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Pope Francis greets visitors as he rides the popemobile around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience June 26, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Justin McLellan

Vatican Correspondent

View Author Profile

jmclellan@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @m/McLellan_Js



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While Christians must treat addicts with care and comprehension, drug traffickers who push their products on the vulnerable are "murderers" who are called to conversion, Pope Francis said.

Breaking from his catechetical series centered on the Holy Spirit, the pope addressed the issue of drug abuse and trafficking during his general audience June 26, marking World Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

"Drug abuse impoverishes every community it touches," he said, echoing the words of St. John Paul II. "It diminishes human strength and moral fiber, undermines valued principles, and destroys the desire to live and contribute to a better society."

Francis emphasized that each drug addict has "a different personal story, which must be listened to, understood, loved and, as much as possible, healed and purified."

"However," he added, "we cannot ignore the evil intentions and actions of drug dealers and traffickers. They are murderers."

Established by the United Nations in 1987, the international day is observed every June 26. This year's theme is: "The evidence is clear: Invest in prevention."

Francis criticized the loosening of restrictions on drug usage as a means to reduce dependence on drugs, calling it a "fantasy," and noted that some countries have proposed or already enacted more liberal drug policies.

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"Having known so many tragic stories of drug addicts and their families, I am convinced that it is a moral duty to put an end to the production and trafficking of these dangerous substances," the pope said. "How many traffickers of death, because drug traffickers are traffickers of death, exist, driven by the logic of power and money at any cost."

Francis described the "scourge" of drug trafficking as one that "produces violence and sows suffering and death," and called on society to act courageously and together to combat it.

Just as Jesus drew near to the afflicted to heal their wounds, "we are also called to act, to stop before situations of frailty and pain, to know how to listen to the cry of loneliness and anguish, to bend down to lift up and restore to new life those who fall into the bondage of drugs," he said.

In a nod to the theme for the international day, the pope stressed that prevention must be a priority when combating drug abuse and trafficking, which, he said, is achieved by promoting justice in society, educating young people in personal and communal values and accompanying those in need.

He also spoke about visiting several recovery centers run by faith-based institutions during his travels as pope. He praised the hopeful witness offered by priests, consecrated and lay people in caring for drug addicts as well as the efforts of bishops' conferences to promote just drug legislation.

Francis ended his speech by departing from his prepared remarks to ask the visitors in St. Peter's Square to "pray for the criminals that give drugs to young people, they are criminals, they are murderers."

"Let us pray for their conversion," he said.