

Pope Francis Visits Refugees in Rome: Recognise The Need For Justice And Hope, And True Liberation



Vatican City, 11 September 2013 (VIS) – In the early afternoon of yesterday, 10 September, Pope Francis visited the Centro Astalli in Rome, which receives and offers support to asylum-seekers and refugees, managed by the Jesuit Service for Refugees. The Pope arrived at the centre at lunchtime and greeted the diners and the volunteers working in the canteen. From there he proceeded first to the chapel in the Centre for a moment of private prayer, then to the Church of Jesus where he met with around five hundred people, all members of the institution, including workers, volunteers, friends and residents. Before addressing those present he listened to the words of two refugees, a Sudanese man and a Syrian woman.

“Each one of you, dear friends, carries with you the story of a life riven by the drama of war, by conflicts often linked to international politics”, remarked the Holy Father. “But each of you carries above all a human and religious richness; a wealth to be welcomed, not feared. Many of you are Muslims or of other religions; you come from many countries and from different situations. We must not be afraid of difference! Brotherhood allows us to discover that diversity is wealth, a gift for all!”

The Pope recalled that Rome, after Lampedusa and other entry points, represents for many people the second stage of “a difficult, exhausting and at times violent journey” the undertake “with the aim of ensuring a future for their children and the hope of a different life for them and for their families”. Therefore, Rome should be “a city that allows them to rediscover the human dimension, to begin to smile again. However how often, here, as in other places, are many people whose stay permits bear the words 'international protection' forced to live in impoverished or at times degrading conditions, without the chance to begin a dignified life, to plan a new future?”

The Pope went on to speak about the commitment of the Society of Jesus to the cause of refugees, observing that St. Ignatius of Loyola had wanted a space to welcome the poor at his residence in Rome, and so in 1981 Fr. Pedro Arrupe founded the Jesuit Refugee Service, in the hope of maintaining the service in the heart of the city. “And I think of the spiritual farewell of Fr. Arrupe in Thailand, in a centre for refugees”, he added.

Francis selected three words to define the work of the Jesuits and their collaborators: **serve, accompany and defend.**

“Serving means to welcome with care a person as they arrive, to reach out to them, without calculation and without fear ... to work alongside those most in need, and first and foremost to establish with them a human relationship of closeness, to develop bonds of solidarity. ... It means recognising and welcoming demands for justice, for hope, and together seeking the way, the real paths to liberation”.

But if we are to accompany, to welcome is not enough. “It is not enough to offer a sandwich if this is not accompanied by the possibility of learning to stand on one's own two feet. Charity that leaves the poor in the same situation as before is not adequate. True mercy, that which God gives and teaches us, asks for justice, asks that the poor find the way out of their poverty. It asks us - the Church, the city of Rome, the institutions – it demands that no-one should be in need of a meal, of a temporary shelter, a legal assistance service, to enable the recognition of his or her right to live and to work, to be recognised fully as a person”.

“To serve and to accompany both mean to defend, they mean “to place oneself on the side of the weakest. ... How often are we unable or unwilling to echo the voices of those ... who have suffered and suffer, to those who have seen their rights trampled, who have experienced so much violence that it has even suffocated their desire for justice?”

The Holy Father emphasised that for all the Church it is important that receiving the poor and the promotion of justice are not simply entrusted to “specialists”, but rather take their place at the centre of pastoral care, and called in particular on religious Institutes to consider “seriously and with responsibility this sign of the times”. “The Lord”, he said, “calls us to live with more courage and generosity” the welcoming of the needy “in communities, in houses, in empty convents. ... Empty convents are not to be sold to be transformed into hotels to make money for the Church. The empty convents are not ours, they are for the flesh of Christ, for the refugees. ... This certainly isn't simple, and requires criteria, responsibility, and also courage. We do much, but we are perhaps called to do more, welcoming and sharing decisively that which Providence has given us to serve”.

Following his address, the Holy Father, accompanied by two refugees, placed a floral tribute on the tomb of Fr. Arrupe, buried in the Church of Jesus, and then returned to the Vatican.

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