



Like Mary at the foot of the Cross

# Compassion and Consolation

In 1990, some young people asked Fr Thierry how they could offer part of their time in charitable service. Out of this, the Heart's Home was born in Argentina. This work, involving thousands of young people in thirty-five houses spread throughout the world, is not a humanitarian organization, but a way to respond to the Lord's call. How Heart's Home encountered the experience of the Movement

by Riccardo Piol

A letter from Lima, from Michelle, who has been there a bit more than a year. Seven dense pages of stories, the things that happened to her in the past week, a long list of names and encounters, such as the visits from Leo, a ten-year-old boy, a tough kid, we would say. Michelle, in her unadulterated French, describes him as a *dur à cuire* (literally, hard to cook), because, notwithstanding his age, he's been through a lot. Abandoned by his father, under surveillance and often attacked by his neighbors, he is a distrustful and a bit violent *gaillard*. "He arrives at our house discretely. Once he is satisfied that no neighborhood children have followed him, he carefully locks the door and says, 'Finally, the French people just for me!' Behind his violence and energy, there is a cry—love me! He

is so struck by the fact that he can be loved, that he wants to keep these moments for himself alone." Leo's "French people" are Michelle and the young people of Heart's Home, "a Catholic work of compassion and consolation"—in the words of its founder, Fr Thierry de Roucy—"for the young people and adults who have been rejected by the world," which involves hundreds of youth. They call them the "Friends of the Children" because their presence is dedicated above all to the littlest. From Kazakhstan to India, from Salvador da Bahia to the Bronx in New York, they dedicate their days to helping children like Leo. The young workers of Heart's Home leave their homes for a year or two to live together in groups of four or five in difficult neighborhoods where the Work is already present with its own house, or where

2002. Fr Thierry, during a trip to the Philippines, visits Heart's Home in Manila.



## > Stages of a History

**1990** On January 4th, Fr Thierry has the intuition for the foundation of Heart's Home. After ten months, the first 11 Friends of the Children depart for the mission: **the houses of Paraná, Argentina (October 2nd) and Salvador da Bahia, Brazil (October 25th) are born.**

**1991** The departure of 50 Friends of the Children, and the **foundation of six houses.** Heart Point thus is also present in Columbia, Romania, Peru, Thailand, and India, and a house is also opened in France, in Ourscamp, where the Work was born.

**1992** 60 young people of six different nationalities depart for the mission. **The first Heart's Home house is born in Lebanon,** and the **Fazenda do Natal** is established in Salvador da Bahia, while the houses of Brazil, Argentina, and Columbia create an association that also involves local youth, and commits to finding financing to be self-supporting.

**1993** The 75 Friends of the Children who depart come from 11 different countries. A presence begins in Senegal, and new houses are born in Argentina and Columbia.

**1994-1995** The foundation of four new houses and the departure of 110 young people characterize these two years, during which the presence of Heart's Home in Brazil is recognized as an association of public utility, while in India and Germany it is set up with a local base. 1995 is also the year in which the **Fraternity of Molokai is born.**

**1996-1999** In these four years, eight new houses are founded, including one in Naples (1998) and one in Syria (1998). These are the years in which Heart's Home in France opens a center for administration, formation, and hospitality for future Friends of the Children and their "godparents;" this group of missionaries and supporters **gives rise to the Fraternity of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, in 1997.**

**2000-2004** In the Jubilee Year, the first members of the Fraternity of Molokai take their final vows and Archbishop **Karlic, of Paraná, Argentina, recognizes Heart's Home as a private association of the faithful.** Thus opens a four-year span in which the number of young people who have departed for a period of mission of at least two years exceeds one thousand. Today, the Heart's Home houses throughout the world number 35, the latest in the Bronx, New York (2003) and Geneva (2004).



July 2001. Cathedral of Paraná. Archbishop Karlic during the priestly ordination of the first two priests of the Molokai Fraternity.

someone, be it a bishop or a missionary, a diplomat, or even just a friend, invites them to found a new one. It's hard to define them with just one word; calling them "volunteers" is overly simplistic.

