

## VISIT TO THE "ASTALLI CENTRE", THE JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE IN ROME ADDRESS OF HOLY FATHER FRANCIS

10 September 2013

[Link](#)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good afternoon!*

I first greet all of you refugees. We have listened to Adam and Carol: thank you for your powerful, heart-rending stories. Each one of you, dear friends, has a life story that speaks to us of the tragedies of war, of conflicts that are all too often linked to international politics. Yet, above all, every one of you bears a wealth of humanity and a religious sense, treasures to welcome rather than to fear. Many of you are Muslim or members of another religion. You come from various countries, from different situations. We mustn't be afraid of differences! Brotherhood enables us to discover that they are riches, gifts for everyone! Let us live in brotherhood!

Rome! For many people our City is the second stage on the journey, after Lampedusa and the other places where they arrive. Often, as we have heard, the journey they make is hard, it is gruelling and even violent — I am thinking especially of the women, of the mothers who bear all of this to assure their children of a future and the hope of a different life for themselves and their family. Rome should be the city that makes it possible for them to rediscover a human dimension and to begin to smile again. How often, however, as in other parts, many people here who have "international protection" stamped on their stay permit are forced to live in distressing situations — at times degrading — and in no way are they able to start living a dignified life or to think of a new future!

Therefore I thank all those who, at this Centre and in other ecclesial, public and private services, do their utmost to welcome these people with a project. I thank Fr Giovanni and the confreres; and you, the staff, volunteers and benefactors who not only give something or your time, but who also seek to enter into a relationship with those who request asylum and with the refugees, recognizing them as people and striving to find practical answers to their needs. Always keep their hope alive! Help them to regain trust! Show them that with acceptance and brotherhood it is possible to open a window on the future — or rather, more than a window, a door, and even more — show them that they can also have a future! It is lovely that Christian men and women and even non-believers are working for the refugees alongside the Jesuits, as well as people who belong to other religions, united in the name of the common good, which for we Christians is above all love of the Father in Christ Jesus. St Ignatius of Loyola wanted there to be room in the premises in which he lived in Rome to take in the poorest people. Moreover in 1981 Fr Arrupe founded the Jesuit Refugee Service and wanted its Roman headquarters to be in these premises in the heart of the City. And I think of that spiritual farewell of Fr Arrupe in Thailand, precisely, at a refugee centre.

*Serving, accompanying, defending:* three words that constitute the programme of work for the Jesuits and their co-workers.

*Serving.* What does this mean? Serving means giving an attentive welcome to a person who arrives. It means bending over those in need and stretching out a hand to them, without calculation, without fear, but with tenderness and understanding, just as Jesus knelt to wash the Apostles' feet. Serving means working beside the

neediest of people, establishing with them first and foremost human relationships of closeness and bonds of solidarity. Solidarity, this word that frightens the developed world. People try to avoid saying it. Solidarity to them is almost a bad word. But it is our word! Serving means recognizing and accepting requests for justice and hope, and seeking roads together, real paths that lead to liberation.

The poor are also the privileged teachers of our knowledge of God; their frailty and simplicity unmask our selfishness, our false security, our claim to be self-sufficient. The poor guide us to experience God's closeness and tenderness, to receive his love in our life, his mercy as the Father who cares for us, for all of us, with discretion and with patient trust.

From this place of welcome, encounter and service, I would therefore like to launch a question to everyone, to all the people who live here, in this Diocese of Rome, to ask themselves: do I bend down over someone in difficulty or am I afraid of getting my hands dirty? Am I closed in on myself, on my possessions, or am I aware of those in need of help? Do I only serve myself or am I able to serve others, like Christ who came to serve even to the point of giving up his life? Do I look in the eye those who are asking for justice, or do I turn my gaze aside to avoid looking them in the eye?

The second word: *accompanying*. In recent years the Astalli Centre has progressed. At the outset it offered services of basic hospitality: a soup-kitchen, a place to sleep, legal assistance. It then learned to accompany people in their search for a job and to fit into society. Then it also proposed cultural activities so as to contribute to increasing a culture of acceptance, a culture of encounter and of solidarity, starting with the safeguard of human rights. Accompanying on its own is not enough. It is not enough to offer someone a sandwich unless it is accompanied by the possibility of learning how to stand on one's own two feet. Charity that leaves the poor person as he is, is not sufficient. True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands justice, it demands that the poor find the way to be poor no longer. It asks — and it asks us, the Church, us, the City of Rome, it asks the institutions — to ensure that no one ever again stand in need of a soup-kitchen, of makeshift-lodgings, of a service of legal assistance in order to have his legitimate right recognized to live and to work, to be fully a person. Adam said: "it is our duty as refugees to do our best to be integrated in Italy". And this is a right: integration! And Carol said: "Syrians in Europe feel the great responsibility not to be a burden. We want to feel we are an active part of a new society". This is a right too! So this responsibility is the ethical basis, it is the power to build together. I wonder: do we accompany people in this process?

The third word: *defending*. Serving and accompanying also means defending, it means taking the side of the weakest. How often do we raise our voice to defend our own rights, but how often we are indifferent to the rights of others! How many times we either don't know or don't want to give voice to the voice of those — like you — who have suffered and are suffering, of those who've seen their own rights trampled upon, of those who have experienced so much violence that it has even stifled their desire to have justice done!

It is important for the whole Church that welcoming the poor and promoting justice not be entrusted solely to "experts" but be a focus of all pastoral care, of the formation of future priests and religious, and of the ordinary work of all parishes, movements and ecclesial groups. In particular — this is important and I say it from

my heart — I would also like to ask religious institutes to interpret seriously and with responsibility this sign of the times. The Lord calls us to live with greater courage and generosity hospitality in communities, in houses and in empty convents. Dear men and women religious, your empty convents are not useful to the Church if they are turned into hotels and earn money. The empty convents do not belong to you, they are for the flesh of Christ which is what refugees are. The Lord calls us to live with greater courage and generosity, and to accept them in communities, houses and empty convents. This of course is not something simple; it requires a criterion and responsibility, but also courage. We do a great deal, but perhaps we are called to do more, firmly accepting and sharing with those whom Providence has given us to serve; overcoming the temptation of spiritual worldliness to be close to simple people and, especially, to the lowliest. We need communities with solidarity that really put love into practice!

Every day, here and at other centres, so many people, mainly young people, stand in line to get a hot meal. These people remind us of the sufferings and dramas of humanity. But that queue also tells us to do something, right now, everyone, it is possible. It is enough to knock at the door and to try to say: "Here I am. How can I give you a hand?"

*The Pope's words on taking his leave of the Astalli Centre.*

I thank you for your welcome at this House. Thank you! Thank you for your witness, thank you for your help, thank you for your prayers, thank you for your wish, your desire to go ahead, to struggle and to make progress. Thank you for defending your and *our* human dignity. Thank you very much. May God bless all of you!