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Pope Francis listens to a question during a meeting with priests ministering in the Diocese of Rome who have been ordained 10 years or less in the Church of Jesus the Divine Master May 29, 2024. The pope is seated between Rome Auxiliary Bishops Baldo Reina, left, and Michele Di Tolve, right. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Vatican City — June 5, 2024

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Pope Francis reportedly told a young gay man to "keep going" with his vocational search after he told the pope he felt called to the priesthood but was turned away by an Italian seminary because he told them he was gay.

According to the Rome newspaper, Il Messaggero, Lorenzo Michele Noè Caruso wrote to Francis after seeing reports that the pope had used a homophobic slur when telling members of the Italian bishops' conference to exercise caution in admitting gay men to seminaries.

Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office, said May 28 the pope "never intended to offend or express himself in homophobic terms, and he extends his apologies to those who were offended by the use of a term, reported by others."

And, Bruni added, "as he has had the opportunity to state on several occasions, 'In the Church there is room for everyone, for everyone! No one is useless, no one is superfluous, there is room for everyone. Just as we are, everyone.'"

Caruso told Il Messaggero that he wrote to the pope May 28 asking him to revise a 2005 instruction from the then-Congregation for Catholic Education, approved by Pope Benedict XVI, that said the church "cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called 'gay culture.'"

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The policy, Caruso told the pope, forced him and others like him to hide their identities or "pay for sincerity with the high price of rejection."

"Many young people feel lost in a church that often seems to have become tied to a toxic and elective clericalism, where only some deserve to be accepted and where others are excluded as false Christians," Caruso wrote.

The young man told Il Messaggero that he received an email June 1 containing the scan of a handwritten response from the pope. The Vatican did not confirm the authenticity of the note.

Francis said he appreciated Caruso's description of clericalism, which the pope called "a plague."

"As a great theologian says, 'Spiritual worldliness is the worst thing that can appen, even worse than the time of popes who were worldly and had concubines,'" the pope wrote, according to Il Messaggero.

"Jesus calls everyone, everyone. Some think of the Church as a customs office and that is bad," the pope continued. "The Church must be open to everyone. Brother, keep going with your vocation."