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"A Chance in Life":giving vulnerable kids a chance to grow and flourish

A papal audience shines the light on an organization founded by Irish priest, Monsignor Carroll-Abbing in 1945 to give children orphaned and displaced by WWII a "chance in life". The organization has adapted to the times, spreading its branches and finding inspiration in Pope Francis' appeal to "welcome, protect, promote and integrate" our brothers and sisters in need.

By Linda Bordoni

Had Monsignor Patrick Carroll-Abbing known how far the branches of the sapling he planted in Rome back in 1945 would spread, it would most certainly have made him happy



The first seeds were planted with the blessing of Pope Pius XII when Carroll-Abbing, an Irish priest, founded Boys' and Girls' Towns of Italy to provide vast numbers of orphans and children who had been displaced by WWII with "a chance in life". Not only did the institution offer them a home, but its unique system of "self-government" and the possibility of pursuing an education and learn skills meant that the children were encouraged to grow up and develop with confidence and creativity, and to become active participants in their communities and builders of their own lives.

Those seeds have given life to Boys' and Girls' Towns of Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala and Peru, and today serve over 1000 children living in marginalized and impoverished communities.

Meanwhile, here in Italy, most citizens of the original Boys' and Girls' Towns (*La Città dei Ragazzi* and *La Repubblica dei Ragazzi*) are unaccompanied migrant minors. In line with Pope Francis' determination to help build a more welcoming and just society, Vatican Dicasteries and Councils are partnering with the institution to be able to better respond to his call to "welcome, protect, promote and integrate" our brothers and sisters fleeing poverty and violence.

That's why on Monday, 9 December, the Pope received a group of members and supporters of "A Chance in Life" - as the organization is now known - in the Vatican, encouraging them to continue "to carry out their mission in a world that presents ever new educational challenges."

In a conversation with "A Chance in Life" President and Executive Director, Gabriele Delmonaco, I discovered more about how the organization continues to grow and develop in a changing world.

Delmonaco explained that about 4 years ago the Board of Directors in New York decided to export the model of self-government that initiated in Rome at the "*Città dei Ragazzi*" to other parts of the world.

It was a need that arose from today's reality that has inevitably changed the face of the original Boys' and Girls' Towns where most of the citizens are in Rome are unaccompanied migrant minors fleeing poverty and conflict in the Middle East and Africa.

"We started in Ethiopia where we help about 400 children," Delmonaco said, and after that we started two programmes in India in very tribal areas where most of children we support are orphaned girls who otherwise would not have a chance to get an education.

Last year, he continued, we started programmes in Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru and Colombia and we are now exploring a collaboration with local partners in Mexico.

Audience with Pope Francis

Delmonaco told me that "A Chance in Life" – as the organization is called today - was founded by Monsignor Carrol-Abbing, who had a strong network in the United States, to support the operations of Boys and Girls Towns Italy, and it still thrives thanks to donors,

primarily in the US.

Thanks to Pope Francis' interest and encouragement, "we were able to bring our major donors, board members and friends of the organization to Rome, and on Monday, 9 December, we were received by the Holy Father," he said.

Delmonaco said that what struck him the most about the Pope's words during the audience was how he connected to modernity: "he even talked about technology!"

"He told us that our method of self-government for children, who have lost hope, is so modern and speaks to these children. And he urged us to continue to use technology in a proper way because, he said it could be the most effective way of communicating with these children," he said.

The Pope's encouragement and the inspiration he provides has become a propeller in the life and activities of "A Chance in Life". Delmonaco said the papal encyclical "Laudato Si" has been adopted by the organization almost as a working document and the "Boys' Town" programme in Rome is destined to become a point of reference in implementing the guidelines spelt out in the encyclical to "create an ecology of people, the environment and the community."

Delmonaco spoke of his gratitude for the audience and of how it was important for members and donors of the organization to receive the Pope's blessing for their work just as it had been for their founder – Monsignor Carroll-Abbing – who went to Pope Pius XII in 1945 asking for a blessing to begin his work when he noticed that in Rome and in Italy there were hundreds of thousands of children on the streets.

The Pope, he said, bestowed upon him his apostolic blessing to start this programme, and "in the same way, today, we feel blessed and encouraged to continue what we were doing," he said.

Global Pact for Education

Not only is the organization developing according to "Laudato Si", but the Pope's indications to "Welcome, protect, promote and integrate" migrant children and young people are at the heart of its current mission, and as collaboration and partnership with Vatican institutions continues to develop, "A Chance in Life" will play a pivotal role in the presentation and implementation of the 2020 Global Pact for Education, an alliance promoted by the Pope to rebuild the global educational pact for the common good of humanity.

Delmonaco explained that it is an initiative of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and that during the "A Chance in Life" donors' stay in Rome, meetings were held with the Prefect and with the Secretary of the Congregation, Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi and Bishop Vincenzo Zani.

"They spoke of this important initiative to bring education to a level that is in line with

the times and that can respond to the needs of young people," he said.

Referring to a study carried out by the 'Gravissimus Educationis Foundation' and to a global survey, Delmonaco said the importance of Catholic education across the globe is "a pillar for the future of the world".

Even in countries like Ethiopia where Catholics only make up about 1% of the population, Catholic education, he said, is the second largest provider of education in the country after the government.

"The Global Pact for Education will be an important moment in which to reconsider Catholic education, reassess the situation and plan for the future," he said.

Delmonaco went on to speak of the work the foundation is doing together with the Migrants' Section of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

"At this point, what we would like to do, is reconsider the services we are providing to our children; adopting the principles of "Laudato Si", the *Città dei Ragazzi* will become a hub," not only for children, but also for their migrant families and it will help guide them towards a path of citizenship or integration into the community.

Within this vision of integral development, he said, there are also plans to make the *Città dei Ragazzi* - Boys' Town - more self-sustainable by promoting agricultural and cultural activities and integrating it into the very fabric of the community.

That's why, he explained is why a Parish has been established and opened inside the *Città dei Ragazzi* that is open to everyone.

"Our 75th anniversary," Delmonaco concluded, "is a great opportunity to reconsider what we are doing and to expand our programme to new countries in order to be able to serve more children."

I am sure Monsignor Patrick Carroll-Abbing would approve!

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