



# **The Lay Centre Web News**

2024



## Introduction

In the following document, you will find all the notes from The Lay Centre for the year 2024. To easily locate a specific note, you can use the "Command + F" function (or "Control + F" on Windows) and search for relevant keywords. This feature allows you to quickly navigate through the document and find the notes you are looking for. The document serves as a comprehensive collection of all The Lay Centre's notes for 2024, helping you access the information more efficiently.



# 2024

## Community Evening Diary: Insights on Solidarity, Hope and Responsibility

**By Stefanie Bross**

Throughout March, The Lay Centre community gathered for a series of engaging evenings, each focused on a different aspect of societal concern.

- Sister Raffaella Petrini, FSE, the first woman appointed secretary general of Vatican City State, held a profound discussion on solidarity and co-responsibility. Drawing from her extensive experience in welfare economics, she emphasized the importance of prioritizing collective well-being over competition. She reminded attendees of the power of discernment in decision-making and urged them to consider the broader community's welfare in every choice they make: Solidarity over competition. She also remarked that all people are dependent on God and knowing that he can provide will lead people to hope and happiness.
- Dr. Austen Ivereigh, a Catholic journalist, author, commentator and biographer of Pope Francis, led a reflective dialogue on the sources of hope amid the world's uncertainties. The Lay Centre and the University of Notre Dame - Rome co-sponsored a public event on March 13, 2024 titled "Called, Chosen, Sent: What is the source of our hope? Austen Ivereigh in dialogue with young adults." During the session, Ivereigh discussed some themes of his new book, "First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis," and engaged in a conversation with young adults. Designed as an eight-day Ignatian retreat, the book serves as a roadmap to deeper discipleship by focusing on three foundational forms of belonging: to God, to creation, and to others.
- Dr. Alessandra Campo, a professor at the Institute of Anthropology (IADC) at the Pontifical Gregorian University, spoke about the urgent need for abuse prevention in society, and particularly in Church contexts. Through a thought-provoking workshop, she shed light on the structural factors in society that perpetuate harm and highlighted the shared responsibility everyone has to protect the vulnerable. Her discussion spurred conversation on strategies for safeguarding the well-being of the most vulnerable.
- Dr. Debora Tonelli, the Georgetown University representative in Rome, led an interesting conversation on dialogue between believers and non-believers. By emphasizing common values and fostering understanding across diverse perspectives, she encouraged community members to seek unity amid differences. Her insights underscored the importance of empathy and mutual



respect in building bridges of communication and cooperation – not trying to convince someone but rather to understand the other.



# Community Evening Diary: Fostering a Common Humanity

**By Stefanie Bross**

The Lay Centre community gathered in April with a shared dedication to fostering unity, dialogue, and empowerment for two memorable evenings.

- Donna Kempt and Mervat Kelly, from the Focolare Movement, offered insights into the movement's charism and shared their respective journeys as active members. They explained how the Focolare Movement, founded by Chiara Lubich in Italy in 1943, emerged in response to the pressing social and spiritual needs at the time. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus, particularly the commandment to love one another as he loved us, the movement endeavors to promote universal brotherhood and unity among people of diverse cultures and backgrounds. In small communities, called "Focolare," members gather to pray, reflect and support one another, embodying the spirit of love in action.
- The Lay Centre also welcomed Chiara Porro, Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, who spoke about her work as a woman in diplomacy. She emphasized the transformative impact of gender diversity in diplomatic circles, stressing the importance of amplifying indigenous voices and perspectives on the world stage to foster inclusivity and solidarity. She shed light on concerns shared by the Vatican and Australia, such as climate change and the international refugee crisis, noting the influence of the papal encyclical "Laudato Si'" and its resonance with values of the indigenous people in Australia. In addition to her commitment to gender equality, Ambassador Porro is actively engaged in other areas, including the protection of minors. Furthermore, she has played a pivotal role in strengthening ties between the Vatican and Australia, serving as a bridge for dialogue and cooperation on issues of mutual concern. She is the sole representative from Oceania at the Vatican in a diplomatic capacity.



