

III° International Meeting on the Pastoral Care of the Road

(Vatican City, 26-27 November 2007)

First International Meeting for the Pastoral Care of the Homeless on the theme:

"In Christ and with the Church at the service of the homeless"

FINAL DOCUMENT

I. The Event

The III° International Meeting on the Pastoral Care of the Road took place on November 26th and 27th, 2007, in the offices of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, at Palazzo San Calisto, Vatican City.

Four Bishops, several National Directors or Representatives of the Bishops' Conferences, and experts, from twenty eight countries were present from Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Burundi, Canada, China, England, Egypt, Eritrea, Germany, Japan, India, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, South Africa, The Netherlands, Taiwan, USA and Zimbabwe. The religious orders were represented by the Capuchins, The Missionaries of Charity and the Comboni Missionaries. The Sovereign Order of Malta was also present with representatives from both SECAM and CCEE. There were also representatives of associations and movements, among them "Aux Captifs La Liberation", FEANTSA, FIO, Community of John XXIII, The Community of Saint' Egidio, The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and SELAVIP.

The President of the Pontifical Council, His Eminence Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, greeted and welcomed the participants. He reflected that the presence of so many people from around the world testified to the fact that we were dealing with a global phenomenon. He continued by reminding us that homelessness was not new. From the very beginning, with the expulsion of our first parents from the garden of Eden, men and women have found themselves wandering and living on the streets. In fact, from the very earliest times, Christians have tried to respond with a pastoral solicitude to the plight of the poor and homeless. He traced a number of pointers in the life of the Church, through the ordinary Magisterium and the various directives that have tried to guide Christians in their response to the pastoral care of the homeless. Finally he drew emphasis, and indeed strength, from the message contained by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical, *"Deus Caritas Est"*. Here, he pointed out, that whilst the gospel does not give immediate solutions to problems, we should always be guided by the desire to love our neighbour, and to see in them, the face of Christ. Thus the service of the homeless 'becomes a deep revelation of God's love for humanity'.

Next, Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, Secretary of the Dicastery, delivered the keynote address, entitled *"Lord, when did we see you...?"*(Matt 25:44). This heading set both the tone and challenge of the meeting by reminding us of the dominical injunction always to see the face of Christ in the most poor and marginalized. He began by outlining the fact that when talking about homelessness, we were dealing with a lack of basic human rights. He continued not only to explain the reality of this global phenomenon, but also to say that it

manifested itself through many different expressions. Despite these diversities, homelessness almost always pushed a person in a downwards spiral of health, poverty and marginalization. Thus needs of the homeless clearly demanded both a human and ecclesial response. This was to be found not only in providing for basic necessities, but also in upholding their dignity as persons. Likewise the Church must develop a specific pastoral care which sees beyond the needs of a person to the person himself, for who he truly is, made in the likeness and image of God. This was the challenge to Christian communities: to become places of welcome, so that in the homeless they may not only welcome the Lord himself, but also they may mutually accompany him on a journey of restoration and re-integration.

During the remainder of this first day, there was an opportunity for the participants, not only to introduce themselves but also to share something of their apostolate and experience. These exposed the great contribution that was already being made in the field of the pastoral care of the homeless, as well as the extraordinary diversity present in the situations in which they found themselves.

During the two days, the meeting separated into several different language groups to share experiences of good practice, methodologies, successes and failures in the pastoral care of the homeless. On the second day, these groups looked towards the characteristics that should underlie a future ecclesial response. Some questions were posed to them to facilitate reflection and dialogue.

The main work in the morning of the second day was a long speech given by Professor Mario Pollo of LUMSA and of the Salesian University, Rome. He presented a comprehensive picture of homelessness and the various pastoral responses, gathered from a survey conducted by the Pontifical Council through the various different participants.

The afternoon of this day was given over to the Round table under the title: "*The Human Commitment and the Pastoral Care of the Homeless*". Baronne Martine Jonet of the Sovereign Order of Malta, Mr. Roger Playwin, the National Director of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, USA, Fr Barnabe d'Souza, Director of the shelter 'Don Bosco', India, Mr Christian Gianfreda of the Community of Sanit'Egidio and Sr Mary Christina Bove Roletti, National Co-ordinator of the Pastoral Care of the Street, Brazil, shared their experiences of the particular situations in their own countries and organizations, outlining principles that should guide good and pastoral care and future approaches.. Above all they emphasized that it was important not only to care for the homeless but to express the value and dignity of their lives.

