



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 190524e

Friday 24.05.2019

Audience with the directors, employees and children of the “Ospedale degli Innocenti” (“Hospital of the Innocents”) Institute, Florence

Impromptu address of the Holy Father

Prepared address of the Holy Father

At 11.15 this morning, in the Consistory Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the directors, employees and children of the “Ospedale degli Innocenti” (“Hospital of the Innocents”) Institute, Florence, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the founding of the Italian institution dedicated to caring for and defending children. The mission of the Institute, adapting itself to the new demands of children and families, remains a point of reference in terms of the safeguarding and promotion of the rights of children and adolescents at national and international level.

During the audience, the Pope gave an impromptu address.

The following are the address prepared for the occasion, handed to those present, and the impromptu address given by the Pope:

Impromptu address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I had prepared a speech for you, but it is a bit boring to read ... I would prefer to say a couple of words and above all greet each of you one by one.

You [the President of the Institute] used a touching expression: the “culture of the child”. Today we have to resume this. The culture of the child. There is a culture of surprise in seeing growth, seeing how they are surprised by life, how they come into contact with life. And we must learn to do the same. This way, this path we all have taken as children, we must take it again. You quoted the Gospel of Mark: “Let the children come ...”; but there are also other passages of the Gospel in which Jesus goes even further: He not only says He welcomes children, and that those who welcome them welcome Him, but He goes further: “If you do not become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven”. And this is what the culture of the child must teach us. We must somehow go back to the simplicity of a child and above all the ability to be surprised. Surprises! Our God is the God of surprises, and we must learn this.

And I still have to say another thing, which I would like to take back from you: those broken medals ... [half given to the child and half to the mother who left him at the Institute]. Today in the world there are many children who in a sense have half the medal. They are alone. Victims of war, victims of migration, unaccompanied children, victims of hunger. Children with half a medal. And who has the other half? The Mother Church. We have the other half. We need to reflect and make people understand that we are responsible for this other half and help make today another “home of the innocent”, more global, with the attitude of adoption. So often there are people who want to adopt children, but there is such a lot of bureaucracy – when there is no corruption of the middle, you pay and ... But help me in this: to spread awareness that we have the other half of that child's medal. Many, many families who do not have children and would certainly have the desire to have one through adoption: moving forward, creating a culture of adoption because there are so many abandoned children, alone, victims of war and so on; that people learn to look at that half and say, “I have another one too”. I ask you to work on this. And thank you!

Prepared address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome all of you, directors and employees of the *Istituto degli Innocenti*, and to you, boys and girls, who are the protagonists of this institution that has been welcoming, assisting and promoting children for six hundred years. When I came to Florence, in 2015, for the Fifth National Ecclesial Convention, speaking of the beauty of the city, I could not help remembering that much of that beauty was put at the service of charity, and I mentioned the “Hospital of the Innocents” as an example. I recalled that “One of the first examples of Renaissance architecture was created to serve abandoned children and destitute mothers” (*Address at the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church*, Florence, 10 November 2015).

The Institute of the Innocents, with its six centuries of history – a history that is not over, but that looks to the future – speaks to us of a city that has given the best of itself in welcoming children, so that they should no longer be called “abandoned” but welcomed, entrusted to the love and care of the community. The story of the Innocents has much to teach us. At the beginning we see the generosity of a rich banker, Francesco Datini, who donated the amount with which it was possible to initiate this work. Even today, the social and ethical responsibility of the world of finance is an indispensable value for building a more just and united society. The other striking element of this story is that the design was entrusted to Filippo Brunelleschi, the most important architect of the age, who at that time was working on a masterpiece that still today astonishes the world: the dome of the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. Because the same beauty dedicated to the house of the Lord should also be dedicated to the home of less fortunate children. Because for the children who needed to be welcomed, it was not enough to give the milk of the nurses, there was also the desire to raise them in an environment that was as beautiful as possible.

And for six hundred years, the Institute of the Innocents has taken care to offer its boys and girls everything they need to grow in a dignified manner. This is a truth that today must be repeated emphatically: to the poor, to fragile creatures, to those who live in the peripheries, we must offer the best we have. And among the most fragile people we have to care for there are certainly so many rejected children, robbed of their childhood and

their future; minors facing desperate journeys to escape hunger or war. Children who do not see the light because their mothers suffer economic, social and cultural conditioning that drives them to give up that wonderful gift that is the birth of a child. How much we need a culture that recognizes the value of life, especially the weak, threatened, offended, and instead of thinking of being able to put it aside, to exclude it with walls and closures, be concerned with offering care and beauty! A culture that recognizes in every face, even the smallest, the face of Jesus: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me" (*Mt 18: 5*).

The Institute of the Innocents is a place of history, but also of stories: smaller stories, but equally fascinating. These are the stories of the hundreds of thousands of children who have passed through those walls. Still speaking at the Florence Conference, I also referred to a particular aspect: the fact that mothers often left, together with newborns, medals broken in half, with which they hoped, by presenting the other half, to be able to recognize their children in better times. "Here", I said, "we must imagine that our poor have a broken medal. We have the other half. Because the Mother Church has in Italy half of everyone's medal and recognizes all its abandoned, oppressed and wearied children".

Today the goal we must set ourselves, at various levels of responsibility, is that no mother be in a position to leave her child. But we must also ensure that in the face of any event, even tragic, that may detach a child from his or her parents, there are structures and processes of reception in which childhood is always protected and cared for, in the only worthy way: giving children the best we can offer them. Remembering the words of Jesus who invites us all to become like you, as children, to be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is what the Institute of the Innocents teaches us with its centuries-old history, with the thousands of stories it has hosted, and with the stories that today you too, boys and girls, tell with your smiling and joyful faces. And this is why I thank the directors, employees and all those who contribute to carrying out the various activities of the Institute of the Innocents. I thank you and I invite you to continue your service with competence and tenderness, professionalism and dedication. I pray for this and I bless you. And I ask you, please, to pray for me.