# Sport, Faith, and Community: Lay Centre Residents Shine at Via Appia Run

**By Stefanie Bross**

On April 21, Lay Centre residents joined in the 2024 Via Appia Run, starting and finishing at the Baths of Caracalla Stadium. What began as a casual idea turned into a memorable team-building experience, as they prepared together for the 13-km run for weeks. Reflecting on their journey, one resident remarked, "It was a powerful experience. These events are so joyful and I think one can make a connection: Christian life resembles a longer run rather than a sprint. There are many difficult stages. But it's easier when you walk together and people cheer you on. The goal is that we all reach the finish line: heaven." Congratulations to Carlo, Francisco, and Francis for their successful race.



# Synod organizes results and focuses on one point: 'How to be a synodal Church in mission'

**By Filipe Domingues**

If the first stages of the Synod on Synodality served to open the range of possible issues to be considered – and there are many – now is the time to organize the information, divide the action on different fronts and focus.

In March, the General Secretariat of the Synod presented how this work will be carried out. The central question of the Synod, from now until the general assembly in October 2024, is: “How can we be a synodal Church in mission?”

“We have already begun to reap the fruits of this synodal process, we have to celebrate, thank God and the people of God,” said Cardinal Mario Grech, general secretary of the synod, at a press conference. “The Church is guided by the Word of God, Tradition and the Magisterium. But we can also find guidance in the 'lived experience' of local realities. That's what we're doing.”

## New Tasks

The synthesis document produced last year made it possible to separate the work into three parts. First, local churches around the world continue to be consulted dynamically. Second, the central issue above must be deepened – and this will be done through bishops' conferences, Synod working groups and a meeting in Italy to consult parish priests from around the world.

Separately, Pope Francis asked the General Secretariat of the Synod to coordinate the creation of 10 study groups, involving experts, pastors, people from the secretariat itself and also representatives of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia. Depending on the theme, a different dicastery will be involved. These study groups will work until June 2025, separately from the general assembly. They must follow a synodal dynamic, but begin to act independently of the October assembly.

The themes are:

1. Some aspects of relations between the Eastern Catholic churches and the Latin Church;
2. Listening to the cry of the poor;
3. The mission in the digital environment;



4. The review of the Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis from a synodal missionary perspective;
5. Some theological and canonical issues surrounding specific ministerial forms;
6. The review, from a synodal and missionary perspective, of the documents that regulate relations between bishops, consecrated life and ecclesiastical groups;
7. Some aspects of the figure and ministry of the bishop (in particular: selection criteria for candidates for the episcopate, judicial function of the bishop, nature and conduct of ad limina Apostolorum visits) from a synodal missionary perspective;
8. The role of pontifical representatives (nuncios) from a synodal missionary perspective;
9. Theological criteria and synodal methodologies for a shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues;
10. Receiving the fruits of the ecumenical path in ecclesiastical practices.

Finally, three commissions continue to support all this work: the International Theological Commission, the Pontifical Biblical Commission and a Canonical Commission. In the words of Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, general rapporteur of the Synod on Synodality, “Now is the time to delve deeper into the central question of the synod” about the Church in mission.

#### Deeper into the 'How'

According to Sister Simona Brambilla, secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the time has come to focus on “how” to lead the synodal Church.

“This is not a synod on this or that topic, but synodality itself. There is no going back from this experience,” she said. “Go forward, or rather, inward, in depth.”

Synod consultant and theologian Father Piero Coda said the central issue is “pertinent and demanding,” as it unfolds at three levels: dioceses, regions of the world and the universal Church. It is necessary to reflect on the methods to build synodality, but also on the most appropriate places and environments.

A revision of the Code of Canon Law cannot be ruled out

During the press conference, I asked Archbishop Filippo Iannone about the possibility of the Synod leading to a new expanded revision of the Code of Canon Law – a set of laws that regulates and organizes the functioning of the Catholic Church. He is the prefect of the Dicastery for Legislative Texts. Archbishop Iannone did not rule out this possibility.

“Every reform needs standards to become operative,” he said March 14. “The Code is a single, organic, articulated law. Changing some canons [articles] may require changing





others,” he further explained. At the moment, however, the synod's revisions focus on the second book of the Code, which refers to “the people of God.”

These are the “fundamental rights and duties of the faithful as individuals and associations,” said Bishop Iannone. “The interventions that will be made from here on will depend on the direction of the Synod’s work.



# Synodal Meditations Podcast by Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP

## By Father Timothy Radcliffe

In October 2023, Father Timothy Radcliffe, OP, former Master of the Dominican Order, delivered profound meditations during the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Now, Vatican News is making these reflections available to a wider audience.

