



## Rome and Buenos Aires prepare for Francis's World Day of the Poor



Pope Francis hugs a faithful during an audience with the participants of homeless jubilee in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Friday, Nov. 11, 2016. (Credit: Alessandra Tarantino/AP.)

As the Church prepares to celebrate the first World Day for the Poor - instituted by Pope Francis at the end of the Jubilee for Mercy - we take a look at the activities planned in the two dioceses most associated with the pontiff: Rome and the Argentinian capital, Buenos Aires.

ROME - In November 2016, as churches around the world were closing the Holy Doors opened during the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis welcomed thousands of “socially excluded people” in the Vatican. During that encounter with them, he “had the idea that” as a tangible sign of the Holy Year, the Church should celebrate a World Day of the Poor.

As is often the case with the pope, that idea soon became a reality.

The day, to be marked annually on the 33rd Sunday of the Ordinary Time, will be “another tangible sign of this Extraordinary Holy Year,” Francis wrote in his apostolic letter *Misericordia et Misera* (Mercy and Misery), closing the jubilee.

The Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, which coordinated the Jubilee of Mercy, is also in charge of the events in Rome surrounding the pope’s latest initiative.

“To understand the need for a World Day of the Poor, we have to look back to the origin of this day,” said Monsignor Geno Sylva, an official of the council.

According to Sylva, it was then, as Francis was delivering his homily during a Mass he celebrated with the socially marginalized, that he “saw the faces of those who were there,” which “evoked in him this desire to name this day as the World Day of the Poor.”

Sylva has been working at the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization for the past five years, under its president, Italian Archbishop Salvatore [Rino] Fisichella.

Every day, Sylva told *Crux*, is the day in which “we have to give to those who are in need, we have to share who we are.” However, having a day, marked the Sunday before Christ the King, gives us an opportunity to really “change our attitude.”

“It’s not just about giving a dollar or doing a work of mercy,” he said. “While those are wonderful things, it’s about how do we change our attitudes recognizing that everybody is poor in some way, and everybody has something to give.”

Francis is not unique in instituting a ‘World Day’: Paul VI in 1968 instituted the World Day for Peace, to be marked every Jan. 1; and John Paul II instituted several such days, including World Social Communications Day, and - most famously - World Youth Day.

As is always the case, the papal message to mark the day was released several months in advance. In this case, it came out June 13, and had the theme “Let us love, not with words but with deeds.”

“The poor are not a problem,” the pope wrote. “They are a resource from which to draw as we strive to accept and practice in our lives the essence of the Gospel.”

Dioceses around the world will be celebrating, but here is how the two dioceses most associated with Francis will mark the day: Rome and his native Buenos Aires.

### ***In Rome, the Vatican will be at the center of events***

For the past week, several tents offering medical aid to the homeless and the marginalized of the Eternal City have been on the “border” between the Vatican City State and Rome, set up in the famed Via della Conciliazione, by the fence enclosing St. Peter’s Square.

This, Sylva said, was done in preparation for the World Day of the Poor: “It’s a beautiful way to begin to enter in such an experience that will include prayer, as well as taking care of the daily needs of the people.”

On Saturday night, there will be a prayer vigil for all those who volunteer, “who journey with the poor every day.”

Francis will lead Sunday’s celebrations in Rome, with a Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica, where an estimated 3,000 homeless and other disadvantaged people are expected. Though the majority are people living in Rome, there will be groups coming from France and Poland, too.

After the Mass, the pope will host 1,500 of them in the Vatican's Paul VI Hall, where they will eat pasta, veal on polenta, and the classic Italian dessert, Tiramisu. Lunch will be served by a group of volunteers, including 36 permanent deacons from the city of Rome.

A children's choir will sing a couple of songs during lunch, and the band of the Gendarmerie Corps, the Vatican's police force, will play as the people walk into the hall.

"It will be a beautiful celebratory lunch. It's really festive," Sylva said.

The hall is often used during winter for the pope's Wednesday general audiences. The thousands of chairs that are always on hand will be replaced by 150 10-seat tables, plus an oval one, for 20, where Francis will sit.

"Today walking down the street, I spoke with this wonderful woman, Dora, who's from Holland, and lives here in the street," Sylva said on Monday. "And I told her, I'm coming to give you a ticket and she told me, 'I'm coming on Sunday, I'm coming on Sunday'."

However, not everyone will fit in the Paul VI Hall: Some 3,000 needy people will be fed in other parts of Rome as part of the day's celebration. For instance, the Pontifical North American College, home to the seminarians from the United States studying in Rome, will host 200 people.

Not all the venues will be Catholic institutions.

For instance, in downtown Rome, ten restaurants answered the call made by Father Pietro Sigurani, of the central Sant'Eustachio parish. Each will host 10 homeless people, allowing them to order "what they want" from their menus, and do so for free.

The logo for this year's World Day of the Poor depicts two people reaching out to one another, one from inside a building and one from the streets. According to Sylva, "it's a hand meeting a hand, and you don't know really who's giving and who's receiving, but there's a sense of reciprocity.

"I think that this celebration of the poor will really help us to sensitize ourselves to the truths of our faith: We help people, we should help people," he said. "Not because we have a relationship with the person, but solely because the other person has a need that we can fill."

This, in his view, is Francis's pastoral approach: The idea that love opens oneself to faith, and then faith sustains love.

His office prepared pastoral aids in seven languages, which have been distributed to bishops' conferences around the world. Even though many dioceses are organizing events to mark the day, Sylva acknowledged that he hopes in the years to come many more will replicate the efforts being made in Rome.

### ***In Buenos Aires, the slums will be at the center***

Among the dioceses that are preparing to mark the first World Day of the Poor is Francis's former archdiocese of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Auxiliary Bishop José María Baliña was tasked with organizing the main celebration, which will take place at the parish for Our Lady of Caacupe in the 21-24 slum, a place then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio often used to visit.

“Since it’s the first one, we organized something without too much pretension,” Baliña told *Crux* over the phone.

Cardinal Mario Poli, handpicked by Francis as his predecessor, will celebrate Mass on Sunday at the slum, and from there, there will be a procession to a local park, underlining the importance of “popular piety.” Along the way, those participating will be invited to hand out prayer cards with images of the three patrons of the event: Mother Theresa of Kolkata, Our Lady of Caacupé, and Argentina’s own Gaucho saint, Father Jose Gabriel del Rosario Brochero.

Once in the park, people here too will be offered lunch, although in this case it will be a traditional *choripan*, a sandwich Argentines often eat before or after a soccer match or during Sunday lunch. Here, the “Festival of Life” will take place. Throughout the afternoon, there will be different activities promoting the “encounter” among the participants.

“The idea is that people who normally don’t talk to each other, do so,” Baliña said. “For the poor to invite to their celebration those who live close to them, but who they don’t encounter. It’s an opportunity for dialogue and to see that we all have the main thing in common: Our dignity as persons, as children of God, and that which makes us different is not as important.”

In preparation of the actual date, parishes in Buenos Aires on Nov. 11 started praying a novena, which included the reading of a Bible passage, the witness of a saint, and the invitation to take action.

“In some parishes, the priest will invite those in attendance to visit a home for the elderly or the infirm at a hospital, or to volunteer at a local soup kitchen,” Baliña said. “The idea is that they can experience the encounter with Christ in the poor, and that it will lead to a reflection as to why there are so many people living in the streets, and what can each one of us do for them.”