NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

?Immigrant Pope? pope visits Rome?s immigrant parish

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 19, 2014 NCR Today
Rome

Pope Francis, who already profiles as the ?immigrant pope? both due to his arriving in Rome from ?the ends of the earth,? as he said on the night of his election, and because of his strong advocacy on behalf of migrants and refugees, made another clear statement of solidarity Jan. 19 by visiting a Roman parish known for outreach to immigrants and the poor.

Not coincidentally, the visit came on a day set aside by the Catholic church as the ?World Day of Migrants and Refugees.? Francis released a message for the occasion back in August, insisting that migrants and refugees ?are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity.?

The pope?s visit today to the parish of Sacro Cuore di Gesù a Castro Pretorio was obviously intended to drive that point home.

During his afternoon outing to the parish, which is located near the main Roman train station of Termini, the pope met with both roughly 60 homeless persons who live in the area and a delegation of 100 young immigrants along with parish volunteers who work with them.

The visit builds on frequent mentions over the past ten months by Francis of immigrants as primary victims of a ?throw-away culture,? as well as his July 8 visit to Lampedusa, an island in the southern Mediterranean that serves as a major point of arrival for migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East seeking to reach Europe.

On that occasion, Francis condemned a ?globalization of indifference? to immigrants and laid a wreath in the sea to commemorate the estimate 20,000 people who have died over the last two decades trying to make the crossing.

During his Sunday Angelus address earlier on Jan. 19, Francis told immigrants that ?you are close to the heart of the church? and said that he thinks often of the hardships many of them are forced to endure.

The pope cited Blessed Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, a 19th century Italian bishop who founded a religious order specialized in the care of migrants and refugees, to condemn ?merchants of human flesh? who traffic in migrants.

The pope also called on wealthy nations to be ?welcoming? of immigrants and to ?preserve their values.?

During his parish visit, Francis also met children baptized within the past year as well as their parents, newly married couples and young families. He also heard five confessions and celebrated a Mass.

The parish of Sacro Cuore di Gesù a Castro Pretorio was constructed by Italian St. John Bosco at the request of Pope Leo XIII, and is entrusted to Bosco?s Salesian order. It?s long had a special focus on the homeless and

immigrant population that tends to congregate around the Termini train station.

Salesian Fr. Valerio Baresi, the pastor, said that the parish offers Italian language classes, vocational training, and other services to roughly 400 immigrants and asylum seekers every year.

?We?re situated in a context of fairly degrading human circumstances, related to so many people who, either because they?re immigrants or they?re homeless, try to ?camp out? in the are around the station,? Baresi told Vatican Radio.

?We can?t pretend not to see them, or to ignore them,? he said.

This was Francis? fourth visit to a Roman parish, after outing to St. Elizabeth and Zechariah on May 26, St. Cyril of Alexandria on Dec. 1, and St. Alfonso Maria Liguori on Jan. 6. On that last visit, the pope witnessed a ?living nativity set? organzied each year by members of the parish.

During his brief and entirely extemporaneous homily, Francis reflected on the gospel reading of John the Baptist's proclamation upon seeing Jesus: 'Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.' Francis invited the congregation to close their eyes and imagine the scene, saying something to Jesus in the silence of their hearts, and also insisted that "Jesus never disappoints us."

Francis? interest in service to the poor was also reflected in his 40-minute encounter the evening before his parish visit with 101-year-old Italian Fr. Arturo Paoli, a member of the ?Little Brothes of the Gospel? religious order inspired by Blessed Charles de Foucauld.

Paoli was active in the the Italian resistence to fascism in the 1940s before spending much of the 1960s and 70s in Latin America, where he became one of the forerunners to the liberation theology movement.

A brief notice from Vatican Radio said Paoli had expressed a strong desire to see Francis, whom he knew as a Jesuit provincial in Argentina in the 1970s, and that the pope welcomed him for a lengthy private meeting at the Casa Santa Marta, the Vatican residence where Francis resides.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter:@JohnLAllenJr)

Source URL (retrieved on *04/27/2015 - 13:00*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/immigrant-pope-pope-visits-rome-s-immigrant-parish