The podcast is edited by Stefanie Bross, a Lay Centre Vatican Fellow. Through this program, she is volunteering for a year at the Dicastery for Communication, serving the Church in Rome and living in The Lay Centre residential community.

Delving into themes of unity, friendship, and listening, each episode of this podcast invites listeners on a spiritual journey of reflection and communal discovery.

It is possible to listen on Spotify, YouTube or the [Vatican News page](#). This is the first episode of a nine-part series.



# Applications: Summer Lay Leadership Program | July 2024

## By The Lay Centre

This summer, The Lay Centre opens a new residential program in Rome. This edition is co-sponsored by the Loyola University Chicago's Institute of Pastoral Studies (IPS).

- Applications are open until May 3, 2024.
- Full and partial scholarships are available. Contact us to learn more about the costs.
- [Read about the 2023 edition of the Summer Lay Leadership Program](#)

The Summer Lay Leadership Program is designed to draw out the potential of lay leaders to contribute solutions to the Church's most pressing challenges. The weeklong immersive and intensive program takes a holistic approach to leadership formation, including in its human, spiritual and intellectual dimensions.

Designed together with Letty Garcia, associate director of the Leadership Initiative at Harvard Business School, the program will take place at The Lay Centre, July 5-12, 2024. It will guide participants as they look at their own life journey through a spiritual lens and listen for their call to leadership and co-responsibility in the Church.

Focused on developing self-awareness and relationships, they will define their own path to authentic leadership and return to their daily activities with greater enthusiasm and confidence.

The program is also an opportunity to join a broader network of lay scholars and professionals, opening the door to possible future projects in Rome. Participants will have the opportunity to experience life at The Lay Centre and to receive more information about pontifical universities.

Throughout the week, participants will be immersed in Rome's historic milieu through guided off-site visits related to the themes discussed. Sessions will be held in English.

Who is this program for?

- The ideal candidate is a lay person with at least two years of professional experience and who is interested in working for the Church and/or applying some concepts of leadership and Catholic spirituality to their daily life.
- Applicants can be from any field or profession. They are united in their commitment to discerning a call to serve as leaders motivated to tackle some of the Church's biggest challenges.



- While there are no age limits, this program is designed mostly for those who are in the initial stages of their career.

How to apply?

Send your CV and a one-page cover letter to [info@laycentre.org](mailto:info@laycentre.org).

For more information, please contact us on the same email address.



# Congratulations: Msgr. Joseph Reilly is the new president of Seton Hall University

## By The Lay Centre

Seton Hall University appointed Monsignor Joseph R. Reilly to serve as the university's 22nd president. (Read more)

Since 2018, as rector and dean of Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology (ICSST), institution with which The Lay Centre has a long-standing partnership, Msgr. Reilly has been serving as Chair of The Lay Centre's Board of directors.

For us, Msgr. Reilly has been a source of trusting support, a bridge of authentic dialogue and a reference of caring friendship. We are honored to have him on our Board.

With the entire Seton Hall University community, in particular with our partners at ICSST, we rejoice at his appointment. Congratulations!

May the Lord guide our shared journey, always.

Rome, April 3, 2024



# Happy Easter!

## By The Lay Centre

They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed.

Mark 16:3-5

Christ is risen, and all who believe in Him will rise as well. Let us live in harmony with Him, allow the life of Christ to enter into our own. And thus we will be able to communicate great joy, the true source of life.

To be Christian means to live in Christ.

From all of us at The Lay Centre:

Have a blessed Triduum and a happy Easter!

Rome, March 31, 2024



# Community evenings in Lent focus on compassion and mission

**By Stefanie Bross**

The Lay Centre's weekly community evenings through Lent have been focused on the themes of compassion and mission, starting with Ash Wednesday, Feb. 14. Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, prefect of the Dicastery for Culture and Education, presided over the evening Mass. He was joined by Father Andreas Lind, S.J., professor of philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University and formator at the Jesuits' San Saba community in Rome.

The Portuguese cardinal is also a distinguished poet, theologian and scholar. He invited the students to consider the transformative power of art, literature and culture in shaping the human experience and fostering a deeper connection to the divine. He emphasized the importance of engaging with contemporary society while remaining rooted in timeless truths. He encouraged the residents to be missionaries of beauty.

