

Heart's Home:
"Maternal" Help to Abandoned Children (Part 1)
Interview With Its Founder, Father Thierry de Roucy



ROME, MAY 11, 2004. - Among the institutions that have responded to John Paul II's call to assist abused children is the Catholic association Heart's Home, which opened in 1990.

This private association of faithful offers young people the possibility to live for 14 months or more in some of the poorest neighborhoods of the world, in order to offer consolation to abandoned children.

On Sunday, the Pope called for an end to the abuse of child labor, saying it impedes millions of children worldwide from receiving a primary education. The Holy Father's words came on the eve of the Children's World Congress Against Child Labor, being held this week in Florence, Italy.

To have a better understanding of Heart's Home, ZENIT interviewed its founder, Father Thierry de Roucy.

Q: Why did you found Heart's Home?

Father de Roucy: In January 1990, when I was superior general of my congregation, the Servants of Jesus and Mary, while praying the rosary with my brothers, I suddenly received the call to found a work of compassion and consolation, a work that is rather more contemplative in its way of looking at reality and aid, a work that is different from many of the NGOs that exist today.

From this perspective, I perceived several elements. This work would not be a "classic" religious congregation, but instead an association that would send young people for one or two years to places where children are in need of spiritual, emotional and psychological support, in a word, of "maternal" support.

I also felt that the mission of this work would be truly based on the life of prayer and adoration of the young people participating, and that their stay in Heart's Home would be like a one- or two-year retreat for them.

In brief, I realized that our volunteers would take Mary's place at the foot of all those who are crucified today, and look at, love and encourage them in their trials, and give meaning to their lives. A mission that might not seem very effective in the eyes of the world but that, in a word, would be Mary's mission by the side of Jesus.

Q: How do young people react after spending some time in Heart's Home?

Father de Roucy: After two or three weeks, many write me to tell me: "Father Thierry, I think I made a mistake. I thought I would give more than I could receive from our neighbors, but it is just the opposite. Our friends give us much more. This experience is enriching me as I never could have imagined. "

One of the important principles of Heart's Home is St. Vincent de Paul's phrase: "the poor are our teachers. " In contemporary civilization, the poor remind us that what is essential in human life are relations, that faith is not belief in an abstract principle, but that it is daily life with God, which is manifested in trust in him at every moment, and which invites us to walk on water without fear.

In these neighborhoods, in which there is so much suffering, one perceives almost in a sensible way that grace is a constant gift to support these persons. During these 15 years I have experienced in an amazing way the presence of divine grace.

It is impossible to live what our friends live in the "favelas" or in the slums if Someone doesn't strengthen them hour after hour, day after day, and doesn't enable them to overcome all the trials that afflict them, such as the successive deaths of their children in the case of mothers, the omnipresent violence, the insecurity, the fear of tomorrow.

If God wasn't there to give so many people wounded by life the grace of a smile, the strength of hope, I don't know how they could endure it.

In fact, on more than one occasion, I have had the happy opportunity to meet with persons who have been in prison for a long time because of their faith and they have told me: "The years I spent in prison are undoubtedly the best of my life. " Without God, how is it possible to explain these testimonies?

Q: What is a Heart's Home?

Father de Roucy: A Heart's Home is a small house in which lives a community of "friends of the children. " In each one of them, there is a small chapel with the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Even in places where there is no custom of entrusting the Real Presence to Catholic young people, the bishops have always given us their permission.

There are one or two rooms for the girls, on one side, and one or two rooms for the boys, on the other. Each Heart's Home has, in addition, a room in which we simply receive the persons who come to see us.

The morning is dedicated especially to community life in the house -- shopping, preparation of meals, washing of clothes -- prayer and study. In the afternoon, the youths go out to meet people of the neighborhood; others stay to receive those who come to Heart's House.

Q: Do they have special times of prayer?

Father de Roucy: Yes. In the morning, the “friends of the children” pray lauds, and at the end of the afternoon, vespers, and at night, compline, during which they mutually ask one another for forgiveness for the faults committed during the day.

They take part in the Mass of their parish church. They take turns every morning, spending one hour of prayer before the Most Blessed Sacrament. Often, people of the neighborhood come to pray with them.

