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Pope Francis greets visitors as he rides the popemobile around St. Peter's Square before his weekly general audience at the Vatican May 29, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Ahead of his ambitious trip to the Asia-Pacific and Oceania in September, Pope Francis will participate in an online dialogue with students from the region, once again providing young people with an opportunity to engage in frank conversations with the pontiff about challenges facing their lives and the church in the modern world.

The June 20 conversation will include students from Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and more and is sponsored by the Building Bridges Initiative organized by Loyola University Chicago, and co-organized with the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Latin America.

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This will be the fourth online dialogue of its kind and is part of an effort to continue the pope's promotion of synodality, and to show his commitment to directly listening to voices across the Catholic Church.

While the papal conversation is a high point of the Building Bridges Initiative, according to organizers, the primary purpose of the program is not the encounter between the pope and the students, but among students themselves and the network that is being built between cultures and countries that continue long after the encounter with the pope.



Pope Francis speaks during a virtual meeting titled "Building Bridges: A Synodal Encounter" with university students from North, Central and South America Feb. 24, 2022. The meeting was hosted by Loyola University Chicago, in partnership with the Holy See. (CNS screenshot/YouTube)

During past encounters, students have engaged in unscripted dialogue with the pope on matters ranging from war and conflict, the climate crisis, migration and a myriad of local social concerns. The upcoming conversation will be livestreamed in both English and Spanish.

The announcement that the pope will once again sit down with students for this distinctive type of meeting comes just days after Francis met with a delegation from its lead organizer, Loyola University Chicago.

During their May 20 meeting, Francis emphasized that education should go beyond the transmission of knowledge and equip young people with the values of reconciliation and justice.

"I commend to you especially intercultural and interreligious dialogue as a means of fostering mutual understanding, cooperation and the building of bridges between different traditions, cultures and worldviews," the pope told the delegation.