- The overall theme of this year's community evenings, "Together," has been inspired by [the ecumenical vigil with Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square last September](#), where participants prayed for the first general assembly of the Synod on Synodality, for Christian unity and for peace among peoples.

Claudio Betti and Elizabeth Boyle (picture), members of the Community of Sant'Egidio, visited with the resident community Feb. 21. Drawing from the rich wellspring of the Sant'Egidio lay movement, they shared insights on service and compassion. Boyle's firsthand accounts of her work in conflict mediation and diplomacy underscored the transformative potential of dialogue and solidarity in the pursuit of peace. The Mass was presided by Father Peter Lah, S.J., dean of the faculty of social sciences at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

Father Thomas Joseph White, O.P., rector of the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum), presided over the Mass Feb. 28 and stayed for a short exchange with the students. During that informal moment, he spoke about Christian faith and the opportunities of dialogue with non-believers, as well as the need to preach the Gospel tirelessly.

A week before Lent began, on Feb. 7, the student community welcomed Bishop Lesanuchristos Matheos Semahun of Bahir Dar-Dessie, Ethiopia. Yaried, a Lay Centre resident from Bahir Dar-Dessie, introduced his bishop to the community. Bishop Matheos shared profound insights garnered from years of missionary work among tribes who had



never heard the name of Jesus. His words, infused with deep sincerity and urgency for peace in Ethiopia, resonated with residents.

Earlier in the year, the community received Father Piotr Janas, O.P., vice dean of the faculty of social sciences at the Angelicum, who shared reflections on Catholic social teaching, particularly the intersection of work, leadership, and spirituality in business. Father Piotr began the evening Jan. 17 speaking about his personal journey, which took him through the worlds of business consultancy and telecommunications before discovering his call with the Dominicans.

At the heart of the discussion was an exploration of the methodology behind Catholic social teaching, summed up in the triad of "Seeing - Judging - Acting." He emphasized the holistic ministry of Jesus, highlighting his teachings and his acts of healing and service as guiding examples for modern discipleship. He stressed that the Church's social teachings provide guiding principles rather than strict directives, which encourage critical engagement with social issues.

- The following week, The Lay Centre community participated in several events for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. As in past years, the Centro Pro Unione and The Lay Centre hosted a joint event to start the week Jan. 18. The theme was "[Synodality at your fingertips.](#)"

Father Fabio Baggio, C.S. (picture), undersecretary of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, presided over the Mass Jan. 24. Father Baggio, renowned for his work in migration studies, shed light on the mission of the dicastery and its crucial role in synthesizing pastoral reflections from various fields to address contemporary challenges. His insights echoed the pope's unwavering support for the marginalized.

On Jan. 31, in the midst of final exams, Father Edmund Power, O.S.B., delved into Benedictine spirituality. He spoke about the Benedictine values of prayer, work and community and highlighted the enduring relevance of ancient monastic traditions in modern life.





# Lay Centre community members prepare for Easter with prayer and pilgrimage

**By Stefanie Bross**

Through Rome's ancient traditions and spiritual practices, members of The Lay Centre's residential community have embraced the Lenten journey with reverence and anticipation.

Among these traditions is the [Roman stational liturgy](#), organized each year by the North American College. All are welcome to join in the celebration of Mass each morning through Lent at 7 a.m. at a different Roman church, dedicated to a saint or martyr. This daily pilgrimage holds deep significance for those involved.

"For me, making the pilgrimage of the station churches is having a concrete experience of the People of God, and the People of God on the way," said Maria Rocha, a student of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) living at The Lay Centre. "Visiting, day after day, for 40 days, a different church, whose history has been marked with the presence of the saints, provokes and reminds me that Jesus, in his mercy, wants me to belong to this history, the history of his people, the history of his Church. And I'm called to return to the One who is the centre of this history: Jesus."

"After the papal basilicas of St. Peter and St. Mary Major, I would choose St. Clemente as my favourite church," she said. "By God's providence, it is one of the neighboring churches to The Lay Centre. The main reason is because I'm always reminded of Pope Benedict XVI's words about the 12th-century mosaic (that illustrates the words of St. John: "I am the vine and you are the branches." 15:15), which no matter how many times I look at it, is always new!"