The final part of the meeting considered the deliberations of the working groups and the formulation of conclusions and recommendations. The meeting ended with a deep desire to continue in dialogue and fraternal accompaniment in the this field of pastoral care for those without a fixed abode.

II. Conclusions

1. Because of his condition, the person without a fixed dwelling remains unrepeatably singular and unique. In a society that interprets social relations as a function of obtaining economic gain, the Church takes upon itself the task of giving it back the value of a gratuitous relationship and its most profound meaning.

2. In our historical and social context there are some who choose to identify the poor as a person where there has been a failure of both human nature and needs. The outcome is that

poverty is considered as the result of a life without values and therefore a fault. Consequently poverty is seen as a situation from which it is almost impossible to be freed. Its permanence is a mark capable of staining human existence forever.

3. The fate of the person without a fixed dwelling is further marked if it is considered a “choice”. Who would ever choose a life of expedients or an existence marked by instability for oneself and his/her own family? In spite of this, the search for justice begins with recognizing the poor, with the conviction that calling them by an erroneous name means adding yet a further injustice.

4. We are usually before a concept that considers the homeless as people who are “different”. Poverty is a problem that seems to pertain to others. In reality there is no difference because we live in a “society at risk”, in which no one can claim to be exempt from the risk of becoming poor.

5. In each of the five continents the example and dedication of Christian communities to the “least among the least” are a visible sign of the love of God for the human being, wherever he/she may live, in every life situation. This is even more visible in the specific activities that they promote, even if methodologies are different and organizational choices are characteristic of the places where pastoral action is carried out. Diverse fundamental values characterize the being done and constitute its teleological setting.

6. The first is the dimension of relations. Assuming that a definition of someone who is homeless could be “*person who is in a state of material and immaterial poverty which brings about a complex, dynamic and multiform discomfort*”, manifested in not having a fixed dwelling, then, we would see that the dimension of relational deficiency – together with economic deficiency – is, to the same degree, an element that can define and provoke a life of poverty especially for those without a fixed abode. This must be placed at the foundation of any further reflection. To affirm this would determine an itinerary towards a greater trust, a true and significant life in which it is possible to call one another friends. This is possible even in places without ‘structures’ like the road; it is a pedagogical place, but also pastoral, with the aim of bringing about integral human promotion and change.

7. To do this, the Church and the local community work in the territories and pay attention to the existing needs and offer support to find a solution. In this common itinerary homeless persons living there are inserted in a journey of reconciliation, as far as the inhabitants of a certain territory are concerned. This process implies a necessary existential complementarity. Only in relationships can the human person discover and recognize himself. The community is called to do likewise with the homeless. They are the other side of the social choices and processes usually considered normal.

8. The political changes and social phenomena that are constantly changing require a prophetic action on the part of the local Churches. Today we see that they are steadfastly committed to care for life, through their choices and their witness that love for Christ is a wellspring for mankind healed from the wounds of indifference.

9. Some essential elements guide the “best pastoral work” among the homeless. For instance there is the twofold choice of sharing and justice. Sharing a common destiny comes from profound relationships in which the way one looks at the poor is purified. Sharing is also

bringing back the certainty that there is someone who has the destiny of others in his heart, and likewise confirming – through our work – that God loves, *hic et nunc*.

10. To believe in significant relationships, put beside material aid the dimension of promotion, the fact to be agents of pedagogy for mediation and belief that the course to follow, in order to get away from serious marginalization, is progressive and important, implies thinking, proposing and believing in a comprehensive pastoral care.

11. The homeless represent an occasion for the whole of society, which is called to a co-responsibility to promote an emphatic approach which is the basis of an evolutionary process. It is a matter of understanding the situation rather than identifying an explanation which at times deteriorates into categorizing. It is a matter of not considering the person as an object, a receiver of interventions defined previously. This requires planning that does not stigmatise, far from actions of social restraint in a logic of true inclusion.

In spite of this, welcome is limited, fragile, incapable, but sustained by a deliberate and constant commitment. Spontaneity, fragmentation and having remnants are elements that are contrary to an integral, lasting and sustainable approach.

