



## Fridays of Mercy: Pope Francis Visits the “Villaggio SOS Bambini”

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The Holy Father continued his Jubilee practice of the “Fridays of Mercy” this month. This afternoon, Pope Francis went to the Roman “SOS Village” in the area of Boccea, a family-style house that takes in children, sent by the Social Services and courts, who are in problematic personal, family or social situations. The house tries to recreate the appropriate surroundings for the serene growth of the children that their original nuclear families are unable to offer. The Pope arrived there in the early afternoon, unexpectedly, as is his custom, bringing the children not only a wonderful surprise, but also sweets and presents.

The Village is made up of five houses, in each of which there are a maximum of six boys and girls up to the age of 12, along with a coordinator, an “SOS Mom”. The Village is organized to support the children as they grow, accompanying them like a true family would through the various stages of their development and integration into society. For example, the children are accompanied to school, attend the local parish, and play sports. The professionals who operate the center, including resident staff, non-residents, and volunteers, follow the children for a period of several years, developing stable human rapport with the children that help them to achieve an appropriate autonomy. There are also older youth at the Village who have chosen to remain near the Center to have it as a continuing support and point of stability, as well as to lend a hand in its daily activities. The SOS Village uses the pedagogical and organizational model of the first SOS Village founded in Austria in 1949. Paulo and Maria, who direct the Village in Rome recounted to Pope Francis the story of the founder of the first Village, Hermann Gmeiner, a young Austrian medical student. He was profoundly struck by the plight of the hundreds of children who were left without their parents because of the devastation of the war. When he opened the first SOS Village in response to their situation, he began an educational model that succeeds in coming close to the warmth of a true family, in strong contrast to the orphanage model that was prevalent at that time.

All the boys and girls, accompanied by the staff of the Center, showed the Pope the lovely park area accessible to the Village, which includes a soccer field and a small playground where the children can meet one another and play. They also showed the Holy Father their bedrooms and toys, and he enjoyed remaining to listen to their stories. After a snack with them, the Pope Frances said goodbye to all of the residents of the Village and returned to the Casa Santa Marta around 17:30.

With this gesture, the Pope wanted symbolically to bring a little tenderness to all the children in difficult situations, mistreated, or victims of violence throughout the world, the number of whom, according to reporters, continues to increase dramatically. He also wanted to remind adults that protecting children and providing them with a childhood full of love is an act of mercy that should be considered obligatory for everyone.