"It's like starting each morning of Lent with a little daybreak pilgrimage, each day to a new church," said William Cooper, a graduate student at the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archeology. "As it turns out, that's both a discipline and a grace! You even get to know a few of the other pilgrims along the way."

He said he found solace in the Basilica of Sts. Cosmas and Damian.

"It's not the oldest or the most beautiful of the station churches, but to invoke those two saints during the eucharistic prayer, then descend to the crypt after Mass to venerate them at the oldest altar in the city — mica male!" he said.



Community members also embrace other traditional practices to prepare for Easter, such as praying the Way of the Cross on Fridays (picture) in the beautiful garden in which The Lay Centre is located.

Additionally, residents gather to close each day with Complines, the night prayer of the Church, which provides a tranquil moment for reflection and communal worship.

On March 10, some residents went on the one-day walking pilgrimage of the Seven Churches of Rome. The 20-km itinerary extends to the Roman countryside and the catacombs, with stops at some of Rome's magnificent basilicas. Conceived by St. Philip Neri in the 16th century, it is among Rome's oldest Lenten traditions.

Called, Chosen, Sent: Austen Ivereigh in dialogue with young adults at The Lay Centre

By The Lay Center

The Lay Centre and the [University of Notre Dame Rome Global Gateway](#) will co-sponsor a public event on March 13, 2024, titled "Called, Chosen, Send: What is the source of our hope? Austen Ivereigh in dialogue with young adults." During the session, Ivereigh will discuss some themes of his new book, "First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis," and engage in a conversation with young adults.

Austen Ivereigh is a UK-based journalist and author specializing in the Catholic Church and the papacy of Francis. He writes regularly for several international publications. Among his books are "The Great Reformer" (2014), "The Wounded Shepherd" (2019), and "Let us Dream" (2020).

It's possible to follow the live-streamed session [by registering here](#).



# 'God leads us to freedom': 2024 Winter retreat

## By The Lay Centre

Led by Father Daniel Huang, SJ, this year's Lay Centre Lenten retreat for student residents delved into the essence of freedom, identity, and the call to illuminate the world. It was held between February 23 to 25.

This year, Lay Centre residents extended their welcome to include three non-resident students for the weekend. These students, from Rwanda, Russia, and the United States, also study at pontifical universities. From the moment participants arrived at the Centro Ad Gentes in Nemi, located in the Alban Hills outside Rome, they were enveloped in an atmosphere of reflection and contemplation.

The retreat focused on [Pope Francis' Lenten message](#) – titled “Through the Desert God Leads us to Freedom” – and offered a profound exploration into the themes of happiness, freedom, and one's intrinsic relationship with God. Father Huang, a professor of missiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University, set the tone with his first session, emphasizing the liberating message of God's revelation.

Father Huang's insightful discussion on identity and freedom was a retreat highlight. Drawing from the wisdom of St. John Henry Newman, Father Huang challenged participants to confront the lies they often believe about themselves – that they are what they do or possess, or what others think of them – and to root their identity in being beloved children of God. This foundational truth, he said, is the key to true freedom and liberation from worldly constraints.

The first evening ended with Adoration. A reflection written by Mother Teresa and sacred music enhanced this time for personal prayer.

The retreat included a powerful moment of communal prayer around a cross in Taizé style. Participants venerated the cross, kneeling before it or touching it with their forehead, and left the retreat visibly renewed in hope and joy, and strengthened in their resolve to be light for the world.

The Eucharist was celebrated daily.

Participants also had opportunities for leisure. Some of them enjoyed strolling through the picturesque town of Nemi and savoring its famous strawberry tarts. Others preferred to stay at the retreat house, praying or resting, taking advantage of the quiet environment.



Contributed: Stefanie Bross



# Sadaf Yaqub: Learning about the importance of Christian unity in Rome

**By Sadaf Yaqub**

“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the faithful and in the congregation” (Ps 111:1).

I am a law graduate from Peshawar University and advocate in Lahore High Court in Pakistan. I completed my Latin Legum Magister at the University of Lahore as well. I am a member of the United Church of Pakistan, part of the Anglican Communion, and for five years I have been involved in the advocacy of minors and in women's issues. I am also an executive member of the Moderator Church of Pakistan's team for women's issues and ecumenical relations.

I am grateful I was chosen to enhance my studies at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Angelicum, particularly in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, with a scholarship from the Anglican Centre in Rome. My stay at The Lay Centre was recommended by Archbishop Ian Ernest, director of the Anglican Centre and representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Holy See, so I could experience living in a diverse community.

