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CHURCH SEEKS TO BETTER MINISTER TO GYPSIES

Official Notes Improvement, More Steps to Take

ROME, MARCH 2, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The Church is offering her "maternal friendship" to Gypsies, while recognizing that at times, Catholics have added to the suffering of this nomadic people.

This affirmation was made today by Archbishop Antonio Maria Vegliò, the president of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, when he opened a three-day meeting for national directors of Gypsy ministry in Europe.

"We are united by our common desire to permit our brothers and sisters among the Roma, Sinti, Manousche, Calò, and Gypsies in general and other Traveling People a greater participation in the life and richness of the Church and, vice versa, to make the Church more present in their midst," the archbishop explained. He noted the meeting aims to improve coordination between Church and civil groups who aid Gypsies and to "find new methods and approaches, without ignoring the tried and tested methods of the past, to facilitate a better understanding between Gypsies and the Church."

The prelate acknowledged the difficult history of Gypsies since their arrival to Europe, listing the Nazi genocide, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and ongoing marginalization among the atrocities they've endured.

The Church has "had her own culpability" in this history, he admitted, and an examination of her role would show "many dark sides" but also "luminous examples" of those who've

helped bring a change in the attitude toward Gypsies.

Notable in this path of change, Archbishop Vegliò said, was Pope Paul VI's visit in 1965 to the Gypsy encampment at Pomezia.

The Pope told them on that occasion: "Here [in the Church] you are warmly welcome, here you are awaited, greeted, celebrated. [...] In the Church you are not on the margins, but, in some respects, you are the center, you are the heart. You are in the heart of the Church, [that] loves the poor, the suffering, the lowest, the disinherited, and the abandoned."

Archbishop Vegliò suggested this visit "made manifest to them the solicitude of the Church," and this effort was continued by Pope John Paul II. The prelate particularly noted the Polish Pope's request for forgiveness "for the sins committed by the sons of the Church in the past; sins that continue, unfortunately, to cast their shadow also over the present."

"A new journey of dialogue and reconciliation between Church and Gypsies thus began," the archbishop said.

Living today

Archbishop Vegliò lauded the changes that have come about in the treatment of Gypsies today. But, he lamented, still many "are forced to live in conditions of poverty. Others encounter difficulties in reaching the heart of the Church due to prejudices and stereotypes, sometimes so firmly rooted in society as to preclude the development and maturation of attitudes of openness, acceptance, solidarity and respect."

Gypsies themselves sometimes are guilty of "negative attitudes to the environments in which they live," he observed.

The path that leads to a "real culture of communion," he proposed, citing Benedict XVI, is marked by "love [that] is rich in intelligence and intelligence [that] is full of love."

Furthermore, the prelate continued, "ways of hope are being opened, as shown by the interest and mobilization of international and national organizations on behalf of Gypsies.

[...]

"The transformations in progress -- it is hoped -- will help to curb phenomena and acts of racism, 'anti-tziganism' and discrimination, and create a new 'European consciousness' which may permit Roma, Sinti and other groups of nomads to re-affirm their own identity and cultural diversity, in the framework of civil insertion in their respective countries."

And as far as the Church is concerned, Archbishop Vegliò concluded, it has a message for Gypsies: "We too, today, as once Paul VI, ask of them nothing more from a pastoral point of view than that they 'accept the maternal friendship of the Church.'"

There are some 36 million Gypsies worldwide, one half of whom live in India. In Europe there are between 9 and 12 million, living above all in Eastern Europe. In Italy, they represent 0.16% of the national population.

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