Vatican

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Pope Francis greets children in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican July 30, 2024. About 50,000 altar servers from 20 countries were on a pilgrimage to Rome. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Thanks to Jesus' promise to be with his disciples always, the faithful can be fully present for others, especially those in need, Pope Francis told thousands of altar servers from around the world.

"Thanks to Jesus, always and only thanks to him — you also can say to your neighbor, 'I am with you,' not in words, but in deeds, with gestures, with your heart, with concrete closeness," the pope told the young people July 30.

The faithful can show their closeness concretely, he said, "by weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice, without judgment or prejudice, without selfishness and excluding no one."

This closeness is to be extended "even with those we might not like; with those different from me; with foreigners; with those whom we feel do not understand us; with those who never come to church; with those who say they do not believe in God," he said.

The pope presided over an evening meeting of prayer, song and sharing experiences with nearly 50,000 altar servers from 20 countries making an international pilgrimage to Rome. The majority of young men and women came from Germany, but there also were pilgrims from Austria, Hungary, France and other countries. The last international pilgrimage was in Rome in 2018.

The pope first arrived by popemobile with a few children accompanying him. He spent about 20 minutes circling St. Peter's Square, which was only about half-full, as well as a portion of the wide boulevard outside the square where thousands of visitors and altar servers were stuck, having not gotten to their seats in time before security closed the area. After the pope was seated in front of the basilica, security allowed the special guests to take their seats and fill the square.

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Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg is president of Coetus Internationalis Ministrantium, the association of altar servers that hosted the meeting along with the German bishops' conference.

He told the pope that altar servers approach Jesus in a special way during their service at Mass. "Through the special bond with Christ comes a true friendship, a connection between us," which also means "drawing closer to one another."

Jesus inspires the faithful "to be true friends of all people with the help of Christ," which means extending a hand to those in difficulty: the poor, the persecuted, the oppressed, the homeless, the unemployed, the refugees or those without a homeland, the cardinal said.

The pope gave brief remarks that were then translated into German for the crowd.

Reflecting on the pilgrimage's theme of "With You," the pope said, "Your experience of serving the liturgy reminds me that the first subject, the agent of this 'with you,' is God."

"This occurs above all during Mass, in the Eucharist, where the God who is 'with you' becomes a real and concrete presence in the body and blood of Christ," he said. "When we receive holy Communion, we experience that Jesus is 'with us' both spiritually and physically."

"You too, in Communion, can say to the Lord Jesus, 'I am with you,' not in words, but with your heart and your body, with your love. Precisely because Jesus is with us, we can truly be with him" and then with others, he said.

The pope thanked the young people "for coming here as pilgrims in order to share the joy of belonging to Jesus, of being servants of his love, servants of his wounded heart that heals our wounds, that saves us from death and that gives us eternal life."

At the end of the prayer service, the pope spent another 20 minutes greeting the many bishops who had accompanied their dioceses' altar servers and scores of young people seated in front of the basilica, signing the back of their tickets, taking selfies, exchanging remarks and receiving gifts.