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Pope Francis gives a blessing as he attends a session of the Salesian Sisters' general chapter at their headquarters in Rome on Oct. 22. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Religious women must live out their calling in a spirit of openness that gives hope to those who have none and closes the generational gap between young and old, Pope Francis said.

Attending the general chapter of the Salesian Sisters in Rome Oct. 22, the pope said that their service of helping those in need begins in their own religious communities, and he asked them to reflect on how they help their own elders.

"It is true that old people sometimes get a little fickle — we are like that — and in old age, it's easier to see one's defects," he said. "But it is also true that elderly people have that wisdom, that great wisdom of life: the wisdom of faithfulness in growing old in one's vocation."

According to the Vatican, the pope left the Vatican in the morning to attend the general chapter, which was held in Rome Sept. 11 to Oct. 24. The theme of the assembly was "Generative Communities of Life in the Heart of Contemporaneity."

In his address, the pope highlighted the challenges facing the world in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, including poverty, and called on the religious women to "renew your 'yes' to God in this time" and become "witnesses to Christ and his way of life."

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Doing so, he said, requires a "firm rooting in Christ so as not to be at the mercy of worldliness in its various forms and disguises."

"Do not forget that the worst evil that can happen in the church is spiritual worldliness. I can say that it seems almost worse than a sin because spiritual worldliness is that very subtle spirit that occupies the place of proclamation, that occupies the place of faith, that occupies the place of the Holy Spirit," the pope said.

Reflecting on the need for interaction between different generations, the pope recalled a religious community in Argentina that kept younger nuns apart from the elderly nuns, which he said was "a sin against the family."

"The elderly must live, as much as possible, in the actual community. And the duty of young people is to care for the elderly, to learn from them, to dialogue with the elderly. If in a congregation there is no such exchange, it is the way that leads to death," he said.

Noting that the Salesian Sisters will soon celebrate the 150th anniversary of the congregation's founding, Pope Francis encouraged the sisters to remember their origins and "the humility and smallness of the beginnings that made God's action transparent in the lives" of those who joined.

He also reminded them of the importance of joy, compassion and tenderness in service to each other, to God and his people.

"For me, a very ugly thing is an angry religious woman, a religious woman who seems to eat breakfast not with milk but with vinegar," he said. "Bring the hope that doesn't disappoint. The real kind. Like Mary, be women of hope."