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Pope Francis greets a young child as he rides in the popemobile around St. Peter's Square at the Vatican before his weekly general audience Sept. 18, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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The 87-year-old Pope Francis publicly thanked God for allowing him "to do as an old pope what I would have liked to do as a young Jesuit," and that is to travel to Asia to preach the Gospel.

As is customary, the pope used his first general audience after his Sept. 2-13 trip to Asia and the Pacific to tell people about what he did, what he saw and what struck him most from his travels.

Addressing thousands of people in St. Peter's Square Sept. 18, Francis said his trips are called "apostolic journeys" because "it isn't a tourist trip, but a journey to bring the word of the Lord, to make the Lord known, but also to get to know the soul of the people, and that is very beautiful."

On his journey, the pope visited Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore.

Some people are "still too Eurocentric" when they think of the Catholic Church, he said, but his visit showed the reality that "the church is much bigger — much bigger than Rome or Europe — and, let me say, much more alive in those countries."

In Indonesia, the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world, the pope said, "I received confirmation that compassion is the path that Christians can and must walk to bear witness to Christ the savior, and at the same time to encounter the great religious and cultural traditions."

"A Christian without compassion is worthless," Pope Francis said.

"Faith, fraternity, compassion," the motto the Indonesian bishops chose for the trip, are like the tunnel that connects the main mosque and the cathedral in Jakarta, the pope said. Visiting the tunnel and the mosque, "I saw that fraternity is the future, it is the answer to anti-civilization, to the diabolical plots of hatred and war."

In Papua New Guinea, he told the crowd, he was impressed by the dedication of the missionaries — including a group of priests and women religious from Argentina — and the catechists, who are the primarily evangelizers.

In the nation's young people, he said, "I saw a new future, without tribal violence, without dependency, without economic or ideological colonialism, a future of fraternity and care for the wondrous natural environment."

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Francis said that in Timor-Leste, a poor and predominantly Catholic country, he was struck above all "by the beauty of the people: a people who have endured much but are joyful, a people wise in suffering."

The East Timorese are a people "who not only bear a lot of children — there were a sea of children — but also teach them to smile," the pope said. "In Timor-Leste I saw the youthfulness of the church: families, children, young people, many seminarians and aspirants to consecrated life. I'm not exaggerating when I say that I breathed the 'air of springtime.'"

While wealthy Singapore was a contrast to the three other countries, he said, the country's Catholic minority forms "a lively church, engaged in fostering harmony and fraternity between the various ethnicities, cultures and religions." And, he said, "even in wealthy Singapore there are the 'little ones,' who follow the Gospel and become salt and light, witnesses to a hope greater than what economic gains can guarantee."

Francis began the audience by introducing the Vatican employees who were reading summaries of his talk in Spanish and in Polish. Arturo López Ramírez and Monika Nowak are scheduled to be married Saturday, and the pope said, "It's beautiful when love leads two people to start a new family."

And the pope ended his audience, as usual, praying for peace in Israel, Palestine, Ukraine, Myanmar and "many places where there are wars, awful wars."

Closing his eyes, he prayed, "May the Lord give us all a heart that seeks peace to vanquish war, which is always a defeat."