In the early afternoon they pray the rosary. It is the prayer in which most people of the neighborhood participate. Sometimes, the “friends of the children” take advantage of it to impart a little catechesis to our neighbors on the mysteries of the rosary.

Q: How does Heart’s Home help these people concretely?

Father de Roucy: I would say that the majority of services they offer are of a “maternal” character.

In the neighborhoods where we meet them, the fathers of the family are generally absent. The mothers have very much work and a mission that surpasses them. They concern themselves especially with the youngest child or youngest children, and the rest are left on their own.

In this way, frequently, there is no one to enroll them in school. There is no one who is concerned about their clothes or their state of health. There is no one who listens to them.

If they are very hungry, then they come to us, or if they are sick, or if they have a torn shirt. In Lebanon, the children often come to do their school homework, as they don’t have a table to work on at home or anyone to help them.

Often, these children simply come to tell us about their lives. We sit with the little ones so that they can tell us what they did that day, as all children in the world love to do. There are many tragic events in our neighborhoods that make us go out to help them -- children who die when they are very little, in a brutal way. We go to console their family and friends. Mothers who give birth on their own. Elderly people who are in agony. Fights.

One day, during a fight between a father and a mother, they threw the television and a child was crushed by it. His older brother called us and we went to free him. There are a thousand services. Moreover, we try to put our friends in contact with other NGOs so that they can benefit from the assistance they offer.

Q: Aren't you afraid to send young people to dangerous neighborhoods?

Father de Roucy: Yes, of course, at times I am very afraid, because in addition we feel very close to each one of the "friends of the children" that we send on mission.

But I have realized a thousand times that these young people, when they are faced with a particular situation, really have a grace to stay and complete their mission. They are mysteriously protected. Their parents at times regard them as grown-up children -- which is normal -- but we really consider them adults, as we seem them face the situations with a wisdom and generosity that astound us.

Moreover, there is something incredible: The population protects these young people. They really love the "friends of the children."

On several occasions, their neighbors have said to me: "Don't worry about your young people. We take care of them!" The world functions the opposite way.

In Haiti, for example, when the first acts of violence took place, the people of Cape Haitian followed very carefully what happened to Heart's Home. When we decided to go, our friends felt calmer. They were too afraid that something would happen to the young people.

Q: When you arrive in a new neighborhood, how do you introduce yourselves to the population?

Father de Roucy: To tell the truth, we don't introduced ourselves much.

In the countries of Latin America, where people live especially on the street, the people discover very rapidly the reason for our presence.

In the majority of cases, at the birth of a Heart's Home there is a bishop, a missionary, or a diplomat who calls us, and then we must choose, as we receive at least one request a year.

If we think we can respond to the request to found a house in a neighborhood, I myself or a member of the association go to spend some time in that place.

The person who has invited us puts us in contact with some parishes in which we could establish ourselves, and we try to find the most appropriate house in the neighborhood.

Afterward, a small team of young people arrives with a more experienced person of the association. The parish priest, who in general has already alerted the parishioners about our arrival, is not slow in introducing us.

I remember, for example, what happened in Lebanon. Our parish priest organized a procession from the church to our house, with a large icon of the Virgin. Behind were the young people of Heart's Home, and then all the population that accompanied us to our house.

All the people of the neighborhood were able to see that we formed part of the Catholic Church, and the parish priest explained why we were there.

Q: How many young people live in Heart's Home at present?

Father de Roucy: Between 160 and 170. Since the foundation of the association, some 1,000 young people have committed themselves to this service for more than a year. Half, more or less, come from France, the rest from more than 20 various countries of Europe, but also of Latin America and Asia.

Q: The young people who participate in Heart's Home give one or two years of their lives to this mission in some poor neighborhood of the world. At the end of their mission, how do they continue their commitment?

Father de Roucy: At the beginning, my idea was only to enable young people to have an experience of charity limited in time, as happens with military service.

However, after three years of existence of [Heart's Home](#), a youth who was returning from Colombia came to see me and said: "Father Thierry, I want to live this experience all my life."

So I answered him: "But this has not been planned. There are many religious congregations at the service of those who suffer in which you could consecrate yourself in a definitive way. Try to get to know them."

