

Do not lose your joy and your hope

Pope in Colombia



“Even children can be heroes, the youngest, when they are deceived or make mistakes, they get up as heroes and carry on. Keep going, keep going like this! Do not let yourselves be defeated, do not let yourselves be deceived, do not lose your joy, do not lose hope, do not lose your smile”. Pope Francis addressed his first public words on Colombian soil in the late afternoon of 6 September, to children and youth who experienced life on the streets, drug addiction and situations of unease.

The young people are part of the Idipron Project (District Institute for the protection of children and youth) which was borne from the sensitive nature of Salesian priest Javier de Nicolò, an Italian living in Colombia since 1949. Nowadays, the Institute is coordinated by Father Wilfredo Grajales, in collaboration with the Municipality of Bogotá, and is committed to taking at risk children off the streets.

The Pope greeted the youth outside the Apostolic Nunciature of Bogotá, where he will be residing during his stay in the Latin American country. Among dances and rap music, handshakes and selfies, the Idipron Project kids touched the heart of the Holy Father who was visibly moved. He prayed with them and wove an off the cuff conversation, repeating three times his advice for them to never lose their joy to live, and to let no one rob them of hope or deceive them. The Pope then stressed the importance of the work which the young people had carried out, in order to defeat the weight of a difficult life, to abandon the streets and to rediscover making plans for the future and the joy of living. “Thank you very much for your bravery and courage”, Pope Francis said. “Do not let yourselves be robbed of your joy” and “let no one deceive, let no one rob you of hope”.

The Holy Father had landed shortly earlier at 4:10 pm local time (11:30 pm in Italy) at the Capital's military airport. arriving 20 minutes ahead of schedule, despite the flight's detour to avoid the fury of hurricane Irma which is devastating the Caribbean. He was met by Nobel peace laureate President Juan Manuel Santos and his wife Maria Clemencia Rodríguez Múnera, the Apostolic Nuncio Ettore Balestrero, some Colombian Bishops led by Cardinal Rubén Salazar Gómez, Archbishop of Bogotá, and Celam President and about 1,000 faithful. Greeted by the rhythm of *cumbia* and dancers in traditional costumes, Pope Francis received his first welcome to Colombia from a group of sick and disabled people, most of them children but among whom were also civilians and military personnel, who were victims of the armed conflict which resulted in so much bloodshed in the country for

decades. Among the children embraced by the Pope was also Emmanuel, the son of Clara Rojas, who was kidnapped in 2002 and held hostage by FARC in the Colombian forest for years. Her son was born in captivity. Today, she is a member of parliament. Emmanuel gave the Pope a porcelain dove as a symbol of peace. It was created by the sculptress and photographer, Ana González Rojas from Bogotá. After the brief and heartfelt welcoming ceremony, where no official talks were scheduled, the playing of the national anthems and the military honours, the respective delegations were presented. The Pontiff then climbed on his uncovered Pope mobile accompanied by Cardinal Salazar and rode between the crowds for 15 kilometres to the Apostolic Nunciature. Crowds greeted him in a long human embrace coloured yellow, blue and red, the colours of Colombia's flag.

Faithful, pilgrims and volunteers waited for hours for the Bishop of Rome to pass to bear witness to their joy. Many of them went to the streets, at times slowing down the Pope's car, and at one point, even halting the parade of cars. Most of the hundreds of thousands of women, men and children have never known peace. Anyone who is 54 in Colombia has never experienced a day without war. Entire generations were born during the conflict they wish to forget forever.

When he arrived at the nunciature, he was greeted by a group of faithful who performed traditional songs and dances. The youth from the Idipron project gave him a *ruana colombiana* (the typical local poncho). Lastly, Francis went to the Nunciature's chapel to pray.

At the end of the evening, President Santos personally greeted the journalists in the press room. They came from all over the world to follow the papal visit, highlighting that this is the "time to build peace".

On Thursday, September 7, the Pope greeted Colombian authorities in the Plaza de Armas of the Presidential house, Casa de Nariño, then visited the Cathedral of Bogotá, blessing the faithful from the balcony. He later held a meeting with the Bishops of Colombia and another with the directive committee of Celam. In the afternoon, he celebrated a Mass for peace and justice in the park dedicated to Simón Bolívar, the hero of Latin American independence.

(source: L'Osservatore Romano)