



A woman begs for money as her baby plays on a sidewalk along the Via della Conciliazione, the main street to the Vatican.

File photo

Pope: Believers are obliged to help the disadvantaged

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

ROME — Believers are obliged to help the poor both spiritually and materially, Pope John Paul II said during a Christmas-season visit to a Rome soup kitchen.

Some 3,000 homeless people and immigrants gathered at the Rome diocesan Caritas facility Dec. 21 to receive the pope's Christmas season greetings.

After a Liturgy of the Word and some speeches, the pope drank a cup of tea while the others ate their mid-day meal.

Valentino Nogali, his head wrapped in bandages, sat next to the pope. Two weeks earlier someone doused Nogali, who is part Somali, with gasoline and threw a match at him while he slept in his makeshift shelter.

"Before those who suffer, one cannot remain indifferent nor inactive," the pope said in his speech.

"Believers, even before asking themselves about their responsibility to others, hear the voice of the Divine Master who asks them to imitate the Good Samaritan," he said.

Proclaiming the Gospel to the poor and caring for their needs is "an obligation at once individual and social," the pope said.

Only those who are poor — those who are aware of their need for help, who are not proud and full of themselves — can fully understand the richness of the gift of grace celebrated at Christmas, he said.

The soup kitchen shows that the Diocese of Rome, which the pope heads, has placed care for the poor among its preferential options, he said.

Illegal or undocumented immigrants deserve special attention, the pope said, because their lack of legal status

often prevents them from insisting on respect for their fundamental rights.

Pope John Paul called on the diocese to:

- Reclaim Rome's ancient reputation as a welcoming and open city.
- Repudiate every form of racism and xenophobia.

- Transmit a message of respect and acceptance toward people from different cultures and nations.

- Mobilize the energy of volunteers to welcome strangers no matter what their faith or origin.

"The baby Jesus, whose wondrous birth we are about to commemorate, came to free us," the pope said.

"He makes us able, if we want, to remove the veil and see every individual and every people with new eyes, recognizing in them our brothers and sisters," he said.

Monsignor Luigi Di Liegro, director of the diocesan Caritas, said that providing the soup kitchen is an "act of justice and a sharing of the sufferings and hopes of the city's poor against every temptation to fear the different or the foreigner."

The presence of the poor "is not the exception which confirms the rule of a general well-being of the population," he said.

In many instances, he said, "the well-being produces suffering, hardships and difficulties of various kinds for a not-negligible portion of the population."

Poverty in the city, Monsignor Di Liegro said, is often the result of squandered money, unbridled consumption, and inefficiency.

He said that "even in the Eternal City there are human beings who do not have even the minimum necessary to live in a manner consonant with their dignity as children of God."

Lay group issues guidebook for homeless at Christmas

ROME (CNS) — One guidebook recommending places to eat and sleep in Rome is not for sale. It is a limited edition provided free by a lay Catholic group.

To get it, one must be homeless in Rome at Christmas.

The 80-page book is called "Where to Eat, Sleep and Wash" and is a survival guide for Rome's street people. It lists free or low-cost places providing food, lodging or a shower.

Christmas 1992 marks the third year of the guidebook, which is prepared and published by the Community of San Egidio, a Rome-based lay organization recognized by the Vatican.

"It is our Christmas present to the people who live in the streets," said Mario Marazziti, San Egidio spokesman, at a Dec. 18 news conference.

San Egidio officials said that according to their contacts with charitable organizations in other major world cities, this is the first book of its kind.

The guidebook is given to the homeless and elderly who are served a hot meal on Christmas by San Egidio at Rome's St. Mary in Trastevere Basilica. It is also given to the 1,800 people who daily attend San Egidio's regular soup kitchen for a hot meal and is distributed through other Rome charitable operations.

San Egidio estimates that there are 4,000 street people in Rome, about half

of them foreigners.

The guidebook is updated each year for Christmas. Eight thousand copies of the current edition have been printed.

The book is revised based on the suggestions of the homeless and double-checked to ensure accuracy, said Marazziti.

The guidebook listings include telephone numbers and the days and hours when services are available. Also mentioned are the bus and subway lines that stop near the sites.

"Accuracy is important, because a vain trip means a homeless person does not eat that day," Marazziti said.

The guidebook also lists welcoming centers that help orient the homeless to available social services, first-aid stations, centers treating drug and alcohol abuse, government offices providing legal documents and emergency telephone numbers.



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