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Pope's message for the 35th anniversary of the Astalli Centre: every refugee has the face of God and the flesh of Christ

Vatican City, April 2016 – The Astalli Centre – the Italian seat of the Jesuit Refugee Service, JRS – celebrates its 35th anniversary this year. The Centre was founded in 1981 at the behest of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the then-Father General of the Society of Jesus, who was profoundly moved by the tragedy of the thousands of Vietnamese boat people and exhorted Jesuits from all around the world to alleviate the situation in some way. Since then, the assistance of refugees and defence of their rights has become the cornerstone of the Centre's activity, whose services range from reception of migrants, raising public awareness and commitment to helping change unjust policies at local, national and international levels.

In view of the anniversary and in the context of the Holy Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has recorded a message for the Astalli Centre, broadcast this morning during the presentation of its annual report in the Argentina Theatre, Rome, in which he recalls that during these three decades, the activity of the Centre has been, first and foremost, "journeying together, as a single people". He exhorts the Centre to "continue with courage", citing the words of the Gospel of Matthew: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me".

"I was a stranger ... each one of you, refugees who knock at our doors, has the face of God, and is the flesh of Christ. Your experience of pain and of hope reminds us that we are all strangers and pilgrims on this Earth, welcomed by someone with generosity and without deserving this. Whoever has like you fled his own land as a result of oppression, war, nature disfigured by pollution and desertification, or the unjust distribution of the planet's resources, is a brother with whom to share bread, home and life. Too often you have not been welcomed. Forgive the closedness and indifference of our societies, which fear the change of life and mentality that your presence requires. Treated as a burden, as problem, a cost, you are instead a gift. You offer witness of how our gracious and merciful our God knows how to transform the evil and injustice you suffer into a good for all, as each one of you can be a bridge that unites distant peoples, that makes possible the encounter between different cultures and religions, a way to rediscover our common humanity".

"And you welcomed me. ... Yes, the Astalli Centre offers a concrete and everyday example of this welcome, born of the prophetic vision of Fr. Pedro Arrupe. It was his dying wish, expressed in a centre for refugees in Asia. Thanks to all of you, women and men, laypeople and religious, workers and volunteers, because you demonstrate in fact that if we walk together the road is less frightening".

"I encourage you to continue. Thirty-five years are just the beginning of a journey that is becoming increasingly necessary, the only way to a reconciled co-existence. May you always be witnesses to the beauty of encounter. Help our society to listen to the voice of refugees. Continue to walk with courage by their side, accompanying them and also letting yourselves be guided by them: refugees know the ways that lead to peace because they know the acrid odour of war", concludes the bishop of Rome.
