

New seeds of peace and caring for Creation in Bethlehem

Inclusion, education, and the protection of biodiversity. In Jesus' native land, two young people have launched a Laudato si' Circle and together with the Cremisan Salesians and VIS, are committed to raising awareness about the culture of ecology.

Cecilia Seppia - 19 July 2022

“Today is a time of mission and a time of courage! Courage to strengthen faltering steps, to recapture the enthusiasm of devoting oneself to the Gospel, of recovering confidence in the strength that the mission brings to bear. It is a time of courage, even if having courage does not mean having a guarantee of success. Courage is required of us in order to fight, not necessarily to win; in order to proclaim, not necessarily to convert. Courage is required of us in order to open ourselves to everyone... Courage is required of us in order to withstand incredulity, without becoming arrogant.”

This is what Pope Francis said at his 23 Oct. 2016 Angelus address: a message that Veronica Coraddu has adopted as her own since she was very young. At the age of 19, she left her beloved Sardinia to move to Rome and begin a journey of mission and social cooperation. Together with her future husband, Fabio Palumbo, an International Volunteer for Development (in Italian, “VIS”), she began to travel the world: from Malawi, to Tanzania, to South Sudan, until she landed in Palestine, in Bethlehem, where, together with other young people, she helped create the first Laudato si' Circle in the Holy Land.

During the pandemic, this 35-year-old mother of two also decided to get a degree in Languages and Cultures for mediation purposes and began taking online courses. She certainly does not lack courage, nor a passion for environmental issues, so she decided to throw herself into this new challenge. "The Holy Land is beautiful," Veronica says. "It exudes history at every corner, but lacks green areas, and there is not much respect for the environment, which is the first of the common goods. Often along the roads, one encounters piles of garbage; people throw garbage from speeding cars; an ecological culture is lacking, which is why we want to commit ourselves to spreading Pope Francis' invitation to Catholic and Orthodox Christians, to Muslim brothers and sisters, and anyone with a desire to cooperate, to defend the Home that God has given us.



The presentation of the Laudato si' Circle in Bethlehem on Earth Day

Seeds of hope

The Bethlehem Circle was officially launched on 13 May 2022, International Earth Day. The ceremony was held during the inauguration of Cremisan Park created on the grounds of the Salesian Monastery in Beit Jala: a project co-financed by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICS) and sponsored by several NGOs, including VIS, “Pro Terra Sancta,” and the John Paul II Foundation. At the forefront are the Salesians of Don Bosco who have been present in Cremisan for 130 years, and who, in collaboration with the Joint Service Council for Solid Waste Management of the Bethlehem Governorate, have always followed the charism of their founder in focusing their activities on educating young people, the hope and promise of change in all fields, including those touched by Pope Francis' Encyclical.

On the surface, it might look like any playground, but this place is much more: it offers the real possibility of giving joy to children and young people, of allowing them to grow together, beyond differences. It is a sign of peace and reconciliation, a way to enhance the urban context and introduce an ecologically-minded culture, as well as an open-air "school" where environmental education and Palestinian biodiversity are taught.



Lots of activities to educate children about caring for our Common Home

Guglielmo Giordano, AICS director in Palestine, notes that "the importance of the project lies basically in the spirit of inclusion. This is a country in which people mostly point out their differences while the project tries to highlight what people have in common, what makes us similar, and childhood, children, are the same everywhere."

"By playing," added Luigi Bisceglia, VIS representative in Palestine, "we want them to become aware of how important it is to respect the environment, and at the same time we want to celebrate the fact that there is finally a new playground, within a green area, that is available to all the families of the entire Governorate of Bethlehem. Likewise, Fr. Alejandro León, Salesian Inspector for the Middle East, said that Cremisan "has often been shown in the news as a place of division, a contested place, and we want it to become an oasis of peace, an oasis of encounter, an oasis of knowledge, recognizing- as Pope Francis would say, that we have a common Home. Let it be a place where young people can grow in this solidarity with nature, with each other, and maybe also in a fruitful relationship with God."



The Cremisan park

Veronica's testimony

In this context, thanks to the 'infectiousness' of the Rome Circle "Nelle Selve" and the VIS mission, the first Laudato si' Circle in the Holy Land has taken root with the aim of spreading the seed of integral ecology throughout the territory.

"It all happened very quickly," Veronica continues. "When I was asked to give life to this initiative, I said yes without thinking twice, and now I have so many ideas to implement. It is true, we are few, young to boot, but our enthusiasm is not lacking as well as our determination to put our talents at the service of our Common Home, animated by the same spirit of St. Francis. We introduced ourselves for the first time to the community during the inauguration of Cremisan Park and the reception was very good. With the children, we organized activities with salvaged materials, planted small strawberry seedlings, recycled plastic bottles and began to introduce them to the biodiversity of this beloved land."



Working together in order to make a difference

Inclusion and dialogue

Veronica sees herself as a bridge between different cultures and joyfully greets a young Palestinian who wants to join: "In this city," she explains, "Catholics are a minority; 90 percent of the population are Muslims, but this disproportion instead of discouraging us, makes us even more willing to pursue this challenge. Moreover, Bethlehem has a deep meaning for us Christians: this is where the story of love and salvation began. Jesus was born here and even though He later lived in Jerusalem, these places are all shaped by His living presence; they are places where He preached, He walked. There is the desert of Temptation behind us, and it is a pity that, on the environmental front, this land is a bit 'mistreated;' people need to understand that the protection of the historic and artistic heritage cannot be separated from the care of the environment, of nature. So being here with a Laudato si' Circle is like giving praise to God, as St. Francis did in the Canticle of the Creatures, for all that surrounds us."

"But this message must be rediscovered together," she stressed. "We need to stimulate people with a new spirit. We want to make the spirit of inclusion tangible and highlight the notion that no one is saved alone; moreover, we want to make people understand that uniting different faiths, even when it comes to the environment, can make a difference."

Veronica has embraced this mission as hers, and she has imprinted in her heart Pope Francis' admonition to listen to the cry of the Earth and the poor. "Pope Francis' words are a warning," she says, "but they also indicate a precise direction, so it is up to us to make ideas and initiatives flourish, and like all the Laudato si' Circles, speaking particularly of Bethlehem, we want to bring passion, spread the values necessary to care for Creation, to provide ecological education, but also to roll up our sleeves and set out to clean up this city of garbage, without forgetting prayer and eco-spirituality meetings.

"This is not an environmentally friendly city, a lot of plastic is wasted and consumed; there is no recycling culture, and we often see the streets disfigured with filth everywhere. And it is also difficult to transmit to the little ones, starting with my children, the idea that we should not litter, pollute, waste - that we should make small courageous choices, every day. What drives me most is the need to listen to the cry of the poor. After South Sudan, we made a radical choice to really be a missionary family, and if you spread goodness, benevolence will circulate, and we want to build a network of caring for the Common Home here as well."