12. The task of awareness-building – within a hermeneutical process – is a way by which one thinks of and plans for a future that is different, in which dignity is rediscovered (not only given back). Precisely because every person safeguards within himself his being unique and unrepeatable as a child of God, it is essential to respect the time needed for growth and change. This is also true for the ecclesial community involved in caring for the neighbour.

13. In all pastoral relationships it is necessary to be “true”. To live the truth in exercising charity should be at the basis of every possible action. And this truth asks for a demonstration of gratuitousness, its source and underlying reasons. Summing up we can see that the blueprint of a Church that is near her children, in spite of their being often far from “home”, should be its “being salt and light”.

14. Offering a ‘home’ is therefore an intrinsic task of every pastoral action. It is not simply a matter of offering a roof but of a place where people can be themselves fully and with dignity. In a word, it is a place where one can build one’s home of relations, and develop every dimension of one’s existence, including the spiritual one.

15. Homeless tends to increase in number in both developed and developing countries, in big cities and rural areas, among citizens and immigrants, including men, women and children of all ages.

16. The Church through its many institutions has been committed to helping homeless people by operating soup kitchens, shelters, job training and placement, advocacy, providing training to take up jobs as part of the process of their integration to the community, and providing pastoral care.

17. Although it is not without connection to the ordinary pastoral care of the Church, there is a need for a specific pastoral care for homeless people. This is holistic and multidimensional, spiritual, social and relational.

18. Pastoral care should be understood in the broadest sense as responding to spiritual need as an integral part of the human person.

19. The ministry of hospitality, especially to the marginalized, is also integral to parish life. When the poor and homeless are missing, the Church is not complete, for there is a clear connection between the works of charity and the demands of justice.

III. Recommendations

For society

1. Since socio-economic reality is complex and doing works of justice means living justice, it is necessary to work in what is complex, avoiding fragmentation. Moreover, the loss of values destabilizes social cohabitation and so the local Churches should present an axiological point of view that leads the human person to the human person.
2. To achieve this objective it is important to believe in a local “network” wherein responsibilities and authority are recognized. Therefore one should choose planning rather than intervening in emergency situations. One should promote occasions of intra-ecclesial and extra-ecclesial coordination as an opportunity to define common aims, as well as mutual understanding of the language used to analyse and face the needs of the homeless. In this way there will be a promotion of the development of a pastoral care of homelessness purified from stereotypes, from “pre-understanding” and from ideological divisions.
3. One should be careful not to create “specialists of need” – organizations or groups who think they are designated to take care of the homeless – and therefore it is appropriate to give back to the central and local civil authorities their respective responsibilities. Only in this way is it possible to affirm and live a civilization of love in which the Church operates out of love for Christ.
4. We should promote the inclusion of work and housing in the enumeration of the fundamental rights. These should also include health, taken not only as the absence of pathologies, but as access to existential well-being.
5. It is therefore opportune, in every pastoral action for the homeless – like offering housing, work, psychological treatment, educational accompaniment, etc. – to assume the limits of the person in order to avoid failure, as far as possible. This means that it is necessary to have possible and reachable objectives.
6. A new and respectful language must be developed when speaking about people who are experiencing homelessness.
7. Services should be focused on improving quality of life and long-term solutions. These should be non-judgemental and delivered in a respectful manner taking into consideration the Social Doctrine of the Church on the dignity of the human person. In addition they need to focus on fundamental transformation, tapping human potential to create hope and new life.

For the Church

8. The Church's engagement with homeless people must be based on the fundamental truth that in them is present the suffering and risen Christ. Following the example of Christ, we need to listen to them, develop trust and form relationships. To that purpose, the Church must reach out to them on the street in positive engagement.
9. In order to be able to offer better service to homeless people, collaboration among ecclesial institutions must be fostered, ending the tendency to work alone sometimes in a spirit of competition. Appropriate collaboration is also encouraged with government, other religions, and non-religious based institutions that share the same concerns and goals. Ecumenical initiatives should be actively pursued.
10. Homeless people are to be encouraged to participate socially and ecclesially to the greatest extent possible. Programs in their favour should take into account their respective experiences, beliefs, cultures and needs, involving people in their own recovery and avoiding the creation of dependency.
11. Approach people as unique individuals recognizing within them the image and likeness of God, calling each one by name.
12. In spite of difficulties in the context in which one works, it appears opportune to walk with conviction in the paths of justice, reiterating the uniqueness of the role of the Church, coming from what it believes in.
13. It is therefore necessary and opportune to know this reality both through studies and through welcome, a result of relations. The poor form part of the ecclesial community and as such, they must be welcomed in the same way as the suffering families, the widows, etc. Every person has his own story and specific problems that should be known and faced. The homeless must be considered as bearers of rights and not be seen only as a catalogue of needs to satisfy.
14. Empower the homeless to have a voice themselves in the Church and public forum. This may take the form of theatre or other media.
15. Involve students at various levels to learn about homelessness and do outreach appropriate to their level.
16. Encourage good family and community relations in parishes so that emerging local needs can be identified and action taken to prevent homelessness from occurring.
17. Ecclesial documents should be used as a resource to provide effective ministry to the homeless.
18. Adequate financial resources should be provided so that lay people are enabled to contribute to the pastoral care of homeless people.