And just calling them young missionaries doesn't express the uniqueness of an experience that in almost 15 years has involved over a thousand young people, mostly French, but also from over twenty countries of Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

### A particular call

Asking Fr Thierry to tell about the birth of Heart's Home means listening to him talk about a fact and a precise date: January 4, 1990. "At the time, I was superior general of my congregation, the Servants of Jesus and Mary. And that day, during the recitation of the Rosary with my brothers, I received a very particular call that made

me know that the Lord asked of me the foundation of Heart's Home. It was like an instant, and not the result of thoughts about the difficulties and sufferings of the world; a very particular call that asked of me the foundation, the presence of communities in the parts of the world where there is the most suffering." Fr Thierry recounts with a disarming simplicity, without worrying about persuading you about the truth of what happened. It's enough just to look into his eyes while he talks to dissolve the mistrust with which we usually react when we hear the story of an extraordinary event like his. He looks at you from behind his little glasses with the smiling face of one who is the first to be amazed by what has happened. And he continues his story, "I felt that our presence should be a bit like that of Mary at the foot of the cross of her Son. A presence apparently not very active, >>

> The work

**In Order to Depart with Heart's Home**

In order to depart, no particular professional skills are required, but a time of evaluation and formation supervised by the responsables of the Work, with the goal of preparing the volunteers for their mission, is necessary. This period of discovering another culture, learning another language, and spiritual life involves four steps: **three weekends** between February and June, and a **stage of 15 days** in July or September, after which the new Friend of the Children will depart for a Heart's Home house. On his way, he will be accompanied by his **"godparents,"** individuals, groups of friends, classes, or parishes that don't physically follow him on his mission, but who make it possible through economic support. Each **"financial godparent"** can donate six euros (7 dollars) or more every month, while the **"spiritual godparent"** donates prayer, committing to pray a decade of the Rosary daily for the intentions of his godchild and of the friends in the neighborhood where he lives. The Heart's Home missionary promises to pray for them and write them regularly with news of the mission, enabling them to participate in the experience he is living thanks to their help.

>> rather contemplative, that's there, that gives a great deal of itself for the consolation of another. Most of our time should be looking at the people, in order to have a profound gaze on reality, a gaze that already sees the time of the Resurrection in suffering. And I thought that I should call this work Heart's Home, that is, a place where love is put first."

Fr Thierry didn't know who should participate in this Work "because I didn't know how to make the intuition of Heart's Home known to the people: it's difficult to talk about something that doesn't exist, and advertise it." But after a month this question also received a response, unexpectedly, with the same extraordinary modality of January 4th. "In February," he says, "I received letters from some girls I had met a few years before, when I preached some Spiritual Exercises. They asked me how they could offer a period of their life in a charitable service. So I spoke about the work, and after 15 days, I found 11 of these young people who were willing to go." At the beginning of October, the first Heart's Home was born in San José, Argentina. And at the end of that same month, another was opened in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. From that point on, the "very particular" call enveloped Fr Thierry's life, asking of him all his time and energy.

because there are not enough young people who want to leave. Workers are always lacking..." Yet today, there are 150 Friends of the Children in 35 houses spread here and there throughout the world: the latest was opened in Geneva in October. More than a thousand young people have undertaken the road of Heart's Home over the course of these years. To explain this outcome, Fr Thierry tells about what he sees happening with the young people he meets. He doesn't go looking for them. They are the ones who find out about Heart's Home from friends, or maybe reading something in the newspaper. And then they contact Fr Thierry or the Friends of the Children they meet in their countries. What animates these young people, what pushes them to spend a year or two of their lives in the service of the poorest and the most needy is a simple desire. "The first thing I see in their heart is a great thirst for God, and I begin from this fact: everyone desires to know Christ more deeply. Before sending them, I ask each of them to write a letter explaining their reasons for wanting to depart with us. Our work is for poor children, for families who suffer, but the most important point of their desire is that they want to meet Christ, and I rest on this fact. I don't talk hours and hours about the conditions of children on the streets, but about the desire of each of us to meet Christ through these children, through community life, through a life of prayer. And every year, I'm increasingly touched by the fact that they have an immense appetite. And the greater their desire, the more they are filled to overflowing, and many of them have an incredible experience of God. So much so that, after this experience, many of them desire to consecrate their whole lives in virginity or, once they return to the life they've always lived, look for a way to continue the experience of Heart's Home in the heart of their professional or familial obligations." These are desires that today are answered in the Fraternity of Molokai and the Fraternity of Saint Maximilian Kolbe (see inset.)

**Responding to each call**

"Heart's Home is not a work of projects. I don't know how to organize projects," says Fr Thierry. "I try to follow what the Lord asks of me through events, the calls of the bishops or of missionaries. I try to answer each call. At times, it is very difficult, because there are numerous requests; in July, I received six requests to found new

Heart's Home houses in different countries. But it is difficult to establish a house every week, every fifteen days,