I am grateful to the Lord our Saviour for all the blessings he has bestowed upon me. My heart is filled with gratitude as I share with you all about my stay in Rome. Since January 2023, I have had many magnificent experiences. It has been the most precious moment of my life. Indeed, a dream turned into reality when I landed in the ancient city of Rome – a place known for the Apostles' faith, their preaching, teaching, and sharing of the love of Jesus Christ, even though they were faced with extreme hostility and persecution. They remained faithful and committed until they embraced death.

Upon arriving at the Anglican Centre, I became involved in the celebration of the Week Prayer for Christian Unity. I was amazed to realize the divisions in the Church and how important it is for the Church to be together in the unity of Christ. As an intern, life at the Anglican Centre in Rome was full of excitement and enriching experiences. My participation in different courses, in pilgrimage, in World Youth Day in Lisbon, and the Exhibition has focused my thoughts on one central point, which is love, learning, encounters, and sharing joys.

Learning about ecumenism at the Angelicum was enriching. It widened my horizon to the importance of church communion. We are one Church in Christ; it is not only about the unity of the churches but the unity of their mission as well. There is the urge to walk and work together.



My stay at The Lay Centre, with residents who are different in their personal capacities and traditions, gave me a broader perspective of community life. I learned more about how we can be the source of strength and encouragement for each other, despite our differences, and how we can be instruments of God's love for one another. I learned that the openness of our hearts and minds, as well as our behavior and attitude, can impact our surroundings. The Lay Centre is a place of communion for people from across our diverse world, where we take care of one another and share the values and characteristics of Christ.

This place is very calm, secure, and comfortable. The food and other facilities are fabulous. I never felt a sense of frustration in these friendly surroundings. The prayer, retreats, and meetings with scholars and dignitaries were marvelous, enhancing our spiritual growth and leadership abilities.

Contributed: Stefanie Bross



# An Invitation to Lenten Prayer 2024: Finding and Cultivating Hope in Difficult Times

## By The Lay Centre

The Gregorian University Foundation is pleased to again offer you an opportunity to deepen your prayer participating in this year's online retreat extended over the six weeks of Lent. There will be two talks per week with reflections drawn from the Gospel as well as from personal experiences that can offer participants inspiration, motives, and practices for finding and cultivating hope this Lenten season.

The talks will be posted each Sunday and Wednesday and will be available for viewing whenever is convenient. You can find out more about presenters by [clicking HERE](#).

Our deputy director, Filipe Domingues, will be among the presenters.



# Shared humanity: Yarden's journey from Israel to Rome

**By Stefanie Bross**

Yarden Millington taught fellow residents at The Lay Centre how to bless the food on Shabbat, smile through hard times, and pronounce biblical names the correct way. A first-generation Israeli, with a unique mix of English and Moroccan influences, Yarden studied at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University this past semester. The Lay Centre sat with Yarden before her return to Jerusalem and asked her about her key takeaways from her four-month stay at The Lay Centre.

Q: Yarden, could you tell us a bit more about your hometown?

A: I was born in Jerusalem, but my parents lived in a “kibbutz” for some years. When I was 12, we moved to a different town called Musaf in northern Israel, near the border with Lebanon. I lived there until five years ago, when I moved back to Jerusalem for my studies.

Q: Your accent sounds British. Are your parents from England?

A: Yeah, it depends on the conversation and topic. My dad is English, so he influenced my accent. My mom is from Marrakech, Morocco, making me a first-generation Israeli with a mix of cultural influences.

Q: What did you study?

A: I have a Bachelor of Arts in history and comparative religions. I also completed most of an MBA and am now finishing my thesis for another MA in comparative religions, and I chose it almost by process of elimination. My mom insisted I should study all religions, not just one.

Q: And how did you end up in Rome?

A: After completing my exams, my thesis adviser suggested I go to Rome to write my thesis. This would not have crossed my mind, but I got to the Gregorian University. When I got into the fellowship, Frederika, the secretary of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, told me about The Lay Centre. It seemed like a place where I wouldn't have to worry much and always have some company.

Q: What was your first impression of The Lay Centre?

