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## The Pope in the Earth Village: do not be afraid to transform the desert into forest

Vatican City, 25 April 2016 – Yesterday afternoon Pope Francis paid a surprise visit to the Roman Villa Borghese park to greet the participants in the "Earth Village", an initiative held from 22 to 25 April in the Italian capital and sponsored by Earth Day and the Focolare Movement, dedicated to the theme "Living together in the city". The key event on Sunday was a debate entitled "Rome, city open to fraternity", during which the poverty of the capital, ancient and new, was discussed along with the responses to these emergencies given by organisations of various inspiration.

Commenting on some of these initiatives, the Pope said, "Two images come to mind: the desert and the forest. I thought, these people, all of you, all, are taking the desert in order to transform it into a forest. They go where there's desert, where there is no hope, and they work to make a forest out of this desert. The forest is full of trees, it is full of vegetation, very disorganised – but, life is like that. ... Later we can see about regulating certain things in the forest ... but there is life in it, while in the desert there is death".

"There are many deserts in the cities, deserts in the lives of people who do not have a future, because there are always prejudices and fears. And these people live and die in the desert of the city. You perform a miracle through your work, changing the desert into a forest: continue in this way. ... Once someone said to me ... that the word 'conflict' in Chinese is composed of two signs: one that means 'risk', and one that means 'opportunity'. It is true that conflict is a risk, but it is also an opportunity. ... Never turn away so as not to see conflict. Conflict has to be faced, evils have to be faced so that they can be resolved. ... The desert is ugly, both the desert in all our hearts and the desert of the city, in the peripheries. There is also a desert in gated communities. ... We must not be afraid to go into the desert to transform it into a forest, where there is abundant life".

"I would like to give you some homework: look one day at the faces of the people you see on the street: they are worried, some are wrapped up in themselves, without a smile, without tenderness; in other words, without social friendship ... and where there is no social friendship, there is always hatred and war. We are living a piecemeal third world war, everywhere. Look at the map of the world and you will see this. Instead, social friendship must often be forged with forgiveness. ... Very often it consists of being close to people, approaching this problem, this conflict, this difficulty".

"There is something else. ... Social friendship is made up of gratuitousness, and this wisdom in gratuitousness is

learned in play, in sport, in art, with the joy of being together, with closeness. ... It is a word, gratuitousness, that must not be forgotten in this world, where it seems that if you do not pay you cannot live, where the person, the man and the woman, that God created precisely at the centre of the world, also to be at the centre of the economy, have been cast aside and now in the centre we have the god of money. ... Those who can worship this god do so, and those who cannot end up in hunger, disease, exploitation. ... Gratuitousness is the key word. Gratuitousness ensures that I give my life as it is, to go with others and to turn this desert into a forest. And forgiveness ... because with forgiveness, we banish rancour and resentment. And then we must always build, not destroy: build".

"These are the things that come to mind. And how do we do this? Simply, in the awareness that we all have something in common, we are all human. And in this humanity, we come together to work together. 'But I am of this religion, or that one...'. It is not important. Let us all go ahead to work together, respecting each other. And in this way we will see this miracle: the miracle of a desert that becomes a forest".

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