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Pope, greeting refugees, says solidarity is not a dirty word

by Francis X. Rocca by Catholic News Service

Rome — Speaking at an assistance center for foreign refugees in Italy, Pope Francis called on wealthy societies and the Catholic Church to do more to help and defend the rights of the needy.

"Charity that leaves a poor person just the way he is does not suffice," the pope said Sept. 10 at the Rome headquarters of Jesuit Refugee Service. "True mercy, that which God gives us and teaches us, asks for justice, asks that the poor person find the way to be poor no more."

In his remarks, the pope recalled his July trip to the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, a major entry point into Italy for undocumented migrants from Africa. During that trip, he denounced the "globalization of indifference" and called for more welcoming policies in richer countries.

As on that occasion, Pope Francis did not hesitate to strike a political note.

"Solidarity, this word that strikes fear in the more developed world," he said. "They try not to say it. It's almost a dirty word for them. But it is our word!"

Addressing a wider public, he urged every resident of Rome to ponder a series of soul-searching questions: "Do I stoop toward someone in difficulty or am I afraid to get my hands dirty? Am I closed inside myself, in my things, or am I aware of who needs my help? Do I serve only myself, or do I know to serve others like Christ, who came to serve even to the point of giving his life?"

The pope called the poor "privileged teachers of our knowledge of God; their fragility and simplicity unmask our egoism, our false sense of security, our purported self-sufficiency, and lead us to experience the nearness and tenderness of God."

Pope Francis did not spare the church in his criticisms, calling on religious orders to make a stronger commitment to the poor.

"Empty convents do not serve the church so that they can be turned into hotels for earning money," he said, referring to homes for religious men and women. "Empty convents are not ours, they are for the flesh of Christ, who are the refugees."

During his visit to the Astalli Center, located in central Rome, the pope greeted some of the hundreds who come there every day for a meal, then conversed with refugees from various countries, including Congo, Somalia and Colombia. Before his remarks, he heard short speeches of greeting from refugees from Darfur and Syria.

The Syrian, who was identified by her first name, Carol, voiced disappointment with the reception those fleeing her country's civil war have found in Europe.

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"Our human rights and our dignity are too often trampled by the indifference and superficiality with which we happen to be treated," she said. "We have escaped from the horror, but we don't yet feel safe."

Following his visit to the center, Pope Francis visited the nearby Church of the Gesu, mother church of the Society of Jesus. There the pope, a Jesuit, paid a brief visit to the tomb of Father Pedro Arrupe, superior of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983, who founded Jesuit Refugee Service in 1981.

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