But he insisted: "I want to live in the spirit of Heart's Home. What attracts me is the charism. I want to live with people the closeness proposed by Heart's Home; I want to live with total readiness at the service of our neighbors; I want to live compassion within a mixed community that is like a family. I think that it is not the same as a religious."

Then he said to me: "Father, I don't need you to reply to me immediately. Reflect before God and when you have a mature answer, you will give it to me."

Then, I reflected and suggested that he begin his studies to be a priest; later we would see. It's what he did. Then another youth came with the same request, and then another.

Now there are some 60 youths who have decided to consecrate their lives in Heart's Home, 15 of whom are of various nationalities who have consecrated themselves definitively. So the "Molokai Fraternity" was born.

Q: Is it a consecration?

Father de Roucy: Heart's Home is a private association of faithful, just like many communities that exist today, and it has many branches.

Those who consecrate themselves in the Molokai Fraternity make promises as consecrated lay people. There is also a priestly branch united to Heart's Home, a public association of clergymen, which seeks to be a society of apostolic life.

Q: Have they been recognized by the Church?

Father de Roucy: The Heart's Home association, as such, was recognized on Holy Thursday of 2000 by Archbishop Estanislao Esteban Karlic of Parana.

He was the first archbishop, together with Cardinal Moreira Neves, to accept us in his dioceses, and he has never ceased to follow our development with interest and affection.

Archbishop Karlic has been, among other things, president of the Argentine episcopal conference and one of the writers of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. His advice, his prayer, his love of the Church, his theological depth have been a great support for us.

Q: Where are Heart's Homes found today in the world?

Father de Roucy: In Latin America and in Asia is where there are most Heart's Homes. But we are also established in Eastern Europe, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Senegal, in Italy and in France.

Moreover, in some 20 countries we have founded a Heart's Home association which helps the team on the spot: It is in charge of the recruitment and formation of "friends of the children," at times with the help of an office.

Our last foundation took place between October-November 2003 in New York, in the Bronx. We live in a parish house that the archdiocese has put at our disposal.

We have had to face many trials to start this foundation. We had the impression that it was the worst moment to open this house. On one hand, because of the war in Iraq, France was not well regarded by the Americans and, on the other, the problems of pederasty that have affected the local Church do not facilitate our mission of assistance to children.

But we have been received in an extraordinary way and, if at this time I have a reason for consolation in Heart's Home, this is due to what happens in our Heart's Home of the

United States.

Mother Teresa said that New York City was the city in greatest need of compassion. These words inspired in me for a long time the desire to found this house. I think that Mother Teresa was right.

It is harder to accept loneliness when one lives in the middle of the great city of New York than when one is a shepherd in the Andes, as we are constantly in contact with other human beings with whom we do not succeed in establishing a relationship.

In our parish, in the Bronx, there is a center for AIDS sufferers. We spend quite a bit of time with them. There is also a house of shelter for homeless families, with some 200 children. They stay there while they have not found a home.

We cannot receive these children in our home, but we receive them, as well as other people, in the parish premises. People come to talk, to have coffee. Unbelievable meetings take place.

Q: If a youth is interested in participating in Heart's Home, what must he do?

Father de Roucy: After writing an application letter, we suggest that he come to meet us. We have offices in France, Italy, Argentina, Switzerland, Peru and Brazil.

We try to start an endeavor of discernment with him, and then, after a time, which can last from six months to several years, according to the countries and the persons, we ask the young people to follow a certain number of weekends of formation, as well as an intense 15-day period of practice.

What we ask our volunteers above all is that they be true to themselves, not that they have a doctorate in education or psychology.

We ask that they be balanced and happy, that they have strong hope, and a great desire to pray, even if they are not already formed persons of prayer, as well as a great desire to live in community.

Our communities are international. It is necessary that the young people be sufficiently flexible to learn to live together -- as, moreover, they will have to live in cramped quarters -- and that they have a spirit of compassion, a desire to help others.

Those who come out of the mission often live with dedication and a generosity that enables young people today to recover an extraordinary confidence. They are willing to spend whole nights taking care of a child or an adult in agony, to go where there is need to find the necessary help for someone who is needy.