**The Philippines. A Friend of the Children playing on the beach with three children.**

**Intense days**

The days of the Friends of the Children, be they in Bangkok or in Paris, are simple. Those who leave home for this work know right from the start that what awaits them can't be compared to any humanitarian commitment with some spiritual parenthesis. "The young people live together," says Fr Thierry. "They get up at six and say Lauds, have breakfast, and dedicate the morning to silence and work in the house. They learn the language of the country; there is an hour dedicated to spiritual reading and one to adoration in the small chapel that is in all the houses of our communities. After lunch, they recite the Rosary with the people of the neighborhood and sometimes they do a bit of catechesis. Then we go to visit the families or receive the children who come to us; two or three times a week we go to truly difficult places, such as juvenile detention centers or hospitals. In the afternoon, we go to Mass in the parish, recite Vespers, and after dinner we often go visit people in our neighborhood until 11:00 or 12:30, when it's time for Compline." These are intense days, marked by gestures Fr Thierry defines as "maternal love"—from health care to help with clothes, from assistance with homework to the simple availability to listen to children and parents talk about their problems and needs. In the end, time is always too short, because there is so much to do. And the days are tiring as well because the habit of looking for immediate results of one's efforts is challenged by the difficult realities of the situations the Friends of the Children come up against. "Once," recounts Fr Thierry, "I received a letter from one of our friends who had been in the Philippines. She wrote me at the end of her stay to sum things up,

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and said, more or less, 'During these months I've encountered many difficulties, unbearable heat, a common life that wasn't always easy, enormous suffering, etc...' A whole page that seemed to summarize a negative experience, but the last line said, 'But through all this, I've encountered...' and I turned the page over, and written in big letters, 'true joy, which is Christ.'

**The grace of a friendship**

In the many letters written by Heart's Home missionaries telling about their days, there are often references to Communion and Liberation and friends of the Movement whom they meet, whether in Kazakhstan or in Brazil. "For us, this friendship with CL is a great grace," says Fr Thierry. "It was born in the beginning of Heart's Home in Argentina because in our first foundation we met a priest of the Movement, who immediately entered into a great friendship with the young people we had sent there. They spoke for hours and hours of the presence of Christ, of all the topics that are developed in the Movement...Then we began to read attentively all the works of Fr Giussani, whom I had gotten to know a bit when I was in Rome for my theology studies. Then, we met the Movement in all the countries where we established ourselves. And today, in many countries the Friends of the Children go to School of Community together and the CL members come to do charitable work with us." This friendship also led to the meeting of Fr Giussani and Fr Thierry, and to his participation in the last international assembly of CL responsables, and continues everywhere in the concreteness of mission among the people. It happened without anyone planning it, and thus it continues, following the Pope's teaching and the simple recognition of a common vocation to carry Christ throughout the world. To use Fr Thierry's expression, you could say that it is a "very particular" friendship, in which each is grateful to the Lord and glad for the presence of the other and for his "very particular" history. ■

➤ **The fraternities**

**To Continue Heart's Home**

For many Friends of the Children, the return to normal life, after the experience in the Heart's Home houses, can be more difficult than the two years in contact with poverty and suffering. "Because," says Fr Thierry, "after two years of a life made up of relationships, intense prayer, and lived friendship, finding yourself living alone in the big capitals of the world is difficult." And, in fact, many, since the beginning, have wanted to understand how they could continue the experience of the Work in the heart of their professional and familial obligations. Many wanted to understand how they could remain faithful to Christ, to Heart's Home, and to the friends they met, whether in Brazil or in Africa. And to respond to this question, on **November 11, 1997, the Fraternity of Saint Maximilian Kolbe was born** as a way to continue the walk that began with Heart's Home, "that experience of compassion," says Fr Thierry, "to which each one was called and that the Lord invites us to continue always." Quite soon, the Fraternity involved not only those who returned from the mission, but also those who could not depart, for various reasons. Gestures of charity, common moments of prayer and sharing, and spiritual retreats are different ways to continue along the road begun through the encounter with Heart's Home, and all of them document the enjoyment of bringing the love of Christ everywhere—that love discovered perhaps in Lebanon, or maybe in the Philippines, that led some of the Friends of the Children to ask Fr Thierry how they could commit themselves more for a consecration in the heart of this family, for a total dedication, that already in 1995 had begun to take form as another Fraternity at the heart of Heart's House, that of **Molokai**, the name of the Hawaiian island where Blessed Damien de Veuster died (1840-1889), after a life spent helping and treating the lepers who were relegated to that island. Today, this Fraternity has about fifty members. Welcomed officially into the Church on Holy Thursday of the year 2000, by Archbishop Karlic, then the Archbishop of Paraná, Argentina, **the Molokai members constitute a private association of the faithful** for consecrated laity, divided into two branches, male and female, and a public association of the faithful directed to becoming a society of apostolic life for priests and seminarians. Those who choose this road live their own belonging to the work of Heart's Home in the most different ways: it could be in one of the 35 houses today present in the world, or in the service of the Work, dedicating themselves to the formation of the Friends of the Children and to accompanying them, but also in an activity of making Heart's Home known.