A: People here are diverse, not just in terms of religion, and that's what I find intriguing. Everyone has different social cues, and you have to learn them from the start if you don't





want to hurt anyone. I must admit, my initial thought was also, "Catholics are crazy!" The Mass and retreat were nice. Witnessing the community's commitment to their faith was very nice. Adoration, for example, is still a bit elusive to me, but what stood out was that no one forced me to participate. The organic nature of the experience allowed me to appreciate its beauty.

Q: How has your faith evolved during your time at The Lay Centre in Rome?

A: Surprisingly, I find myself more religious now than before, and I think I've grown closer to my family.

Q: And your experience with interfaith dialogue here?

A: It's fascinating. In Israel, interactions happen, but not necessarily in a dialogue context. Here, it's intentional. Sharing practices and rituals with people from different faiths made me realize our shared humanity. I am also very happy for my priest friend Rafael [Starnitzky]. He speaks my mother tongue, and it was so nice to talk to him because, at the beginning, I needed someone whom I could trust and knew would understand me. The Lay Centre has reinforced the importance of dialogue in breaking down barriers and fostering understanding.

Q: What would you say is the key takeaway from your four-month journey at The Lay Centre?

A: Patience. It's been a journey of uncovering layers, fostering mutual respect, and building bridges of understanding. The growth in understanding diverse viewpoints and participating in meaningful practices, even if initially unfamiliar, have been great. I will undoubtedly miss the people I've met here — individuals with a deep commitment to their faith and studies. But I think I ate too much pasta. I can't eat it for half a year.

Q: Reflecting on your experience, do you have any recommendations for someone from Israel considering a similar journey?

A: It depends on the individual's level of religiosity. For secular individuals like me, this experience can be very enriching. I'm even encouraging a friend engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue to consider coming to The Lay Centre.

Q: What's the first thing you plan to do upon returning to Israel?

A: Run to my niece and nephew!

Thank you for sharing your journey and experiences, Yarden. We will miss you. Good luck on your thesis and thank you for all the joy you brought here.



# Synodality and togetherness: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

**By Stefanie Bross**

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, observed annually from Jan. 18 to 25, provides an opportunity for Christians worldwide to focus their prayers and engage in meaningful discussions on unity. As in past years, the Centro Pro Unione and The Lay Centre hosted a joint event to start the week on Jan. 18. This time the theme was “Synodality at your fingertips.”

Father Timothy MacDonald, SA, opened the evening, setting a contemplative and spiritual tone for the discussions that followed. The priest is a member of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, which founded and operates the Centro Pro Unione.

Dr. Teresa Francesca Rossi moderated the event, held at the Centro, where she serves as a researcher. She is also a professor of ecumenism at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas.

## Different perspectives, one desire

Dr. Tamara Grdzeldze, a former ambassador of Georgia to the Holy See and currently a professor at Ilia State University in Tbilisi, Georgia, spoke about synodality and ecumenism from an Orthodox perspective. Focusing on the Synthesis of the Synod on Synodality, she emphasized a more missionary church — one that cares and listens to the needs of others, just like the good Samaritan.

Dr. Rev. Vanessa Bayha, director of the Melancthon Centre, offered theological insights on synodality. The Melancthon Centre is a Protestant centre for ecumenical studies in Rome, founded in 2002. She emphasized the importance of spirituality and prayer in the process of listening and participating in a Church that has a place for everyone.

Dr. Rev. Maurizio Mirilli, chaplain at Tor Vergata Hospital and former youth ministry coordinator for the Diocese of Rome, added a practical and pastoral dimension to the discussion. He encouraged participants to go beyond talking about unity and to work actively toward unity in daily life. He shared some of his experiences to illustrate that working toward unity is not easy to do, but it is possible.

The event culminated with a contemplative Taizé prayer, led by The Lay Centre choir. Dr. Donna Orsuto, Lay Centre director, concluded the evening by thanking participants and reminding them of the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John, “that they may all be one” (17:21).



# Pope praises communities that host Orthodox students in Rome, including The Lay Centre

**By The Lay Centre**

Two members of The Lay Centre community attended a private audience with Pope Francis on Jan. 12, when he greeted students from the Catholic Committee for Cultural Collaboration. This organization, linked to the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, grants scholarships to Orthodox students who come to Rome to study at pontifical universities. The organization just marked its 60th anniversary.

