

**ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY OF THE REPUBLIC OF
COLOMBIA, MS. NOHRA PUYANA DE PASTRANA, AT THE
CEREMONY WHERE THE IVY INTER-AMERICAN
FOUNDATION GRANTS THE IVY HUMANITARIAN PRIZE TO
FATHER JAVIER DE NICOLÓ**

Washington, October 24th, 2001

They say Saint John Bosco, the great Italian saint, founder of the Salesian Order, who revolutionized the concept of education in the nineteenth century, had a prophetic dream when he was barely nine years old. In his dream, little John saw himself surrounded by quarrelling children, and he fought to make peace among them, first pleading and then resorting to his fists. Suddenly the Lord Jesus Christ came to him and said: "No, no; you must win them over with gentleness and love!". The Lord then went on to say that the Holy Virgin would be his teacher, and she too appeared in his dream and said to him: "Take your shepherd's staff and guide your sheep". As soon as Mary finished saying this, the children turned first into ferocious beasts and then into tame and peaceful sheep.

It is no surprise that today, in the twenty-first century, another exemplary Italian, with a very big Colombian heart and

vocation, member of the Salesian Order, has dreams similar to those of his Patron Saint and Founder.

The kind and dynamic priest I am talking about is Father Javier De Nicoló, who also speaks of his dream in his recent book on the children of the streets. Let me tell you the story he dreamed by quoting his own words:

“Suddenly I found myself in the inner-city, in a typical street environment, with its forms, colors and picturesque characters. There was music, like in a fair. Yet I could hear a distinct voice coming out of a speaker that said to me: ‘We were waiting for you to tell you what to do. First, you must visit the streets persistently, go and observe, take note, learn to communicate through your friendly, stimulating presence and make friends with the young. In so doing you will learn and understand the true tragedy of poverty’ ...”

Both: Saint John Bosco, in 1824, and Father Javier De Nicoló, his faithful follower, in 1969, felt God’s great call of love, but it wasn’t just any call. On these occasions the Lord’s merciful gaze was personified in the rather harsh gaze of abandoned children who lack affection.

Their mission never abandoned them since, because their devotion to others and to humanity's most precious treasure, children, is a vital flame that encouraged them and that leaves an ever-lasting print in their fellow men, the fellow men of whom Jesus spoke.

Today I am very pleased and proud that it is I, the First Lady of Colombia, who has the pleasure of introducing this good hearted man to you, a man who has done so much for the so called "children of the street". A man whose life is a role-model for all Colombians, particularly for those who have been fortunate enough to know his work of love, a love that extends over the last three decades.

Father Javier De Nicoló, always smiling, always wearing his typical barrette, has touched the lives of the 17,000 children he brought in from the streets one by one, saving them from a life of misery, drugs and violence. He has taken them into his home, where, besides a place to live, they find solidarity, learning opportunities and grow healthy.

Today most of these children have become good-hearted, hard-working men and women, proud of themselves and their self-improvement, who contribute to society and who help others find the opportunities they were once fortunate to have.

Poverty in developing countries such as Colombia is a reality no one can overlook, not even when the Government, private organizations and good-hearted people do whatever we can to eradicate it.

Anyone who has seen these children, with their blackened faces, their dirty tangled hair and their broken decaying teeth, walking in groups or on their own, smelling glue and begging coins from passers-by in the streets of Bogotá, Cali, Barranquilla or Medellín, has seen the cruelest face of poverty, of social inequity and, all too frequently, the disastrous fruit of intra-family violence.

Well, it is men like Father Javier De Nicoló and his co-workers who take the trouble of getting close to those children, of overcoming their distrust and, slowly, cross-over to their circle of friendship. It is thanks to this kind of dedication that homeless children are invited first to join the “street clubs” where they

learn to socialize and find a helping hand, shelter and food. Finally, it is the children and youths themselves who decide, on their own, to participate in the Bosconia Program led by Father Javier De Nicoló and it is only then that they join one of his training centers where they learn to read, write, paint, play music and do practical chores, and, what is even more important, they learn to love and to be loved, to respect and to be respected.

Children find much more than just a new home or school: they find the freedom and love they need to become good people and citizens. That is the life legacy that Father Javier gives to the thousands of youngsters that have undergone his program!

I could talk forever about the great work of this simple-hearted man, of this “dreamer by profession”, but I know that you know his life work very well and that you value it greatly. I also know that it is our respect for him that has brought us here today to witness the well-deserved awarding of the IVY Humanitarian Prize to Father Javier De Nicoló.

“You will know them for their fruits” said Jesus, and, yes, such is the case here, because there are 17,000 fruits of love that

speaking of the unparalleled work of the exemplary man I have the pleasure and honor of accompanying today as his compatriot at heart.

Let me thank the IVY Inter-American Foundation for the tribute paid here today. Above all, let me thank Father Javier De Nicoló for believing in the children of Colombia when many did not believe, for seeing light in a gaze where others only saw darkness, for seeing hope and affection in the faces where others only saw fear.

Thank you, Father Javier, for teaching us with your example that there is no greater gift on earth than the gift of giving love to those who need it most!

Thank you very much