

Never Reject Beggars

In an age when more persons in the U.S. appear to be withdrawing into their dwellings behind closed doors with peephole viewers, the streets of Rome continue to be congested until late at night — often until 2 a.m. in the summer — with people strolling, visiting, shopping, eating, and the like.

It is an exhilarating atmosphere. Whether one walks along the wider, more modern streets of the city or the narrow, winding cobblestone passages where any minute Ben Hur surely will drive a chariot through, you can shop in some of the most beautiful stores anywhere.

There are street merchants as well: like the man from

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Around Rome

whom you can buy a candy cane after you watch him form it by hand for you; or the old ladies who sit on doll-house-size folding chairs making plastic holders for monthly bus and train passes; the flower booths; the open air markets that hurriedly are set up in early morning hours in the piazzas to provide fresh fruits, foods and fish and just as quickly disappear in the afternoon to make way for the collapsible table restaurants that emerge from seemingly nowhere in the evenings.

Near the Vatican there is a very, very long and a very wide approach from the Tiber

River to St. Peter's Square known as the Via Conciliazione. It swarms with tourists.

Both sides of this street are lined with stores catering to the needs of these pilgrims: places to buy holy cards, rosaries, religious books, plates with the pope's picture, key chains, and film, tobacco, food and other things.

Small candy-striped-canopied trucks serving ice cream, soft drinks and snacks park in the circle facing the Square. To the right, on the way leading to the Vatican Museum, vendors display on portable counters such items as ties, purses, umbrellas, and so forth.

It looks as if everything has been deliberately coordinated into one grand, colorful, congenial performance.

But, then, like weeds sprouting in a flower garden, come the uninvited beggars: barefooted gypsies in multi-colored, but dirty ankle-length dresses, with shaggy shawls

draped over their heads, not entirely covering disheveled hair, and in their arms they hold, or sometimes nurse, a baby wrapped in filthy clothes.

Usually they sit or lie on the sidewalk, obstructing the path of pedestrians, assume a forlorn expression and a posture of complete fatigue with barely enough strength left to raise a quivering, open palm. They present a pathetic picture.

I was quite shocked when I encountered them during my first trip to Rome. It was difficult to walk from one end of a block to the other without emptying my pocket, even though I somehow felt their net income was greater than mine.

They panhandle around the other churches in Rome and even enter these houses of prayer just before services begin.

I've been a soft touch for street solicitors particularly since the time I read the book

"No Hiding Place," a very moving account of an alcoholic who convinced me never to refuse a "bum" who needs some money for a drink. And so it was hard to ever pass a gypsy woman and her baby.

But a few Sundays ago, as I walked by a park close to the Ministry of Justice which is near St. Peter's I saw a group of these women with their children. Jovial, giggling and laughing, they doled out their collections to a Fagan, look-alike who funneled their "take" into a large moneybag. They, too, are organized!

Nevertheless, it is a mistake not to greet and speak to everyone since, as the hub of the world, there is here an endless stream of interesting people.

When I was at the Vatican Post Office mailing some articles at Christmas, I struck up a conversation with a traveler who flabbergastedly told me his clothing had been stolen from his small valise the day before while he showed a

friend through St. Peter's Basilica.

He insisted on helping me with my mailing and continued to talk between licks. He told me his name — he admitted it sounded strange for an Indian to have an Irish name — and explained he was from Burma, near the Chinese border, and that as old as he was, this was his first trip to Rome. He said he was so embarrassed because he now only had left the wrinkled clothes he was wearing. Suddenly, he excused himself saying, "I must go now, I have a personal audience with the pope."

"Sure you do," I thought.

Reading "L'Osservatore Romano" next day I came across the Official Notices regarding the pope's activities for the preceding day. Listed among the dignitaries his Holiness had received in private audience was a Bishop J. Madden, apostolic prefect to India — the same man who had licked and stamped 75 envelopes for me!

In Vitro Baby Clinic Target of Life Group

Norfolk, Va. (S) — The Virginia Society for Human Life has started proceedings to try to stop the March opening of the nation's first "test-tube" baby clinic at Norfolk General Hospital.

Wayne Nunnally, an attorney for the society, charged that Virginia Health Commissioner James B. Kenley violated state law when he granted a "certificate of need," authorizing the Eastern Virginia Medical School to open the clinic at Norfolk

hospital. The lawyer said that Kenley failed to determine whether the in vitro (in glass) fertilization lab was needed in the Norfolk area.

The hospital has received thousands of inquiries from persons interested in becoming patients. Eastern Medical School estimates that at least 280,000 women in the U.S. with blocked fallopian tubes could benefit from the procedure. Patients will be charged between \$3,000 and \$4,000 for two implantation attempts.

Anti-abortion groups forced two public hearings on the project in August and October, and the commissioner's office has received more than 700 letters of protest and petitions with several thousand signatures. Opponents of the clinic claim it would result in destruction of fertilized eggs deemed imperfect or unfit, and would also lead to made-to-order babies.

'Woman of Year'

New York (RNS) — The United States section of St. Joan's International Alliance has named Sister Theresa Kane "American Woman of the Year 1979." As president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Sister Theresa welcomed Pope John Paul II at his meeting with women religious in Washington last October and took the occasion to press for the ordination of women.



Special Crucifix

Msgr. Mercurio Fregapane of Lancaster, Pa., and Italo Rodriguez, director of the diocesan Spanish Apostolate, examine a ceremonial cross at the San Jose Mission in San Antonio, Tex. The two men recently participated in a solidarity meeting for diocesan directors of the Spanish Apostolate of the Northeast in San Antonio.

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