Patriarch Kirill visits children's rehabilitation center in Havana suburb

On February 13, 2016, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia visited the children's rehabilitation center 'Solidarity with Panama' in a Havana suburb. It is a unique specialized center in Cuba for children with physical-motor disorders or mental retardation, which teaches high school children.

The Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church was welcomed by Ms Anna Elsa Velazquez, minister of education, Ms Esther La Ochoa, headmistress, as well as teachers and schoolchildren.

'I visit such educational institutions in Russia on major holidays – Christmas and Easter. For me, today is a feast day too', His Holiness said greeting the welcoming party.

Accompanied by the minister and the headmistress, His Holiness made a tour of the classes, rooms for work lessons and the gymnasium.

He had a warm talk with children and gave them a benediction. Children, with some of them missing the both arms, gave to the patriarch the gifts they themselves had made and did some bright concert numbers for him at the assembly hall.

His Holiness addressed the children, saying,

> 'Dear children! Dear teachers! All those present here! For me it is a great feast today as I have an opportunity to be your guest. For people a feast is a joy of their souls, but if one feels upset then it is no feast at all. For me, it is a joy to see you. You sing wonderfully; you dance wonderfully; you do what other people cannot do. And this means that God gives special gifts to each. You may not have something of what other children have, but you all have what very many have not – you have an experience of a special life. You surmount difficulties; you do much more than your mates do, and the most important thing is that you set an example for others.
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> 'It is wonderful that society, the people, take care of both children and adults who have health limitations. Those who have no limitations are needed by those have such limitations. You need teachers and doctors who help you. But I would like to say that you are needed by all the society

as well. In some special way God marks those whose life is important for the rest. You are an example for healthy children – an example of how one can cope with difficulties. Please, remember my words: we all need you. You render a special service to people as you help them to be kind, to overcome their egoism, to open their hearts to others.

‘As Patriarch, I often visit various churches, pray together with a lot of people and take part in various feasts. And when one visits a holy place, one’s heart rejoices. Here I experience the same feeling as I do when I visit holy places. As I feel the presence of God in you and through you, I would like to wish you never to be sad, never to compare yourselves to others, never to pity that you cannot do what others can, because each one of you can do what the absolute majority of children cannot do. And when I was listening to your singing today, when I enjoyed such beautiful dancing, I really realized that you can do much of what others cannot. And I would like to thank the leaders, the teachers and all those who take care of the children’.

Patriarch Kirill presented the center with wheelchairs, notebooks, video-projectors, developing toys, sweets and icons of the Intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God for the children and teachers.

The headmistress thanked Patriarch Kirill on behalf of the children and teachers.

In conclusion of the visit, Patriarch Kirill signed the Book of Honoured Guests with the note: ‘An illness and physical limitation cannot limit the immortal human spirit. I wholeheartedly thank all those who work in this holy place, helping children to preserve the power of the spirit and conquer physical illnesses’.

During his visit to the rehabilitation center, His Holiness Kirill was accompanied by Ms. Cardiac Diego Bello, head of the department for religious affairs of the Cuban Communist Party Central Committee, and members of the official delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Patriarchal Press Service

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Photos by the Patriarchal Press Service

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