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Pope Leo XIV listens to a question from Christopher Pantelakis from the Archdiocese of Las Vegas during a meeting livestreamed from the Vatican with 16,000 young people gathered at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis Nov. 21. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Leo XIV encouraged American youth in a unique digital discussion Nov. 21, telling them that they were not only the "future of the church," but "the present," saying "your voices, your ideas, your faith matter right now."

He spoke in response to questions from students in a 45-minute virtual dialogue at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Indianapolis with an estimated crowd of

16,000 young people ages 14-18.

Katie Prejean McGrady, host of the "Katie McGrady Show" on SiriusXM's The Catholic Channel, moderated the discussion at Lucas Oil Stadium in which Leo fielded questions from five high school students: Mia Smothers from the Archdiocese of Baltimore; Ezequiel Ponce from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles; Christopher Pantelakis from the Archdiocese of Las Vegas; Micah Alcisto from the Diocese of Honolulu; and Elise Wing from the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Iowa.

The questions touched on themes of technology use, artificial intelligence, forgiveness, hope and the church's future. The students developed them in meetings with other students and organizers and they were sent to the pope in advance.

Wing, who had asked the Holy Father about the future of the church, told reporters following the event that "walking up on that stage felt like history." Wing said it was an honor that the pope "said our names," and she found his response to her "personable and so profound."

"He gave us so much hope for the future and for the church and the coming ages," she said.

Ponce, who asked Pope Leo for advice about perseverance in prayer amid difficult times, said he thought the pope "gave an incredible answer" like "he was speaking directly to me." He said he was sure the pope's response "definitely resonated" with others.

The pope told Ponce, "Jesus does not just understand our struggles from a distance. He actually wants us to hand them to him, because he loves us. And that kind of trust starts when we have a real relationship." The Holy Father encouraged Eucharistic adoration and daily prayer, saying Jesus "often speaks to us gently in stillness."

"Scripture says that faithful friends are like a strong shelter and a treasure," he added, "I hope you are forming friendships like that, even during this conference, friendships rooted in faith, rooted in love for Jesus; whether it is a trusted adult or close friend, it's important to speak honestly about what you feel, what you think, what you experience."

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Leo started things off light by responding to a comment from McGrady that she had given the pope a pair of socks some time ago and also wanted to know what he used as an opening word when he played Wordle each day.

"I just want to say I only wear white socks, and I use a different word for Wordle every day, so there's no set starting word," he said with a laugh. Pope Leo is well-known to be a fan of the Chicago White Sox baseball team.

McGrady told reporters the pope's digital encounter started off a moment of connection with young people right at the beginning "when he laughed right when we got started, and then just started to ease into his answers." She saw that the pontiff was truly being a spiritual father in the encounter.

Caty Traub, a high school student attending the event from Our Lady of Grace Parish in the Diocese of Lafayette, told OSV News that it was "really cool" to see Leo on the livestream and he answered "questions that I'd been holding in my heart."

Lane Hull and Peyton Kauzlick, also high school students at the conference coming from Our Lady of Grace Parish in the Diocese of Lafayette, reflected on the historic nature of the moment. Kauzlick told OSV News that since a pope has never had this sort of digital encounter with U.S. teens, being among the first to witness it was "pretty neat." Hull called the encounter "really humanizing" because "you see him a lot on the news, on social media but to actually get to interact with him, that was really special."

Even students viewing the livestream hundreds of miles away told OSV News that the pope's digital encounter with youth was "magical."

That was the word Maddiana Telusma and Julia Gonçalves, both sophomores at Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls in Philadelphia, used to describe the event.

Fellow student Chelsea Sadowski, a senior at the school, said she was struck by Pope Leo's emphasis on "building close friendships that are rooted in Jesus."

Little Flower sophomore Sophia Clark also resonated with the pope's insights on friendship admitting, "I had a really rocky road with friendships when I was younger … and it really touched me, what he said."

Cara Flaherty, a junior at Little Flower, pointed to Pope Leo's reminder that "Jesus is close to the brokenhearted," and that "even when you don't feel him, he's still there."

Angela Pometto, director of the Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministries for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, said the fact that the digital encounter happened said a lot about Pope Leo.

"It says that he knows the importance of investing in young people, even if it’s just the gift of his time. I'm sure his schedule in Rome is very full, but he made time to encounter the young people at NCYC in this way," she said. "It was also beautiful how they included several young people in the process both in discerning what questions to ask the Holy Father and in asking the questions. In a very real way, that was a moment of allowing the young people to be protagonists who are playing a leading role in the story."