For Episcopal Conferences

19. Bishops' Conferences should advocate for housing rights and development in the spirit of *Populorum Progressio*. Good advocacy flows from reliable information. Local bishops

can gain knowledge of the issues from their own associations and others working in their diocese.

20. An itinerary of a strong commitment implies the activation of the Episcopal Conferences, the help of the Holy See, enlightenment by the teachings of the Holy Father.

21. In this context, the Bishops' Conferences should propose guidelines for funding to support activities specifically intended to help the homeless, to plan a different future, to sustain those who already work for the poor (who are often poor themselves).

22. The sacred Liturgy could express this solicitude through concrete liturgical signs signifying the centrality of the poor in the heart of God. A day of prayer for those suffering from extreme poverty (maybe on 17 October, celebrated as World Day against poverty) could contribute to this.

For Dioceses

23. Unused church resources (buildings) could be placed at the disposal of the development of affordable housing or shelter. Dioceses might consider developing a housing project for the homeless as a concrete sign of this first international meeting, if they have not already done so.

24. Seminarians, religious and pastoral ministers must be formed in Catholic Social Doctrine and pastoral care of the poor and marginalized.

25. Greater presence of the permanent Diaconate is encouraged to work with the poor and homeless.

26. Greater connection should be made with the work of religious men and women and associations who have a long tradition of social ministry.

For parishes and communities

27. Parishes should be "communities of welcome". The establishment of parish 'social committees' is encouraged to promote and focus the corporal works of mercy.

28. Homilies and other forms of catechesis should address the plight of the homeless and our consequent christian response.

29. For the Christian community to be welcoming, it must put aside prejudices by carrying out an action of recognition. In that sense there are no poor that are a prerogative exclusively for someone's action. In any case, it is always the community that must bear the burden, even if it may be through an action that gives back responsibility. In a given territory, a community is welcoming when it identifies the need and furnishes flexible responses that are not "bureaucratic". Therefore, ecclesial communities can take the risk of living a prophetic charity.

30. It is opportune that ecclesial communities recognize the presence of available competence in their midst. Such competence must be accompanied by a proposal of formation, able to furnish elements that are useful in understanding the reality.

31. In the Parishes, therefore, it is possible to promote “works that are signs” to affirm prophecy, interest and commitment of the Christian community for the homeless. In particular, at the local level, it is opportune to catch the symptoms of suffering and, even before that, those of uneasiness. The latter can be prevented when ample space is given to listening to what the person is living and experiencing.

32. Each parish and other Church groups should heed the Gospel mandate to welcome the stranger and care for the needy and homeless among them in the most appropriate way. Chaplains and spiritual counsellors should be readily available for homeless people, especially during critical situations in their lives and times of bereavement.

33. The local community, the Churches, the people of God, are also called to believe in the future of the homeless. This can take place through constant communication in the proper form and at the proper time. Every occasion meant to “give a voice to those who have none” (see the experience of the so-called street newspapers) is an opportunity that can change the way homeless people identify themselves, but also the way society considers and perceives them. All this is a step in increasing their trust in themselves and in life.

For the Pontifical Council

34. The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, with the help of the participants, should map the organizations that are working with the homeless so that it is easier to share models and facilitate communication and coordination.

35. The same Pontifical Council could devote a week each year to the awareness of the pastoral needs of the homeless, maybe on the occasion of the international days dedicated to these persons.

36. This meeting should not be the first and the last; a follow-up is needed.