The Lay Centre's deputy director, Dr. Filipe Domingues, and Russian-Lebanese student Karina Gandur, who is a licentiate student in ecumenism at the Pontifical Gregorian University, had the opportunity to greet and shake hands with the pontiff. Dr. Domingues spoke to the pope briefly about The Lay Centre's mission – to welcome and promote lay men and women in a context of dialogue, hospitality, and faith – and handed him a thank you letter.

During the audience, Pope Francis praised the work of Catholic faith communities that welcome Orthodox students during their studies in Rome. He thanked the rectors and directors of these student residences “for the spirit of openness and the care with which they welcome and accompany them.”

“In this way, the visiting students can follow personally not only the academic courses but also the formational, spiritual, and liturgical growth of the Catholic students and, above all, share with them the experience of community life” in the colleges,” he said.

“This vital and direct contact with concrete communities, in which all share the same desire to follow the one Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, and to serve his Church, helps not only the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox students, but the Catholic ones as well, to overcome prejudices – to overcome prejudices! – to break down walls and to build bridges of dialogue and friendship.”

He then directed remarks to the students, saying: “Studying here in Rome, you have a great opportunity to share with one another who Christ is for you, where you encountered him, how he won your hearts and laid hold of your lives, and the variety of traditions by which you offer him praise and acknowledge him as your Lord.”



# Lay Centre community learns from outstanding storytellers

**By Stefanie Bross**

Outstanding storytellers were among the invited guests at The Lay Centre's Wednesday evening gatherings in November and December.

The theme for these evenings this academic year, "Together," was inspired by [the ecumenical vigil with Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square in September](#), where participants prayed for the first general assembly of the Synod on Synodality, for Christian unity, and for peace among peoples.

At the first gathering in November at The Lay Centre, Cristiane Murray, vice director of the Holy See Press Office since 2019, engaged attendees in a dialogue on the intricacies of church communications. She is a business graduate and was a longstanding contributor to Vatican Radio's Brazilian section. One of her responsibilities at the Holy See Press Office is journalist accreditation.

Murray — who brought her mother along for dinner — explained with joy that her task is to be a bridge builder between journalists and the message of the pope. On that same evening, Mass was presided over by Father Douglas W. Marcouiller, SJ, General Counselor and regional assistant for the USA Assistency at the Jesuit Curia in Rome.

Gerardo Ferrara, an expert in Middle Eastern history and a member of the student advisory office at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, enriched the conversation with his thoughts on communications and storytelling. In his short talk, he explained how important it is to observe in order to tell a good story. Ferrara settled in Rome after varied international experiences in Spain, France, Argentina, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Israel.

At another evening gathering, well-known journalist Austen Ivereigh drew from his biography of the pope, "[Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church](#)", to describe how this pope is leading the Church toward a more missionary and evangelizing era and fostering a culture where all members are called to be witnesses to hope. He said Pope Francis has been a polarizing leader, but one who sees potential for growth in every crisis. On that same evening, Mass was presided over by Father Andreas Lind, SJ.

The month culminated in a festive Thanksgiving celebration, which included traditions observed in the United States and Canada. Attendees gathered in a spirit of gratitude for a shared meal.



In December, Father Michael Rossmann, SJ, currently a doctoral student at the Pontifical Gregorian University, shared his insights and the joy he experienced from his time as editor-in-chief of The Jesuit Post and creator of the "One-Minute Homily" series.

The Lay Centre also observed the feast of St. Nicholas. The festivities began with a heartwarming Christmas prayer, the "Nine Lessons and Carols," a cherished Christian worship service that includes nine short Bible readings and soul-stirring Christmas hymns. The service, traditionally celebrated on or near Christmas Eve, led attendees closer to the profound narrative of the Fall, the promise of the Messiah, and the miraculous birth of Jesus.

Following the prayer, the community gathered for a brief but delightful aperitif. The highlight of the evening was the much-anticipated visit from St. Nicholas, a cherished tradition upheld at The Lay Centre since the days of the Ladies of Bethany. The beloved saint, known for his generosity and kindness, made a special appearance, delighting attendees of all ages. St. Nicholas distributed small gifts and treats, bringing smiles to the faces of those present.

As the December evenings at The Lay Centre drew to a close, there was a palpable sense of gratitude and joy among the student community. It was a wonderful prelude to bidding farewell to the old year and welcoming the new one with open hearts.