

Pope's pediatric hospital: Making a big impact helping tiny patients

VATICAN CITY - Of the thousands of hospitals the Catholic Church owns or operates, one has a very special patron. Known as "the pope's hospital," the Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital belongs to the Vatican.

Under the aegis of the Vatican's Secretariat of State, it's the only children's hospital in Rome. And the hospital has gained worldwide recognition for its quality care, cutting-edge research, Christian ethics and charitable outreach to five continents.

This year Bambino Gesù, Italian for "baby Jesus," is celebrating the 140th anniversary of its birth. From its humble beginnings as a 12-bed ward in a family home to 800 beds in a modern hospital complex, the pope's hospital has a lot to celebrate.

Founded in 1869 by Duchess Arabella and Duke Scipione Salviati, it became the first pediatric hospital on the Italian peninsula. At the time, children needing care were obliged to share hospital wards with adults.

With the help of their own children, who donated the contents of their piggy banks for the cause, the duchess and duke turned one of the family's homes into a small pediatric hospital run by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

In 1887, the facility was transferred to its current location within the 15th-century convent of St. Onuphrius, on the Janiculum Hill behind the Vatican.

There it quickly grew. According to hospital registry records, it served some 1,000 patients in 1907. Today more than 1.1 million visits are registered each year.

In an effort to guarantee the hospital would have a secure future, in 1924 the Salviati family donated it to Pope Pius XI, who always had shown his support for safeguarding the health and welfare of children.

Once under papal authority, the hospital added new pavilions, new operating rooms

and new outpatient departments.

In the 1970s the U.S. bishops made significant financial contributions that helped fund the hospital's complete renovation.

Today, with two other branches outside Rome, Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital is one of the most modern and well-equipped pediatric facilities in the country.

Pope John XXIII started a new papal tradition just a few months after he was elected in 1958; he personally visited the hospital and greeted the staff and young patients.

Pope Benedict XVI lost no time in paying the hospital a courtesy call after his election in 2005.

He said he wanted Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital to be the first hospital he visited in his pontificate, not only because it's a Vatican-related institution, but because he wanted to faithfully give witness to Jesus "who loved children tenderly and wanted them to be allowed to go to him."

The face of Jesus, he said, is also present in the pained or frightened look of a child in difficulty.

"In every suffering person, and even more if he or she is small and defenseless, it is Jesus who welcomes us and awaits our love," said Pope Benedict.

The hospital takes pride in offering excellent care coupled with an approach based on Gospel principles. Respect for human dignity does not hamper the hospital's research and care; rather it renders scientific progress more human, says the hospital's Web site.

For example, the hospital achieved groundbreaking progress in repairing skull fractures with a patient's own stem cells derived from bone marrow.

One reason the hospital attracts patients from all over Italy and Europe is because it is one of the few medical facilities that can guarantee care for almost all pathologies afflicting children, said the head of the hospital's public relations staff, Marco Magheri. Hospital staffers work to provide care not available elsewhere, Magheri

once told Vatican Radio.

The pope's hospital takes the Christian call for mission seriously, too. The hospital has provided charitable medical assistance to approximately 40 countries for the past 15 years.

Projects range from temporary emergency assistance – such as sending two medical teams to the Gaza Strip in December after the Israeli attacks – to permanent ventures such as running and staffing a medical school in Tanzania.

The president of the hospital, Giuseppe Profiti, told the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, in a recent interview that many new projects are aimed at helping Southeast Asia, specifically Myanmar and Laos. He said doctors hope to carry out the first successful heart transplant on a child in Southeast Asia this year.

One of the reasons the hospital has been so successful in establishing programs and carrying out needed care and formation in developing nations, he said, is because “we work within a network already built up by the various religious congregations that operate on the ground. We're riding a little on their shoulders.”