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Pope Leo XIV talks with Archbishop Charles Thompson of Indianapolis and members of a pilgrimage organized by the U.S. bishops' Committee for Evangelization and Catechesis for the Jubilee of Catechists at the Vatican Sept. 27, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Among the estimated 20,000 pilgrims in Rome for the Jubilee of Catechists, a group of three dozen from the United States had their own private audience with Pope Leo XIV.

The pilgrims — an archbishop, volunteer parish catechists, diocesan employees, religious sisters and two staff members from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — met with the pope Sept. 27 before his Jubilee audience.

The pope told them that all Catholics, by virtue of their baptism, are called to be teachers of the faith, said Marilyn Santos, associate director of the USCCB Secretariat of Evangelization and Catechesis.

The next morning, during Leo's Jubilee Mass, he formally installed in the ministry of catechist Santos and David Spesia, executive director of the secretariat. The first reading at the Mass was proclaimed by another member of the pilgrimage: Robert Gallagher, a volunteer catechist at the Basilica of St. Edward in Palm Beach, Florida.

Archbishop Charles Thompson of Indianapolis, chair of the bishops' Committee for Evangelization and Catechesis, led the pilgrimage.

"We are just being pilgrims of hope," the archbishop told Catholic News Service. The pilgrimage was an opportunity to "deepen our own our faith, our own sense of God's grace and presence in our lives and our own calling — rooted in all of our baptisms, whether bishop or religious, consecrated, single, married, what have you — to live out our call to holiness and mission and be witnesses of the faith."

The formal institution of some people in the ministry of catechist, a possibility opened by Pope Francis in 2021, shows "how important, how essential catechists are to the church," the archbishop said. "And I think it coincides beautifully with the synodality focus on co-responsibility, that we are all co-responsible for passing on the faith."

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The U.S. bishops are working on a national directory on the three instituted ministries Francis formalized: catechist, lector and acolyte. The directory aims to provide a theological understanding of the ministries, the formation needed, age requirements, the duration of the ministry and their role in a parish and diocese.

Spesia said that in the United States parish catechists are "the 'little engine that could' that drives the church and hands on the faith," and recognizing that with a special Jubilee celebration "is just a beautiful thing."

Asked about being chosen to be instituted a catechist by Leo, Santos said, "I'm thrilled. I'm a little shocked. I'm honored."

Parish catechists "are priceless because they are the boots on the ground, so to speak," she said. Those instituted in the ministry of catechist answer to their diocesan bishop and are called to be an example and resource for others.

Patrick Donovan, director of the Institute for Catholic Formation in the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut, also was part of the pilgrimage.

He told CNS he hoped no one would see the formal institution of catechists as somehow saying that only some Catholics are called to share and teach others the faith.

"I think oftentimes we mistakenly talk about catechesis as a chore, catechesis as a project, as a program. It begins and it ends," he said. But it is an ongoing process of growing in the faith and in one's ability to share it with others.

"For me, the perspective is all about what we can do to help mom and dad be the best witnesses of the faith," Donovan said, giving parents "the language to articulate the faith" and share it with their children each day.

"We have to do less of the hostage situation with young people" forced to attend religious education classes, he said, "and more of giving the language to articulate the faith to mom and dad and grandparents."

This story appears in the **2025 Holy Year** feature series. View the full series.