

Pontiff Defends Role of Disabled in Society

Says Faith Can Help to "Imagine Life as God Does"

AMMAN, Jordan, MAY 8, 2009 (Zenit.org).- Benedict XVI is defending the contribution made to society by those with disabilities, choosing as his first stop during his weeklong Holy Land pilgrimage a home for mentally or physically handicapped youth.

The Pope visited the Regina Pacis center in Amman today, just an hour after his official welcome to Jordan by the nation's King Abdullah II and Queen Rania.

The center was founded in 2004 by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and offers not only medical attention but also formation and education to disabled youth, both Christian and Muslim.

Bishop Selim Sayegh, Latin patriarchal vicar of Jordan and the center's founder, together with the youth, the nursing staff and volunteers, the Comboni religious women who run the center, and retired Patriarch Michel Sabbah welcomed the Holy Father to the site. His Beatitude Patriarch Fouad Twal offered words of welcome.

In a festive encounter celebrated in the center's chapel, the Pontiff recognized that these disabled youth have been led to Regina Pacis by journeys "marked by suffering or trial."

"Some of you struggle courageously with disabilities, others of you have endured rejection, and some of you are drawn to this place of peace simply for encouragement and support," he said. "It is a great joy for me to be with you."

The Pope lauded the "center's great success in promoting the rightful place of the disabled in society and in ensuring that suitable training and opportunities are provided to facilitate such integration."

Meaning and purpose

Benedict XVI offered a reflection on the mystery of suffering as he spoke with the disabled youngsters and their caregivers.

"At times it is difficult to find a reason for what appears only as an obstacle to be overcome or even as pain -- physical or emotional -- to be endured," he said. "Yet faith and understanding help us to see a horizon beyond our own selves in order to imagine life as God does. God's unconditional love, which gives life to every human individual, points to a meaning and purpose for all human life." The Holy Father confided that being with the youth was a blessing for him personally: "I wish to say that standing in your midst I draw strength from God."

"Your experience of trials, your witness to compassion, and your determination to overcome the obstacles you encounter, encourage me in the belief that suffering can bring about change for the good," he said. "In our own trials, and standing alongside others in their struggles, we glimpse the essence of our humanity, we become, as it were, more human."

"And we come to learn that, on another plane, even hearts hardened by cynicism or injustice or unwillingness to forgive are never beyond the reach of God, can always be opened to a new way of being, a vision of peace."

Coming with hope

Upon his arrival, Benedict XVI was welcomed by a group of youth who improvised a small Arabic festival with songs and greetings. A priest with a megaphone led them with Arabic slogans and the refrain "Benvenuto, Benedetto" (Welcome, Benedict). Jordanian and Vatican flags waved as the Holy Father entered the church amid shouts of "Be-ne-det-to."

When he reached the altar, the Bishop of Rome knelt to pray and those inside fell silent. After his address, he personally greeted many of those present. Applause broke out when a pair of youth put the "keffiyeh" on the Holy Father -- the typical red and white headdress worn by many Arab men. During his discourse, the Pope again reiterated his intention for coming to the Holy Land: "Friends, unlike the pilgrims of old, I do not come bearing gifts or offerings. I come simply with an intention, a hope: to pray for the precious gift of unity and peace, most specifically for the Middle East. Peace for individuals, for parents and children, for communities, peace for Jerusalem, for the Holy Land, for the region, peace for the entire human family; the lasting peace born of justice, integrity and compassion, the peace that arises from humility, forgiveness and the profound desire to live in harmony as one."

Before leaving, the Pontiff entrusted the youth with a special task: "I exhort you all to pray every day for our world. And today I want to ask you to take up a specific task: Please pray for me every day of my pilgrimage; for my own spiritual renewal in the Lord, and for the conversion of hearts to God's way of forgiveness and solidarity so that my hope -- our hope -- for unity and peace in the world will bear abundant fruit."

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