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A teacher blows a kiss to Pope Francis at the end of an audience with about 6,000 Italian schoolchildren involved in the National Network of Schools of Peace, a civic education program, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican April 19, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Peace can spread and grow from "small seeds" like including someone who is left out of an activity, showing concern for someone who is struggling, picking up some litter and praying for God's help, Pope Francis told Italian schoolchildren.

"At a time still marked by war, I ask you to be artisans of peace," the pope told some 6,000 Italian school children involved in the National Network of Schools of Peace, a civic education program designed to teach the children to care for themselves, their friends, their communities, the world and the environment.

During the gathering April 19 in the Vatican audience hall, Francis led the children in a moment of silent prayer for their peers in Ukraine and in Gaza.

"In a society still prisoner of a throwaway culture," he told them, "I ask you to be protagonists of inclusion; in a world torn by global crises, I ask you to be builders of the future, so that our common home may become a place of fraternity."

The pope drew the children's attention to the U.N. Summit of the Future, which is scheduled for Sept. 22-23 in New York to draft a "Pact for the Future," focused on promoting international cooperation and partnerships to ensure "a world that is safer, more peaceful, more just, more equal, more inclusive, more sustainable, and more prosperous."

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While government leaders and experts in a variety of fields obviously must get involved to make that hope a reality, the pope said, the pact will remain "just words on a page" without a commitment by all people of good will to take concrete steps

aimed at changing harmful behavior and building communities and societies where everyone feels they are cared for and belong.

"This is a dream that requires being awake and not asleep," he told the young people. The world can change for the better only when people are out in the world, "not lying on the couch," using media to create connections and not just waste time, "and then — listen carefully — this kind of dream is realized by praying, that is, together with God, not by our strength alone."

"Peace, in fact, is not only a silence of weapons and absence of war," Francis said. "It is a climate of benevolence, trust and love that can mature in a society based on caring relationships, in which individualism, distraction and indifference give way to the ability to pay attention to others, to listen to their needs, to heal their wounds, to be instruments of compassion and healing."