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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
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N. 160514b

Saturday 14.05.2016

The Pope's fifth Mercy Friday: visit to the mentally disabled

Vatican City, 14 May 2016 – Yesterday, on his fifth monthly "Mercy Friday", the Pope visited the "Il Chicco" ("The Grain") community, an association belonging to the L'Arche family founded by Jean Vanier in 1964, present in 39 countries in five continents. Along with the "Faith and Light" association, dedicated to the most fragile and marginalised people in society. The Il Chicco community is the first in Italy, founded in 1981, and currently houses 18 people with serious mental illnesses.

"These 'family homes' welcome people with severe disabilities to enable them to be protagonists in their lives and those of the people who care for them. The main idea of L'Arche is that of 'praising imperfection'; that is, being aware that no-one can be discriminated against for any form of disability. Attending these houses enables the discovery of how these people possess a sensibility of their own, composed of profound affection and the search for friendship. Pope Francis has wished to give a further sign against the throwaway culture. No-one can be deprived of love, joy and dignity merely because he or she has a mental disability, and no-one can be permitted to discriminate on the basis of prejudices that marginalise families and associations, and close them up in solitude", according to a Holy See Press Office communiqué.

Yesterday Francis joined the disabled and the volunteers for a mid-afternoon snack, and then visited those affected by the most severe disabilities to offer them a sign of profound affection and tenderness, especially the first two to be assisted at the centre. According to the founder of L'Arche, it is helpful for the disabled to carry out manual tasks, in line with their own capabilities. Pope Francis therefore also visited the laboratory where on a daily basis small craft works are produced, expressing the creativity and imagination of those who frequent the Centre. At the end of his visit, the Pope prayed hand in hand with them all in the small chapel, embraced them one by one, and then left at around 6.30 p.m.

"Il Chicco" is supported by minor regional subsidies, but trusts in Providence for the greater part of the aid needed to provide assistance. The Pope offered a sum as a contribution to staff costs, presented to them along with a basket of fresh seasonal fruit, including cherries and peaches, received with great joy and applause.

With this visit Francis expressed one of the most salient points of his papacy: attention to the simplest and weakest among us. By showing them tenderness and affection, he wished to give a concrete sign of how the

Year of Mercy can be lived. The four preceding Mercy Fridays were dedicated to the elderly and patients in a vegetative state cared for in a hospice in January, a rehabilitation community for drug users in February, a centre for refugees (Cara) at Castelnuovo di Porto in March, and his visit to the Greek island of Lesbos in April.