In Haiti, our "friends of the children" were exceptional when it came to facing the last crisis. They must be very solid but also realists. Heart's Home has nothing to do with ideologies; it is a school of reality.

Q: Are young people monitored during their mission in Heart's Home?

Father de Roucy: Yes, of course. I realized that if we put someone in charge in each Heart's Home, the young people did not grow in the same way. For this reason, one of the youths is in charge of the community.

This does not mean that they cannot go regularly to someone in particular. We call this person the "visitor." The young people report to him every week on their community and they go to him with any particular needs.

Every four months, more or less, the visitor spends some time in the community, which he looks after for years. He makes an assessment with the young people as well as those in charge in the local Church -- the nuncio, the bishop, the pastor -- and at times with the local administration.

If there is no Heart's Home office in the area, the visitor also meets with possible candidates and organizes their formation. It is quite an onerous system from many points of view, but I think it is very appropriate.

There are difficult moments in Heart's Homes. I am thinking above all of the Heart's Homes of Eastern Europe, where our neighbors drink too much, as they are desperate. At times they are violent.

Not long ago, for example, a youth arrived at Catherine-de-Hueck Heart's Home in Almaty [in Kazakhstan], and said: "I am going to commit suicide." Before the "friends of the children" could react, he had already cut his veins. He had to be taken to the hospital. A few days later, a man raped a girl on one of the streets on which the "friends of the children" were walking. They succeeded in impeding his carrying out his act. All this is difficult.

One must be able to face these situations and to talk so that they won't stay inside the person. People of the place whom we have been able to get to know, are willing and have the competence to help young people.

Q: What happens when young people return from their mission?

Father de Roucy: The Heart's Home experience can be very intense. For this reason, we think it is important not to abandon the young people when they return.

In France, we suggest that they spend a brief period of time in our central house and we review their experience with them. We also organize a weekend "of return."

If the young people want to continue to live actively the spirit of this association, they can commit themselves to the St. Maximilian Kolbe Fraternity, composed of former "friends of the children" and persons who live this spirituality.

Among the members of this Fraternity, there is genuine friendship, nourished by regular meetings, an annual retreat, joint activities, a week's vacation.

In this way, they are helped to live compassion where they are, in their work, their family, etc. In a word, we continue to be available at all times to respond to their needs.

It must be said that, if the majority of "friends of the children" return to the job they had before they left to go on mission, or the job for which they were trained, a good percentage enter the consecrated life or the seminary.

Q: How are Heart's Homes financed?

Father de Roucy: Before going on a mission, we ask the "friends of the children" to find spiritual godparents, to commit themselves to pray a mystery of the rosary for them every day, and for the financial godparents to donate an amount of money monthly, quarterly, or annually, to enable them to live this experience.

In a certain sense, they live it with them. The godparents' contributions are complemented with other donations, which are extremely useful, in particular when it is necessary to purchase houses.

We practically receive no donations from the governments or large institutions. Almost all come from private individuals.

Providence has enabled us to balance our global budget. Each house is assigned a particular budget, according to its needs.

In some countries we leave a sizable reserve, such as Colombia, so that the young people can leave easily in case of danger. Heart's Home tries to live in a bold way, but also with much prudence.

Q: And tomorrow?

Father de Roucy: Interestingly, in Heart's Home we almost don't make big projects and, when we do, they are soon modified.

Our greatest desire is to try to follow, day after day, the Lord who calls us, to walk on the water with confidence, to respond to the cries we hear and which at times cannot wait, to not be discouraged in face of the difficulties we might find, to assume every time our responsibility before the young people who commit themselves to the service of the association and before the flock that God entrusts to us, a flock of wounded persons, who suffer, but who are also extraordinary, often exemplary.

When we started the association, many said to me that the word "compassion" was worn out. Just today, however, I was reading an article in which the journalist said that compassion is becoming fashionable.

More than converting it into a fashionable word, we want compassion to be a vigorous attitude everywhere as I realize that it is necessary everywhere: in the field of politics, of the economy, but also of culture, of science, and even in the world of the NGOs.

In a word, with the passing of time I see how our mission is extended and the need we have to witness to the charism we have received and to live it beyond the world of the "favelas."