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Young people and others gather for prayer behind the Church of St. James in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in this file photo from the 2024 international youth festival known as Mladifest. Pope Leo XIV sent a message to this year's festival, which is being held Aug. 4-8, 2025. (CNS/Courtesy Mladifest)

Cindy Wooden

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Vatican City — August 5, 2025
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A solo traveler, even using Google Maps and ChatGPT, cannot safely and happily complete the journey of life or the journey of faith, Pope Leo XIV told thousands of young pilgrims meeting at the Marian shrine in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"No algorithm will ever replace a hug, a look, a real encounter — not with God, not with our friends, not with our family," the pope wrote to people attending the international youth festival known as Mladifest Aug. 4-8.

Leo urged young people to "seek genuine encounters" following the example of Mary, who "undertook a difficult journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth."

The gathering in Medjugorje was the 36th annual youth festival and the first to be held after the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith published a notification in September 2024 recognizing the spiritual value of devotions connected to Medjugorje but not ruling on the authenticity of the alleged apparitions there or alleged messages from Mary.

Six young people, aged 10 to 16, said Mary began appearing to them in June 1981. Three of them say they still have apparitions of Mary each day, while the other three have them only on special occasions.

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Leo did not mention the apparitions or the Vatican notification in his message, instead focusing on the theme of the gathering, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

"This phrase speaks to us of a journey, of a desire that moves us toward God, toward the place of his dwelling, where we can truly feel at home, because his love awaits us there," the pope wrote.

"On the road of life, we never walk alone," he told the young people. "Our journey is always intertwined with that of others: we are made for encounter, for walking together and for discovering a shared destination."

Young or old, he said, Christians "are not solitary pilgrims. The path toward the Lord is traveled together. That is the beauty of faith lived in the church."

Traveling to Bosnia-Herzegovina from dozens of countries, the pilgrims also discover that "there is a language stronger than any barrier — the language of faith, nourished by the love of God."

"You are all members of his body, which is the church," the pope wrote, encouraging the young people to "meet one another, get to know one another, share with one another."

And, he said, "if any of you feels within yourselves the call to a special vocation — to consecrated life or to the priesthood — I encourage you not to be afraid to respond. That invitation, which you feel stirring within you, comes from God, who speaks to our hearts. Listen to him with trust: the word of the Lord not only makes us truly free and happy but leads to our fulfillment as people and as Christians."