

POPE FRANCIS

'Treat all people with humanity'

The pontiff talks to street papers about the need for integration – whether we're welcoming homeless people into the churches or refugees into our countries

BY STEFANO LAMPERTICO
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Pope Francis has always had a special connection to those living on the street. So much so that last year, in Rome, where approximately 6,000 vulnerable, poor or homeless people gathered for the Jubilee of the socially excluded, he delivered a touching mea culpa: "I ask your forgiveness, on behalf of the Christians who, when reading the Gospel, do not see the matter of poverty at its heart; for all the times we, as Christians, have found ourselves before a person trapped in poverty, and turned away from them."

And it was Pope Francis who led by example, in the days of extreme cold at the beginning of 2017, when six homeless people died of exposure within 48 hours. The pope ordered that the doors of the Vatican be opened, and – remembering the stalwart volunteers still working in the homeless shelters – made donations of sleeping bags and gloves.

With the Community of Sant'Egidio, he opened the church of San Calisto in Trastevere as a warming shelter where people experiencing homelessness could sleep and eat. And how can we forget the showers and barbershop for the homeless, under the colonnade of St. Peter's Square, or the special visit he organized to the Sistine Chapel?

But food and blankets alone are not enough to restore dignity to those who have lost it. So Pope Francis has decided to give those who possess little or nothing a seat in the front row for the Papal Blessing at the Vatican on May 14.

A year and a half after he first spoke to street papers, Pope Francis sat down for an exclusive interview with vendor Antonio Mininni and editor Stefano Lampertico of Italian street paper Scarp de' tenis.

Scarp de' tenis: *A few weeks ago, at the start of winter when the cold became severe, you appealed to all the churches to open their doors and welcome homeless people. What was the reaction to your appeal?*

Pope Francis: The appeal was heard by many people in many parishes – they listened and answered. In the Vatican, there are two parishes, and every parishioner welcomed a Syrian family as guests. Many churches in Rome opened their doors in welcome, and I know that some others, not having the space to host guests, raised enough money to cover a whole year's rent for the needy and their families.

Our goal must be integration, and so it is important to provide support and company at the beginning. Much has been done, all over Italy. Catholic schools, convents and many other organizations all opened their

doors. This is why I say the call was answered. I know that many people made monetary donations to help those without accommodation pay for somewhere to stay.

Scarp: *When you meet someone who is experiencing homelessness, what is the first thing you say to them?*

Pope: "Hello, how are you?" Sometimes we only exchange a few words, other times we are able to build rapport and I am able to listen to fascinating stories: "When I was studying at college ..." or "I once knew a really good priest ..."

You may ask, why does this interest me? People who live on the streets can tell immediately if there's genuine interest from the person speaking to them or if it's only out of – I don't want to call it compassion – it's more like penitence. Some people see a homeless person just as another person; others treat them as if they were a dog. If you look at someone differently, they of course realize it.

In the Vatican, there is a famous story of a homeless man, of Polish origin, who could normally be found at the Piazza Risorgimento in Rome. He never spoke to anyone, not even the Caritas (Catholic charity) volunteers who would bring him a hot meal in the evening. Only after a long time were they able to learn his story: "I am a priest. I know your Pope well; we studied together at the seminary." These words eventually reached St. John Paul II, who heard the name and confirmed they had been at the seminary together. He wanted to meet this man. They embraced after 40 years apart, and after an audience, the pope

asked him to hear his confession – this priest who had once been his friend. Afterwards, he said to the pope, "Now it's your turn." And the pope heard his confession.

Thanks to the deeds of the volunteer, a kind look, a hot meal and some words of comfort, this man was able to resume the path to a life like his old one, eventually working as the chaplain of a hospital. The pope helped him, certainly, perhaps this counts as a "miracle," but it's also an example to remember the grand dignity that the homeless possess.

When I was archbishop of Buenos Aires, a homeless couple and a family lived under the archway to our entrance hall, between the pavement and the grilles. I met them every morning when I went out. I always said hello, and we would exchange a few words. It never occurred to me to chase them away. Somebody once said to me, "They are a stain on our Church," but to me, those words were the stain. I think one must treat all people with humanity, not as if they owe you a debt, and not as if they were impoverished dogs.

Scarp: *Many wonder if they should give alms to those who beg for help on the street. What would you answer?*

Pope: There are many ways to justify one's actions when not giving alms. "But why should? If I give him money, he'll just spend it on a glass of wine." If a glass of wine is his only happiness in life, then so be it. Ask yourself instead what you do, when you're alone. What secret "happiness" do you pursue?

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Scarp de' tenis editor Stefano Lampertico interviews Pope Francis.

Or, when you compare yourself to him, you see yourself as more fortunate, with a house, a spouse, a family, and so you find yourself saying, "Let the rest of you worry about him!"

