

Pope returns to social Gospel, stressing jobs and ecology

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 22, 2013 The Francis Chronicles
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On his second Italian trip outside Rome, Pope Francis today visited the island of Sardinia, reinforcing his image as a pope of the social gospel by stressing the importance of jobs and environmental protection.

"If there's to be authentic promotion of the person, work has to be guaranteed," the pope said, insisting that work and human dignity are closely intertwined.

The pope also stressed ecological sensitivity, a special concern in places such as Sardinia that rely on tourism and agriculture as the prime motors of economic life. The pope argued that one area in which societies ought to be investing in job creation is precisely in eco-friendly enterprises.

The comments on jobs in particular have obvious political and social relevance in Italy, where almost half of the population between 15 and 24 is estimated to be out of work. As the Italian economy remains mired in recession, Prime Minister Enrico Letta recently described youth unemployment as a "plague."

Sardinia has been especially hard hit amid the Eurozone crisis, with its physical isolation compounding the challenge of kick-starting recovery.

The pope told his audience today in the city of Cagliari that he can feel their pain, because he lived through a similar economic meltdown in Argentina in the late 1990s.

Francis argued today that such implosions are not merely a technical or economic problem, but also have an "ethical, spiritual and human" dimension.

"At its roots, it's a betrayal of the common good, both on the part of individuals and by powerful groups," he said, without identifying specific culprits.

"The entire society, in all its components, should make every possible effort to ensure that work, which is a source of dignity, is a central preoccupation," Francis said.

Francis stressed that job creation programs must focus on generating "dignified" work, because times of crisis tend to breed "inhuman work, slave-labor, work without property security or without respect for creation, without respect for rest, holidays and families, such as working on Sunday when it's not necessary."

The pope then devoted a major section of his address to a strong dose of ecological sensitivity.

"Work must be connected to the custody of creation, so that it's preserved responsibly for future generations," he said.

"Creation isn't a commodity to exploit, but a gift to care for," he said.

"Ecological commitment itself is an occasion for new jobs in sectors connected to it, such as energy, the prevention and clean-up of various forms of pollution, vigilance regarding fires in the patrimony of forests, and so on," he said.

Francis said society needs a commitment to both ecology and to "human ecology."

The pope celebrated Mass today at the famed Sardinian sanctuary of Our Lady of Bonaria, which has been under the care of the Mercedarian religious order since the 14th century. The complex arose on the site of what local tradition regards as the miraculous saving of a ship due to a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Francis' desire to visit the shrine is in keeping with the strong emphasis he places on popular devotions and religiosity, reflecting his experience as a pastor in Latin America.

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