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ORTHODOX, CATHOLICS REFLECT ON CHARITY TOWARD POOR

Sant'Egidio Community Holds Congress in Rome

By Mariaelena Finessi

ROME, MAY 6, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- An international congress drew ecclesial leaders, scholars and members of several Christian movements together to Rome to reflect on the poor as a treasure to the Church.

The congress, which was held on Tuesday and promoted by the Sant'Egidio Community, was on the theme, "The Poor Are the Precious Treasure of the Church: Orthodox and Catholics Together on the Path of Charity."

Participants reflected on the reception of the most frail in our societies, the testimony of the Fathers of the Church, and the challenges dictated by new social problems.

Among the speakers were Arkadij Satov, president of the synodal department for charity of the Moscow Patriarchate; Patriarch Filaret, Metropolitan of Minsk and Sluck; and Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, former president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

"The object of existence is to give," explained Orthodox Archbishop Laurentiu of Sibiu, of the Patriarchate of Romania.

"What we have is given to us on loan and that is why we must restore it," said another speaker, Zoran Nedeljkovic.

He pointed out that if a person wanted to help the numerous needy by creating for them a village, St. John Chrysostom instead sold the precious objects that filled the episcopal house, allocating their great return to the foundation of hospitals and the maintenance of the marginalized.

Nedeljkovic noted that the saint preached, "If you want to honor the Body of Christ, do not disdain him when he is naked; do not honor the Eucharistic Christ with silk pieces, while outside the church you neglect

that other Christ who suffers from cold and nakedness."

The congress participants reflected on the example of St. Augustine, who also felt the tragedy of the poor and thus pressured the administrators of the cathedral of Hippo to aid the needy, often members of the same Christian community, which received foreigners, orphans, widows and victims of assaults.

New world

Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant'Egidio Community, noted that in more modern times, people have tried to build a "new world," in a "utopian and violent way, on the path of an ideological vision," such as Communism and other totalitarianisms.

In the plan of that "new world," he said, "evangelical charity, of which the Church had spoken for centuries, was no longer necessary."

Riccardi noted that Christians, confronted with that utopia, were often accused: "Were they not accomplices of the misery of so many poor, teaching them resignation and helping them episodically, without profoundly transforming the social reality?"

He affirmed that the challenge, begun in the 1800s with the growth of the Socialist movements and the divorce between the Church and the proletarian world, grew in the 1900s, with the realization of the Communist regimes.

"For them," he added, "the Church, 'enemy of the working class and of social progress,' was a vestige of the past to be eliminated."

Exiled, the Church was banned from celebrating the triumph of social equality achieved through charity, Riccardi observed.

However, he added, men and women of faith have tried to close the gap created between the Church and the poor: Raoul Follereau, Albert Schweitzer, Giorgio La Pira, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna of Russia, Orthodox nun Maria Skobtsova and Mother Teresa of Calcutta are but a few names.

Tested

Monsignor Marco Gnani stated that on the advent of the 21st century, "Christian humanism is finally put to the test in the urban and human architecture of the modern city, product and synthesis of the tensions of a globalized world."

In this context, he said, the poor person "reminds us of the limitation and frailty of our condition and is the bearer at times of a desperate request for humanization of the environment that surrounds him."

"He indicates what is lacking to our coexistence and invites to an interior glance to see beyond the satisfaction of the personal and material desire," the priest added.

Moreover, he said, whoever sees the poor and has compassion for them begins to view things in a different way.

The priest recalled that Pope Gregory the Great taught that the more one grows in love of neighbor, the more one rises in knowledge of God.

He added: "Bending down to one's neighbor, one acquires the strength to be upright. That charity which makes us humble and compassionate, then raises us to the highest degree of contemplation."