It is always right to give help. Of course, that doesn't mean it's good to just throw some coins in the direction of a beggar. What matters more is a good deed, helping someone who asks you for help, looking in their eyes and touching their hands. Throwing money at someone without

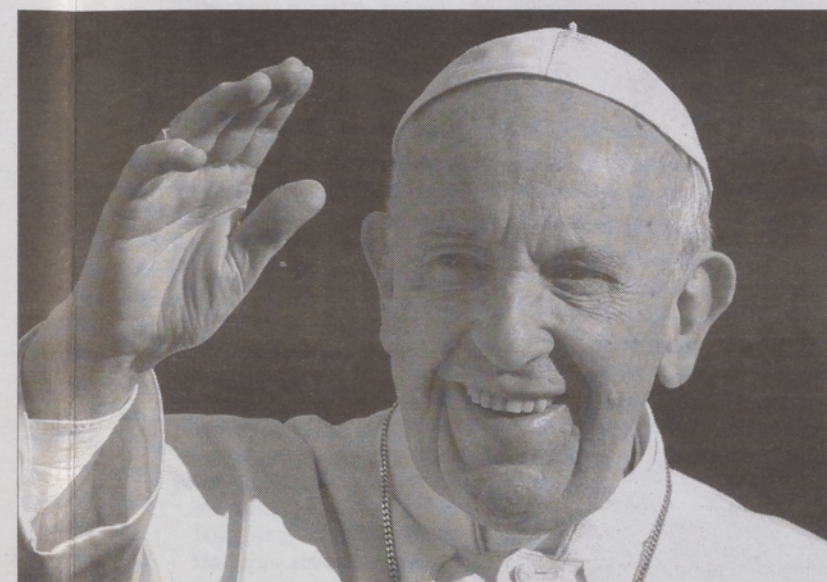


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her children alone at home; they had homework to finish, and she prepared a snack in advance of their lunch. When she got home, she found her three children sat at the table with a stranger, a homeless man. They had learned her lesson too well and perhaps too hastily, for sure they had forgotten their common sense a little. Teaching charity is not about offloading one's faults, but about touching another person, and looking at the wretchedness within oneself, knowing that God sees us and will save us. Because we all have our own miseries, on the inside.

Scarp: *On several occasions, the pope has spoken out in defense of migrants seeking asylum and charity. Milan is in some ways the capital for asylum seekers. However there are many who wonder if it is really necessary to accommodate everyone or whether it is necessary to set limits.*

Pope: Those arriving in Europe now are fleeing from war or famine. And we are in some ways responsible, because we strip their lands for profit, but we don't make any investments from which the locals can benefit. They have the right to emigrate, and they have the right to be sheltered, to be helped. But this is something we must do with Christian virtue, a virtue that must be guided by wisdom. What does this mean? It means taking in all those that we are able to take in. This has first to do with numbers. But more importantly we must reflect upon the ways in which we admit people, because to welcome means to integrate with. This is the most difficult aspect, and if migrants don't integrate, then they become segregated. I am often reminded of the Zaventem incident, (the suicide bombings at the airport and metro station in Brussels). These were Belgian youths, yes, children of migrants who had grown up in a quarter of the city that resembled a ghetto.

And what does it mean to integrate? Again I will give you an example. From Lesbos, 13 people came to Italy with me. By their second day here, thanks to the

community of Sant'Egidio, all the children were already attending school. In almost no time, the refugees had found places to live, the adults were enrolled in courses to learn Italian and to find work. Certainly, it is easier for children: They go to local schools and in a few months can speak better Italian than I can. The men looked for work, and they found it. So "to integrate" means to enter into the local way of life, respecting the local culture but also respecting and maintaining one's own heritage and cultural richness. It is a difficult task.

In Buenos Aires, in the days of the military dictatorship, we looked to Sweden as a positive example. Today they have a population of 9 million, but 890,000 are "new Swedish" migrants, or the children of migrants, who have integrated. The Swedish minister for culture, Alice Bah Kuhnke, is the daughter of a Swedish mother and a father of Gambian origin. This is a wonderful example of integration. Of course even now there are difficulties in Sweden: There are many requests for citizenship, and they are trying to figure out what to do as there is not a place for everyone. Admitting, receiving, welcoming and immediately integrating – that is what we are often missing out. Every country must therefore realize how many people it is able to accommodate. You cannot shelter people without the possibility of integration.

Scarp: *Your own family history includes your father's parents, with their son, crossing the ocean to Argentina. What was it like growing up the child of an immigrant? Did you ever feel uprooted at all?*

Pope: I never felt uprooted, or out of place. In Argentina, we are all immigrants. That is why interfaith dialogue is the norm. I went to school with Jewish immigrants who had mostly come from Russia, as well as Syrian and Lebanese Muslims, or Turks with passports from the Ottoman Empire. We were a brotherhood. There were few people of indigenous origin. For the most part, we were originally Italian, Spanish, Polish, Middle Eastern, Russian, German, Croat, Slovenian. ... In the last two centuries, migration has been a far-reaching phenomenon. My father was in his 20s when he arrived in Argentina, and he worked in the Bank of Italy. He was married there.

Translated from Italian to English by Eleanor Susan Lim.

Courtesy of Scarp de' tenis / INSP.ngo