift of parents, the gift of creation and, especially, "the gift of your Son, our brother and savior, friend of the small and the poor."

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"You taught us to call you 'Father,' and with your word you call us to live as true sons and daughters, to be brothers and sisters who walk together in the grace of the faith we received with our baptism," the text continued. "Thank you, Lord, who loves us."

Francis asked the children if they pray, and one of the youngsters said his family prays before they eat.

"You said something important," the pope told him. They should all thank the Lord for the food they eat and for giving them families.

Alice, who is 10, asked, "How can I thank the Lord when I'm sick?"

"Even in dark times, we have to thank the Lord because he gives us the patience to tolerate difficulties," the pope responded. "Let's say together: 'Thank you, Lord for giving us the strength to tolerate pain.'"

Sofia, who will receive her first Communion in a few days, said it is hard to thank God when there are wars.

Pope Francis said there is always something to thank God for, and he shared a piece of advice: "Before you go to sleep think, 'What can I thank the Lord for?' And give thanks."