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Pope Leo's Teaching to the Ecclesial Movements and International Associations. What Can Jesus Youth Learn.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Leo has delivered two general addresses to the leaders of the international associations, movements and new communities recognised by the Holy See. The Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life gathers these leaders each year, and your own leaders take part in these meetings. Because these annual meetings are generally in May or June, the first meeting with Pope Leo was only a few weeks after his election in 2025. Pope Leo spoke to these assembled leaders on 6th June 2025 and on 21st May 2026. Why are these addresses significant? It is because the Pontiff's reflections concern all these organisations together: regarded collectively as "an inestimable gift to the Church" (21st May 2026).

We'll look at several themes the Pope raised across these two meetings

- A Legitimate Path
- Part of the Body of Christ
- Institution and Charism
- Work for Communion
- Petrine Ministry: Unity and Mission

A Legitimate Path

1. In 2025, the newly elected Pope Leo observed that the gathered leaders represented “thousands of people who live out their faith and carry out their apostolate within associations, movements and communities”. This simple statement of fact is also an affirmation, by the Holy Father, that associations, movements and communities are legitimate settings for walking in the faith and serving the Church through the apostolate.

The Pope then referred to the Second Vatican Council Decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem*. *Apostolicam actuositatem* affirms that the faithful can legitimately take the initiative in the apostolate, by virtue of their baptism, as well as acting under the impetus or the direction of ecclesiastical authorities. *Apostolicam actuositatem* likewise affirms the right to form associations for the apostolate. The Pope cites the Decree to remind us of the fruitfulness of communal action: “As a result, a much richer harvest can be hoped for from them than if each member were to act on his or her own. (AA, 18)”.

Part of the Body of Christ

2. Pope Leo observes as an essential characteristic of Christianity that: “no one is a Christian alone! We are part of a people, of a body established by the Lord”. Pope Leo quotes Saint Augustine, speaking of the first disciples: “They became God’s temple, not only as individuals; together they were built into the temple of God” (*En. in. Ps. 131, 5*).

The Pope goes on to state: “Christian life is not lived in isolation, as a kind of intellectual or sentimental experience, confined to the mind and the heart. It is lived with others, in a group and in community, because the risen Christ is present wherever disciples gather in his name.” In this way, Pope Leo situates community life, in the various forms practised within ecclesial movements, within this ecclesial dynamic.

Institution and Charism: in the Service of Grace

3. Pope Leo then speaks of the relationship between ‘institution and charism’ and the role of specific charisms, given to the Church through charismatic founders, and developed, among other places, in ecclesial movements and new communities. Pope Leo references a document written by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on the ecclesiality of charisms, called *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*. I would encourage

you to read it. For the Pope “everything in the Church is understood in reference to grace”. This means that “the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the sacrament of Holy Orders exist precisely so that ‘the objective offer of grace’ [...] may always remain alive amongst the faithful”. This grace is given to us through the Sacraments, the proclamation of the Word, and the care we receive from our Pastors. “Charisms, on the other hand, ‘are freely distributed by the Holy Spirit so that sacramental grace may bear fruit in Christian life in diverse ways and at every level’”. (IE, 14–15).

4. Pope Leo goes on: “The institution exists so that grace may always be offered, and charisms are given so that this grace may be received and bear fruit. Without charisms, there is a risk that the grace of Christ, offered in abundance, may not find good soil to receive it. This is the reason why God raises up charisms: to awaken in hearts a desire to encounter Christ and a thirst for the divine life that he offers us. In a word, grace!”.

5. Pope Leo reaffirms, quoting the words of Pope John Paul II, that this is what is meant when we say that hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts “are co-essential to the divine constitution of the Church founded by Jesus”. (JOHN PAUL II, *Message to World Congress of Ecclesial Movements*, 27th May 1998).

