

Press Release – April 24, 2016

Pope Francis at the Mariapolis in Rome: Deserts into forests

Focolare Movement in Rome and Earth Day Italy together at Villa Borghese for “Earth’s Village”

«You are doing a good job, transforming deserts into forests. The deserts in our hearts, in cities, in suburbs and even those in protected areas are unpleasant. The forest is full of greenery, it is very disorderly, but such is life». These words were said by Pope Francis during his unscheduled visit to the Rome Mariapolis at Villa Borghese; one of his surprise visits during this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Putting aside the written script, while speaking off the cuff, Francis invited those present *“to take life from where it comes, just as the goalkeeper does during a football match.... Do not be afraid of conflict, which is in itself a risk and an opportunity. Approaching someone is a risk for me and for the person I approach. But I must never turn my back. We have to take risks”.* He insisted: *“Approach others!”* Then he continued: *“Wipe their tears, so that they can smile. Then the desert will be transformed into forest; there will be the smile of life”.* He also said: *“Look at the faces of people; they go about on their ways closed in themselves, without smiling; they lack tenderness and social friendship. Where there is no social friendship, there is hatred and war. We are living a fragmented third world war.”*

He continued: *«Social friendship is achieved through gratuity. This wisdom is learnt through sport, art, the joy of being together, approaching others. The word gratuity should not be forgotten in a world where it seems that one cannot live unless he pays for it. Gratuity is the keyword to make this desert become forest. And so is forgiveness, because forgiveness keeps us away from regret and hatred”.* He concluded: *“How can this be achieved? We have to admit that we all need forgiveness. We have to work together and respect one another. Thus we will see the miracle of a desert transformed into a forest”.*

Pope Francis arrived at 17.00hrs, accompanied by Archbishop Angelo Becciu, Substitute for General Affairs of the Secretariat of State, He was welcomed by Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, and by Maria Voce, president of the Focolare Movement and Jesús Morán, co-president. He was greeted with joy and wonder by a crowd of 3500 people.

Words of welcome were expressed by Donato Falmi and Antonia Testa, who are responsible for the Focolare Movement in Rome, Pierluigi Sassi, president of Earth Day Italy and some others. The Pope listened to experiences about solidarity with the poor and with prisoners, and about the fight against gambling. These witnesses voiced the commitment to live together in a city like Rome plagued by fragility, but animated by the initiative of many that want to instill hope.

Towards the end of this visit, a boy presented “Earth Cube” to Pope Francis; this cube is sort of game which is meant to impart principles in favor of the environment. The Musical Group Gen Verde, who was scheduled to give its show during the program, sang some songs during this unforgettable hour.

Pope Francis concluded this visit by inviting everyone to pray heartily: *“Lord, we know that we are all your children, that we are all brethren. We know that each one of us has a mission, to make the world become a better place, so that our brothers and sisters have less suffering, so that mother earth is well cared for, so that many find an opportunity to work and regain their dignity through work. We, all of us your children, ask for your blessing”.*

The Mariapolis was born in 1949 on the Dolomites in the Trent region. The words of a song read that drivers, students, doctors, pharmacists or members of parliament, present at the Mariapoli on the Dolomites. were all regarded as equal. Even today, these words show that the Mariapoli is meant to build a model of that society which is renewed by the love of the gospel, where differences do not hinder but enrich the spirit of fraternity that is built. This is the common spirit that reigns in all the Mariapolis held annually in many places all over the world.

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