



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS TO THE MEMBERS OF THE "POPE JOHN XXIII COMMUNITY" ASSOCIATION

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 14 January 2023*

[Multimedia]

Dear children,
Dear boys and girls,
Brothers and sisters, good morning!

Thank you for coming! Thank you to the President, who gave a voice to all of you here, and also to those who could not come but are here with their hearts. I especially thank those of you who wrote to me with your stories, and also some questions.

Today's meeting is special, because it is you, the youngest, who represent the great family of the Pope John XXIII Community. And for this we have to thank the Lord and then Fr Oreste Benzi, who founded this beautiful community. Do you agree? Good. So, all together, let's say: "Thank you, Fr Oreste"! One more time: "Thank you, Fr Oreste"!

And then there is another important aspect, which struck me in the presentations you sent to me some time ago: the fact that you, children and young people, were all introduced, each one *with his or her own name*. God, who knows each one of us by name, likes this. We are not anonymous, we are not photocopies, we are all originals! And this is how we should be: originals, not photocopies. Blessed Carlo Acutis, a boy like you, used to say this. God knows us one by one, with our name and our face, which is unique. Certainly, we also have our limitations; some of us unfortunately have heavy limitations to bear. But this detracts nothing from the value of a person:

each one is unique, a son or daughter of God, each one is a brother or sister of Jesus, but unique.

A Christian community that welcomes the person as he or she is helps to see them *as God does*. And how does God see us? With a look of love. God also sees our limitations, it is true, and helps us to bear them; but God looks above all at the heart, and sees every person *in their entirety*. God sees us as an image of Jesus, his Son, and with his love he helps us to become more and more like him. Jesus is the perfect man, we know, he is the fullness of the human being, and God's love helps us grow towards that complete measure, towards fullness. We know that we will reach it in heaven, but already in this life, love helps us mature in this way. It is a bit like the seed that germinates and grows in the field with the help of the rain and the sun, that develops and becomes, for instance, a beautiful ear of wheat.

And, you know, there are signs that help us understand that when a person is accepted with love, when a child, a boy, a girl, but also a grown-up, of any age, is looked upon with God's gaze, they are accepted with love. What are these signs? There are several, but I will choose one of them: *a smile*. I saw that you too have said this, more than once, while telling your stories: "That boy or that girl has problems, but always smiles". How come? Because he or she feels loved, welcomed, as he or she is. When a newborn baby is in the arms of his mother, who looks at him and smiles, he begins to smile back. The smile is a flower that unfurls in the warmth of love.

Dear boys and girls, in your stories, and also in your questions, an experience that you all share stands out: the experience of the family home. Today, here with you, I want to emphasize that "family homes" arose from the mind and heart of Fr Oreste Benzi. He was a priest who looked at boys and girls through the eyes of Jesus, with the heart of Jesus. And, by being close to those who behaved badly, who had gone astray, he understood that they were lacking the love of a father and a mother, the affection of siblings. And so Fr Oreste, with the strength of the Holy Spirit and the involvement of people to whom God had given this vocation, began the experience of full-time hospitality, of the sharing of life; and from there, what he called "*casa famiglia*", [the family home], was born. An experience that grew in Italy and in other countries, and which is characterized by welcoming into the home people who truly become their own children, regenerated by Christian love. A father and a mother who open the doors of their home to give a family to those who do not have one. A real family; not a job, but a life choice. There is room for everyone: minors, people with disabilities, the elderly, Italians or foreigners, and anyone who is looking for a fixed point from which to start again, or a family in which to find themselves. The family is the place where everyone is cared for, both those who are welcomed and those who welcome, because it is the answer to the innate need for relationships that every person has.

And now, dear friends, I would like to address some of you personally. I greet Francesco, who is six years old, who could not come today, and I pray for his mother who is sick. I greet Biagio, who is 14: he too could not come, and I send him a blessing. And you, Sara, who are 13 years old and fled from Iraq, carry in your heart the holy desire that children not be robbed of their childhood:

God will help you achieve this! You, who would like to see your grandmother who has gone to heaven, speak with her in your heart and follow her good example, and one day you will see her again. You, who, like many teenagers, struggle to perceive the beauty of Mass, do not fear: at the right moment, the living Jesus will let you feel his presence. Thank you, little friend, who remembers the innocents who are killed in the womb. And heartfelt thanks to you, children and young people, who meet up online every Sunday to pray the Rosary. I want to say to you: God listens to your prayer for peace, even if it does not seem so. God listens to it, and we believe that God grants peace, immediately, today! God gives it to us, but it is up to us to receive it, in the heart and in life. Rest assured that God listens to your prayer, and keep going forward!

Dearest friends, thanks to all of you! May the Lord bless the Pope John XXIII Community, and may Our Lady keep it always in faith, hope and love. I bless you from my heart. And I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you!