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# As pope tours Assisi, streets fill, crowds cry support

Joshua J. McElwee | Oct. 4, 2013 The Francis Chronicles
Assisi, Italy

Pope Francis is touring this central Italian town Friday, visiting the home of his 13th-century namesake St. Francis with poignant stops at a home for disabled children, at places pivotal to the life of the medieval saint, and for prayer and the celebration of the Mass.

Upon arriving in Assisi at about 7:30 a.m. Italian time, the pontiff first visited the Serafico Institute of Assisi, an organization that helps with the rehabilitation of severely disabled children across Italy.

For nearly an hour, he walked among the children, taking their hands into his and many times kissing their cheeks or the tops of their heads.

Putting aside his prepared text and speaking off the cuff, he compared the wounds of the disabled children to the wounds of Christ. After the resurrection, the pope said, Jesus was recognized by the disciples because of his scars. As he spoke, moans and cries of disabled were clearly audible.

"When Jesus rose, he was beautiful," the pope said. "He didn't have his wounds on his body, but he wanted to keep the scars, and he brought them with him to heaven. The scars of Jesus are here, and they are in heaven before the Father. We care for the scars of Jesus here, and he from heaven shows us his scars and tells all of us, 'I am waiting for you.' "

The pope again put aside his prepared text after praying privately at the convent of San Damiano. Visiting the city's historic archbishop's residence, where St. Francis is said to have stripped off his clothes in an assumption of complete poverty, the pope said the church needs to "strip" itself of "worldliness."

After spending time in the Basilica of San Francesco and at the crypt where St. Francis is buried, the pope went out to the public square to celebrate an outdoor Mass in front of a several-stories-high, stark wooden cross. On top of the cross sat a copy of the crucifix inside the San Damiano church, where St. Francis is said to have heard Christ tell him to "repair my church."

In his homily, the pope focused first on key points in the life of St. Francis before entering into a continued prayer to the saint, asking that he might help the world focus on peace and care of creation. Several times, the pope finished a part of the homily by saying, "We turn to you, Francis," before asking for a specific need.

"Teach us to remain before the cross, to let the crucified Christ gaze upon us, to let ourselves be forgiven, and recreated by his love," the pope asked the saint in one invocation.

"Teach us to be instruments of peace, of that peace which has its source in God, the peace which Jesus has brought us," the pope asked the saint in another.

"Francis was a man of harmony and peace," the pope said near the end of the homily. "From this city of peace, I

repeat with all the strength and the meekness of love: Let us respect creation, let us not be instruments of destruction! Let us respect each human being."

"May there be an end to armed conflicts which cover the earth with blood; may the clash of arms be silenced; and everywhere may hatred yield to love, injury to pardon, and discord to unity," the pope continued.

"Let us listen to the cry of all those who are weeping, who are suffering and who are dying because of violence, terrorism or war, in the Holy Land, so dear to Saint Francis, in Syria, throughout the Middle East and everywhere in the world."

Later, the pope went to Assisi's Cathedral of San Rufino, speaking to members of the pastoral council of both the parish and the diocese. His message there drew upon his years as a diocesan bishop, as the pope addressed priests directly, telling them not to be boring in their homilies. He also spoke of the difficulty of counseling spouses who are struggling in their marriages.

The pontiff said he used to tell younger couples who asked him for advice that they could fight all they want, "even throwing dishes," but to always make up before the days was over. "Fight as much as you want, but never end your day without being at peace again," the pope said.

While the streets of the medieval city are crowded with pilgrims for the pontiff's visit, the atmosphere has remained a bit serene, with several saying after the pope's homily he had spoken to them "emotionally" and had evoked the saint.

Many people are holding up signs. Some read: "Love will never end"; "Papa Francesco: Courage"; and "Thanks for being with us ... good lunch!" The last, of course, is a reference to the pope's first Angelus address following his election, when he told faithful to go and have a good lunch.

Following are some photos taken by me of the atmosphere of the visit, which I'll update as I can. Also look for updates at my Twitter feed: @joshjmac [1].

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent.]

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