

Scholas Occurrentes, bridges of hope between young people from Israel, Palestine, and the United States

The second edition of the “Meaning Meets Us” meeting, organized by the pontifical foundation from November 2 to 5 in Rome and the Vatican, has come to an end. Once again, young university students between the ages of 23 and 27 discovered a space where they could speak without fear, recognize each other as equals, and dream of peace together. “Here,” they said, “we were able to be ourselves.”

Sebastián Sansón Ferrari – Vatican City

“Here in Rome, I felt I could be myself. I didn't have to pretend to have certain opinions or hide what I think.” With a calm voice but filled with emotion, **Shadan Khatib**, a young Palestinian Arab living in Israel, sums up her experience at the second edition of the *Meaning Meets Us* meeting, organized by Scholas Occurrentes from November 2 to 5, 2025, in Rome and at the Vatican. For four days, fifty Israeli, Palestinian, and American students shared workshops, games, moments of reflection, and prayer. The meeting, which grew out of the *Middle Meets* program, aims to provide a space for dialogue and listening among young people who have grown up in the midst of conflict and now wish to transform mistrust into friendship and fear into hope.



Participants in the Scholas meeting with the Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue

For Shadan, one of the most significant moments was the dialogue with Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad, Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. “I told him something very intimate,” he explains, “namely that Palestinian Arabs living in Israel carry a double identity with them. Every day we face great confusion. At university or at work, we cannot always express what we think. It is difficult for both sides, the Palestinian Arab and the Israeli Jewish, because there is no real dialogue; we do not speak freely or truthfully. “However, in Rome, she points out, the masks came off:” Here we are all equal, we can all speak freely. I felt free, without fear, and I was truly myself.” For this reason, at the end of the experience, Shadan wanted to send a message to other young people: “I invite

everyone to say what they think without fear. We are living in difficult times, but we have many tools, such as artificial intelligence, to build something different. We must be ourselves.”

“Behind the conflict there are people”

Yehonatan Grill from Tel Aviv, a student at the city's university, shares a similar feeling. “After two years of war and so much pain, this meeting was an opportunity to breathe, to talk about how we feel and to start imagining a different future,” he explains. “It was very special to discover that behind all the hatred, different opinions and wounds, there are people,” he adds. “People who love to go out, laugh, play soccer, have friends. And when we get to know each other, we realize we have a lot in common. “For Yehonatan, it was a kind of ‘break’ in the routine of silence that dominates university campuses in his country:” In theory, university should be a space for the exchange of ideas. But in recent years, there has been no freedom to talk about the conflict, not even among ourselves. This program has given us a place to listen to each other, discuss, even argue, politely, but with respect and affection. This almost doesn't exist at home.”

At the end of the General Audience with Pope Leo XIV on Wednesday, November 5, Yehonatan had the opportunity to greet the Pontiff together with other young people from Israel, Palestine, and the United States. “I told him about our program, that we are building bridges between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. He replied that we must all work for peace and that he knows how important it is to do so in Israel. He smiled and encouraged us to continue.” That smile, says Yehonatan, became a sign of hope: “He reminded us that we all deserve a better future and that it is in our hands to start changing things, talking to each other, getting to know each other, creating communities. Behind all the differences, there are human beings who want to live in peace.”



Participants to the second “Meaning Meets Us” meeting

“True peace comes from the grassroots and it is built with young people”

José María del Corral, President of Scholas Occurrentes explains that this second edition of the program had a different tone than the first meeting, held in February: "We thought that, after the ceasefire in Gaza, we would find more joy. But what we saw were sad faces, disillusioned young people, without much hope. However, when the Scholas activities began, they recovered something precious: being children." Through trust games, artistic exercises, and experiences of silence, participants discovered a new freedom. "Many said," Del Corral recounts, "that in their countries they live with a double personality, but here, in the Vatican, they were able to be themselves. In one of the activities, an Israeli and a Palestinian thanked Cardinal Koovakad for offering them a space where they felt equal and listened to. This is the mother Church, which welcomes everyone." The meeting was neither theoretical nor distant: "There were young people who had fought, who had lost family members," Del Corral emphasizes. "They did not speak from books, but from life. Yet here they met, looked each other in the eye, and began to believe again."

During the general Audience Pope Leo XIV greeted them personally and encouraged them to replicate the experience in their own communities. "They are convinced that true peace does not come from above, but from within and from the grassroots," concludes Del Corral. "As Francis said and Leo XIV now repeats, young people are not the future: they are the present. And this present needs their courage to build bridges." So, amid tears, laughter, and silence, the young people of *Middle Meets* returned to their countries with a common commitment: to continue talking, to continue listening, to continue dreaming of a peace that is not imposed but comes from the heart. "Because artificial intelligence can predict the future," said Del Corral, "but you can create it."

(DID translation from Vatican news article:)

<https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2025-11/scholas-occurrentes-giovani-israele-palestina-stati-uniti-roma.html>