
Father Renato Chiera (Casa do Menor): “Jesus is in the children”

Convincing people that there is an alternative to drugs and the power they give is difficult when they have nothing, not even a loving family. It is even harder to face the fact that there are children who are abandoned, unloved and exploited by drug trafficking gangs. Since 1978, Father **Renato Chiera** has responded to the cries and pleas for help from children in Brazil's poorest neighbourhoods, rescuing them from the streets and gang wars. To this wounded humanity, in 1986 the priest opened the doors of the Casa do Menor, an organisation that over the years has rescued hundreds of thousands of children from violence. It operates in four Brazilian States. In their eyes, the Gospel message that Father Renato teaches his children appears revolutionary: the other person is a gift. **Father, should humanity rediscover a theology of children?** Jesus is in the children. The inspiring word of Casa do Menor is "You did it for me". I have been helping the unloved children of Brazil for 38 years.

The driving force is Jesus, I feel his presence in them. When I reach out to them, I am nourished.

A 15-year-old boy told me this morning that he was tired, that he wanted to be with his family, that he felt abandoned like Jesus on the cross. These children are all little Jesuses who feel abandoned. **Was it by reaching out to abandoned children that Casa do Menor began its activity?** We first responded to the cry of children who did not want to die, but needed love to continue living. I had no plans to found Casa do Menor. When I was a child, I wanted to be like Don Bosco. Then, as I grew up, I realised that the Lord had something else in store for me and I left my job as a philosophy teacher in Mondovi. In 1978, my bishop sent me as a missionary to the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, where I found extreme poverty. These young people were crying out for someone to love them. I found one of them bleeding in a garage. He had been wounded by the police. We heard the cry of the young people who, like him, needed love to live. They needed God. Today, we also work with adults who need help, in therapeutic communities where we rebuild their lives by helping them to love. **In all these years, you have saved 100,000 children.** Actually, more than 120,000. Some of these children return to express their gratitude, perhaps after discovering a new path away from drugs. Others become missionaries. They feel they are a gift to others, having received the love they needed. Our efforts are not aimed at removing the drugs. They are aimed at rebuilding the person, rebuilding relationships with others, and rebuilding values to believe in. Drugs come in when life is ugly, not when life is happy. Every day with these young boys and girls, we roll a six-sided die, and on each side there is a phrase from the Bible about the teaching of love. Today we are no longer taught to love and that is why we are not happy. Being a gift to others changes our lives and as a result we overcome our shortcomings, we stop looking for what we wanted in order to satisfy our inner needs.

Each of us is a gift, we just can't see it anymore.

We are not at war here, but factions of drug dealers are fighting each other with constant gunfire. To teach them that the other person is a gift is a revolution. **Have you ever feared for your life?** I have received many threats in the past. When I arrived, there was still a dictatorship. But when I saw the deaths, I could not stand idly by. Today I have been accused of being a communist, or that I ought to confine myself to saying Mass. But I continue my work. It is no easy task to be an alternative to the drug traffickers who provide power and money. **Pope Francis will meet 6,000 children from 56 countries today.** This Pope is like Jesus, who put the children at the centre of everything. The Church does not always put them at the centre, nor does society. In Francis instead I see the presence of Jesus who continues to send out a message.

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