

Pope Francis to children at Harlem school: 'You have a right to dream'

2015-09-26 Vatican Radio



(Vatican Radio) Pope Francis continued his visit to New York by meeting on Friday (25th September) with children and immigrant families at Our Lady Queen of Angels School in Harlem. In his brief address to the school children, the Pope encouraged them to have dreams, just like Martin Luther King, and “not lose the hope of a better world with greater possibilities.” “Wherever there are dreams,” he said, “there is joy and Jesus is always present.”

Our Lady Queen of Angels School is a Catholic school, set amid public housing in the heavily Hispanic neighbourhood of East Harlem and more than two third of its students come from Latin America. With around 300 students ranging from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, the school was once part of the church of Our Lady Queen of Angels, which closed in 2007 as part of a large number of church closures by the Archdiocese of New York due to a lack of funds and diminishing vocations to the priesthood.

Vatican Radio's Seán-Patrick Lovett is travelling with Pope Francis during his Apostolic Journey. He was present during the Pope's address and sent us this report:

If you were to believe everything you hear, you might think that Catholic education in America is in crisis. You might, quite understandably, be influenced by the figures: since 2005 over 1,700 Catholic schools in the United States have had to close their classrooms. And the reasons are not always financial either. The fall in vocations to the religious life has taken a heavy toll in this field - fewer dedicated, unpaid, nuns working for the glory of God alone.

But if you'd accompanied Pope Francis on his visit to Our Lady of Angels school in Harlem, in New York's upper east side, you might have had to change your mind: namely, that Catholic education in America is not only alive and well - it's singing and dancing too.

Usually I don't like facts and figures but, in this case, I think they help provide context:

64% of the children the Pope met in Harlem on Friday live below the poverty line, a third of them are not Catholic, over half are being raised by a single parent, and most of them represent minority groups and immigrant families. But the best figure of all is the graduation rate - an impressive 97%.

Alright, enough of the numbers and back to the stories.

Pope Francis arrived at the school in a playful mood. Greeted by a classroom of children who were so awed by his presence (or so exhausted by waiting so long), their shy little voices could barely be heard above the clicking of the photographers' cameras. "So?" - asked Pope Francis - "Are you singing or sleeping?" Anxious to show him they were wide awake, the young students became teachers, illustrating their various projects that range from designing a more ecologically-friendly school environment to raising money for children with cancer in Latin America. They even gave the Pope a lesson on how to use a smart-board.

But Pope Francis also had a lesson for the children and young people present. "You have a right to dream", he told them. In fact, "It is beautiful to have dreams and to be able to fight for them". And then he gave them their homework: "Pray for me", he said.

One little girl I spoke to promised she would. Another said that Pope Francis' visit had made her feel "special". "Because now", she added confidently, "I'm going to be famous!".

Traveling with Pope Francis in the United States - I'm Seán-Patrick Lovett

Please find below an English translation of Pope Francis' prepared remarks to the children at Our Lady, Queen of Angels School:

Dear Children,

I am very happy to be with you today, along with this big family which surrounds you. I see your teachers, your parents and your family members. Thank you for letting me come, and I ask pardon from your teachers for "stealing" a few minutes of their class time!

They tell me that one of the nice things about this school is that some of its students come from other places, even from other countries. That is nice! Even though I know that it is not easy to have to move and find a new home, new neighbors and new friends. It is not easy. At the beginning it can be hard, right? Often you have to learn a new language, adjust to a new culture, even a new climate. There is so much to learn! And not just at school.

The good thing is that we also make new friends, we meet people who open doors for us, who are kind to us. They offer us friendship and understanding, and they try to help us not to feel like strangers. To feel at home. How nice it is to feel that school is a second home. This is not only important for you, but also for your families. School then ends up being one big family. One where, together with our mothers and fathers, our grandparents, our teachers and friends, we learn to help one another, to share our good qualities, to give the best of ourselves, to work as a team and to pursue our dreams.

Very near here is a very important street named after a man who did a lot for other people. I want to talk a little bit about him. He was the Reverend Martin Luther King. One day he said, "I have a dream". His dream was that many children, many people could have equal opportunities. His dream was that many children like you could get an education. It is beautiful to have dreams and to be able to fight for them.

Today we want to keep dreaming. We celebrate all the opportunities which enable you, and us adults, not to lose the hope of a better world with greater possibilities. I know that one of the dreams of your parents and teachers is that you can grow up and be happy. It is always good to see children smiling. Here I see you smiling. Keep smiling and help bring joy to everyone you meet.

Dear children, you have a right to dream and I am very happy that here in this school, in your friends and your teachers, you can find the support you need. Wherever there are dreams, there is joy, Jesus is always present. Because Jesus is joy, and he wants to help us to feel that joy every day of our lives.

Before going, I want to give you some homework. Can I? It is just a little request, but a very important one. Please don't forget to pray for me, so that I can share with many people the joy of Jesus. And let us also pray so that many other people can share the joy like yours.

May God bless you today and Our Lady protect you.