

Pope meets U.S. leaders patiently building 'culture of solidarity'

By Cindy Wooden September 17, 2023

Pope Francis invited a group of community organizers from the United States back to his residence for a follow-up discussion about their efforts to listen to gather people, listen to their needs and help them figure out how to work together to improve the lives of their communities.



Pope Francis prays with delegates from community organizing groups that are affiliated with the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation after a private meeting in his Vatican residence, the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Sept. 14, 2023. (CNS photo/Courtesy of West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation)

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- When Pope Francis told a group of U.S. community organizers that their work was "atomic," Jorge Montiel said, "I thought, 'Oh, you mean we blow things up?'"

But instead, the pope spoke about how the groups associated with the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation in the United States take issues patiently, "atom by atom," and end up building something that "penetrates" and changes entire communities, said Montiel, an IAF organizer in Colorado and New Mexico.

Pope Francis' hourlong meeting Sept. 14 with 15 delegates from the group was a follow-up to a similar meeting a year ago. Neither meeting was listed on the pope's official schedule and, the delegates said, both were conversations, not "audiences."

"It was relaxed, it was engaging," said Joe Rubio, national co-director of IAF. "Often you don't see that even with parish priests," he told Catholic News Service Sept. 15, garnering the laughter of other delegates.

Elizabeth Valdez, an IAF organizer in Texas, said the delegates told the pope about their work to promote a living wage, to welcome immigrants, to protect the environment, to improve schools and to get more people access to mental health services -- all efforts that grew out of listening to people in their communities talk about what they needed and then building partnerships with churches, synagogues or mosques, unions, local nonprofits and community service providers.

Rubio said the group has an 80-year history in community organizing and "in the last 50 years, parishes have become really integral to the work," much of which echoes the tenets of Catholic social teaching.



Pope Francis shares a laugh with Tazamisha Alexander, a leader with Common Ground in Solano County, Calif., a group affiliated with the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation, in his Vatican residence, the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Sept. 14, 2023. (CNS photo/Courtesy of West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation)

One thing Pope Francis noted at last year's meeting with the group is how it also models key parts of his vision of a "synodal church," one where people listen to each other, empower each other, take responsibility and work together to respond to concrete needs. Several bishops in Texas used local community organizing teams to conduct their diocesan listening sessions at the start of the process for the current Synod of Bishops, said Father David Garcia, who has spent decades working in San Antonio, Texas, with Communities Organized for Public Service.

Pope Francis was eager to hear an update on the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation's five-year-old "Recognizing the Stranger" program, a parish-based project to identify, train and mentor immigrant leaders to build connections among themselves and with nonimmigrant

allies in their parishes and the broader community. Supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the project is active in 19 Western U.S. dioceses.

While most of the delegates who met the pope at his residence, the Domus Sanctae Marthae, were Catholic and work closely with Catholic parishes and dioceses, the group was ecumenical.

Sally Boeckholt, from AMOS -- A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy -- in Des Moines, Iowa, is a member of the First Unitarian Church and said community organizing work has been "transformational for me in my relationships with the folks that I've gotten to know who are Catholic or members of other faiths. I have a much deeper appreciation for how faith animates what they do."

Sonia Rodriguez, who has been a leader in San Antonio's Communities Organized for Public Service "on and off since the 1980s," said it had been "quite a ride" working with her neighbors to "make changes in the city and really begin to shape the culture of the city in a way that nobody had dreamed of."

The pope, she said, summed up their work as "creating a culture of solidarity," and "it was perfect; that's exactly right."