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Pope Francis speaks to representatives of popular movements meeting Sept. 20, 2024, in the offices of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Maybe it is a sign of aging, Pope Francis said, but he is increasingly concerned about what kind of world he and his peers will leave for younger generations — and the prognosis is not good.

"This isn't pessimism," the pope told about two dozen representatives of popular movements and grassroots organizations meeting Sept. 20 at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

Francis said he feared adults are leaving behind "a world discouraged, inferior, violent, marked by the plundering of nature, alienated by dehumanized modes of communication," and "without the political, social and economic paradigms to lead the way, with few dreams and enormous threats."

But, he said, if people join forces, especially with those who are most often the victims, things can change.

And he prayed that "the cry of the excluded" would "awaken the slumbering consciences of so many political leaders who are ultimately the ones who must enforce economic, social and cultural rights."

Francis was meeting with representatives of movements and organizations from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia, including those that organize informal workers who collect and recycle trash, gather people who live in the informal settlements on the outskirts of cities, rally citizens to promote care of the environment, assist subsistence farmers and rescue migrants at sea.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, told the representatives that "justice cannot be an intellectual or even a juridical matter. It must be rooted deep within us, as urgent and impossible to ignore as hunger and thirst."

"To raise our voices for the voiceless," the cardinal said, Christians must follow the example of Jesus and be "humble, not caught up in pride, success, money and fame; in solidarity with those who suffer, capable of weeping with them and comforting them; meek, acting without violence or boasting, but with a deep thirst for justice."

Francis told the leaders that the injustices that keep too many people poor, malnourished, unemployed and on the margins of their community's social and political life fuel violence and ultimately war.

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Gloria Morales-Palos, a member of Christ the King Parish in San Diego and an officer in the local, state and national offices of the PICO Network, a faith-based community organizing group, told Catholic News Service she feared Francis was right; "In America, this is the first generation of children who will not be better off than their parents."

"The political environment is very harsh right now and scary for many Latinos," especially those who have family members in the United States without legal papers, she said.

"The immigration laws are old, broken and need to change," Morales-Palos said. "People always say, 'They should get in line,' but there is no line."

Francis told the group that he has been criticized for never speaking up for the middle class, "and I apologize for that," he said. But at the same time, "it was Jesus who put the poor at the center."

"Millionaires should pay more taxes," the pope said. They draw their wealth from the goods of creation, which God made for everyone, and from which everyone should benefit.

People with money like to speak of the economy as a "meritocracy," but oftentimes, they are rich through no merit of their own, he said. Their money comes from "inheritance, they are the fruit of the exploitation of people, of the pollution of nature," or "they derive it from corruption or from organized crime."

"The blind competition to have more and more money is not a creative force, but an attitude, a path to perdition," the pope said. "It is reckless, immoral, irrational behavior. It destroys creation and people's lives."

Too many people, and not just the rich, want to have someone they can look down on so they feel superior, he said. They "look from afar, look from above, look with indifference, look with disrespect, look with hate."

"This is how the silence of indifference is exercised," the pope said, and "it is silence and indifference that enliven the roar of hate. Silence in the face of injustice opens the way to social division. And social division opens the way to violence."

The answer and the key to hope is love, he said. The fight for social justice, for respect for the sacredness of all human life and for care for creation must all be motivated by love.