Vatican

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Young adults welcome Pope Francis to a meeting with young people at a convention center in Dili, Timor-Leste, Sept. 11, 2024. As is customary during his trips abroad, Francis spent time with local Jesuits during his trip Sept. 2-13 to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Cindy Wooden

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Pope Francis, who has called for the liberation of Aung San Suu Kyi, the former leader of Myanmar and Nobel Peace Prize winner, told Jesuits in Asia that he had even offered to give her refuge at the Vatican.

"I called for the release of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi and received her son in Rome," the pope said Sept. 4 during a meeting with Jesuits in Jakarta, Indonesia. "I offered that the Vatican would receive her in our territory. Right now, the lady is a symbol. And political symbols are to be defended."

As is customary during his trips abroad, Francis spent time with local Jesuits during his trip Sept. 2-13 to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore. He answered questions the Jesuits posed, and the transcript of the encounters was published Sept. 24 by La Civiltà Cattolica, an Italian Jesuit journal.

In Indonesia, a Jesuit from Myanmar asked the pope how people could go forward with hope in the midst of violence and turmoil after a military coup and the arrest of Suu Kyi in 2021.

"The situation in Myanmar is difficult," the pope said. "There are good young people fighting for their homeland. In Myanmar today you cannot be silent: you have to do something! The future of your country must be peace, based on respect for the dignity and rights of all, on respect for a democratic order that allows each person to make his or her contribution to the common good."

Many of the questions the Jesuits asked in Indonesia Sept. 4, in Timor-Leste Sept. 10 and in Singapore Sept. 11 were about their ministry and the pope's.

In Timor-Leste, a country where close to 98% of the population is Catholic, a Jesuit asked the pope how best to avoid clericalism.

Clericalism "is everywhere," the pope responded. "For example, there is a strong clerical culture in the Vatican, which is slowly trying to change. Clericalism is one of

the most subtle means that the devil uses" to undermine the Gospel.

With its concern for status and power, he said, "clericalism is the highest (form of) worldliness within the clergy. A clerical culture is a worldly culture. That's why St. Ignatius insists so much on examining worldliness, the spirit of the world, because our sins, especially for men on the front lines, will be there, in that sphere; in intellectual worldliness, in political worldliness."

One way to get back to a sense of true faith, he said, is to "think of your mother and grandmother. The faith they gave you wasn't clericalism; it was something else."

Francis also was asked for advice about promoting the social justice work of the Jesuits in Timor-Leste, a country with a high rate of poverty.

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Jesuits have always proclaimed the Gospel and worked to promote social and political policies that respect the dignity of every person, the pope said. "And none of these great men were 'communists'; no, they promoted the social dimension of the Gospel."

"On judgment day, none of us will be asked: 'How did you behave? Did you go to Mass every Sunday? Did you go to meetings? Did you obey the provincial?'" Francis said. "I'm not telling you to be disobedient, obviously, but the Lord won't ask these things. Instead, he will say to us: 'I was hungry, did you give me something to eat? I was thirsty, did you give me something to drink? I was in prison, did you visit me? I fled, did you help me?'"

"This is what we will be judged on," the pope said. "This is what the Lord said. So, social justice is an essential and integral part of the Gospel."

Another Jesuit in Dili asked Francis how he developed the "program" for his pontificate.

"I was elected pope without imagining that I ever could be," he said. "But once I was elected, I thought about the program that I should follow. What the cardinals had said in the meetings before the conclave was what I felt I had to promote and make it a program. Because when one does something only with one's own hands, it is not

fruitful, it is not useful. Each of us must carry out what we have been entrusted with, but with the originality of places, times and people."

"Of course," he said, "I come from Latin America and, for example, a German might not understand me right away, because he and I have different cultures. The criterion is always: take on the mission because it has been given to you. People who are elected pope are asked whether they accept or not. But once you have accepted, you have no choice: either you go ahead with your abstract, personal criteria, or you go ahead with what the church asks of you. That's how I developed my program."