Institution and Charism: Christocentric

6. Pope Leo also says something, which I think is useful to us, about charisms. This applies to the shared charism which can underpin a Community or a Movement, but also to the individual charisms we each receive from the Lord.

Pope Leo proposes a Christ-centred vision of the charism:

“Always keep the Lord Jesus at the centre! This is the essential thing, and charisms are meant to serve this purpose. They lead to an encounter with Christ, they foster human and spiritual growth and development, and they help to build up the Church”.

The charism is not an end in itself and is always justified in relation to Christ. Therefore, in imitating Christ ‘who emptied himself to enrich us’ (cf. Phil. 2:7), those who “join with others in pursuing an apostolic goal and those who bear [enjoy] a charism are called alike to enrich others through the emptying of self. It is a source of freedom and great joy”.

Work for Communion

7. Pope Leo speaks of communion: “Those who govern are required to have a particular sensitivity towards the safeguarding, growth and consolidation of communion. This applies both to life within the association or movement, and to communion with other ecclesial realities and with the Church as a whole”.

What the Pope says here on communion has an impact on how we are to understand a community’s founding charism and on how to remain faithful to it. “Every authentic charism already contains within itself fidelity and openness to the Church. To govern in a manner faithful to the founding charism therefore means finding in it the inspiration to open oneself to the journey the Church is undertaking in the present, without becoming entrenched in the models—however positive—of the past, but allowing oneself to be challenged by new realities and challenges, in dialogue with all the other members of the ecclesial body.”

Petrine Ministry: Unity and Mission

8. Pope Leo reaffirms that ecclesial movements are at the service of the Petrine ministry – the ministry of the Successor of Peter. This is a big thing! It flows from the relationship of these communities and movements to the Holy See. Recognition from the Holy See – in the case of Jesus Youth, recognition from the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life – is much more than a convenient administrative label or a kind of ecclesiastical honour or badge or medal. It signifies being called to serve the Holy Father in his mission as Pastor of the universal Church, and supposes a willingness to serve, even to make sacrifices for this mission.

Pope Leo identifies two priorities for the Petrine ministry where he wants your help: unity and mission. “I ask all ecclesial associations and movements to cooperate faithfully and generously with the Pope, above all in these two areas”.

9. He invites you to be a *leaven of unity*, starting from the spiritual communion that, for example, is part of what you live here in these days. “All of you constantly experience the spiritual communion that unites you. It is the communion that the Holy Spirit brings about in the Church. It is a unity that has its foundation in Christ, who draws us to himself and thus unites us with one another”.

You can live this communion as a participation in Pope Leo’s Petrine ministry simply by seeking out opportunities to share your own experience, in communion with the Bishops and in solidarity with other movements: “Draw close to all those

whom you meet, so that your charisms may ever be at the service of the unity of the Church”.

10. Pope Leo speaks of *the mission* as a shared experience within the movements, a spiritual journey for each person, and a ‘momentum’ to be maintained.

For this last point, please take the Pope’s words personally: they are for you – they are the Pope’s way of saying thank you and of encouraging you!

“Your encounter with the Lord and the new life that filled your hearts gave rise to your desire to make him known to others. You have involved many others, and devoted much time, enthusiasm and energy to sharing the Gospel in the most distant places, in the most challenging environments, enduring difficulties and failures. Always keep this missionary zeal alive in your midst: today as always, movements have a fundamental role in the work of evangelisation.

11. Some final remarks from Pope Leo. I might summarise them in this way: What you have received from the Lord, and therefore from the Church, is given to you, each of you, and to Jesus Youth as a whole, so that you can give it to others, and therefore serve the Church.

“Among you there are many generous, well-trained people, with hands-on experience. This is a treasure that needs to be put to good use, with a constant eye to new situations and challenges. Place your talents at the service of the Church’s mission, whether in places of first evangelisation or in your parishes and local ecclesial communities, in order to reach those who, albeit distant, are often waiting, without being aware of it, to hear God’s word of life.”