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Mad at everyone else, Muslim immigrants in Rome trust the pope

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 27, 2013 NCR Today
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Perhaps the most dramatic Christmas Day example of the ?Francis effect? came not in the Vatican but across town, in a Roman detention center for poor and undocumented immigrants. A four-day hunger strike, which featured angry Muslims from Morocco and Tunisia sewing their mouths shut, was suspended because the protestors were persuaded that Francis could ?make us heard.?

The immigrants had refused to eat and were sleeping outdoors despite freezing temperatures, but they accepted an offer to suspend the protest in exchange for a promise from Italian Fr. Emanuele Giannone, who runs the local branch of the Catholic charity Caritas, to carry a letter from them to Pope Francis describing their lives and explaining their demands.

The migrants said they accepted the offer because they regard this pope, who took the name of the "saint of the poor," as someone who truly understands their plight.

Twenty-four hours later several of the immigrants returned to their protest, but said they retained hope that Francis could move the ball on their demands, which include more rapid procedures to investigate requests for refugee status and the opportunity to seek work in Italy.

?We came to seek a better life, but we?ve only found the bars of a jail cell,? the immigrants wrote in their letter Francis. ?Holy Father, we are the new poor, but we?re not meat for a butcher shop.?

Francis has made defending the human rights of immigrants a major focus of his papacy, including a high-profile visit on July 8 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 enter Europe.

On that day, Francis condemned what he called a ?globalization of indifference? to immigrants and laid a wreath in the sea to commemorate roughly 20,000 people who have died in the past two decades trying to make the crossing.

He brought up Lampedusa again during his *Urbi et Orbi* address on Christmas Day, indirectly referring to a shipwreck in October that claimed more than 300 lives.

?Grant that migrants in search of a dignified life may find acceptance and assistance,? he said. ?May tragedies like those we have witnessed this year, with so many deaths at Lampedusa, never occur again!?

Giannone, a well-known figure on the Roman scene, spoke to NCR on Dec. 27 about the ?Francis effect? and the immigrant protest. The interview took place in Italian; the following is an NCR translation.

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NCR: Can you describe the conditions in which these immigrants live?

Giannone: In terms of sanitation and hygiene, and also in terms of the food that?s provided, the conditions are fairly good. The structure is well-maintained and provides these people with some dignity, even if it?s been damaged a few times due to violent protests that have erupted. What makes the model of life inside the center intolerable, however, is that these people are locked up without any idea of how long they?ll have to stay, with nothing to do to occupy their time in a worthwhile and satisfying fashion. That makes the conditions basically impossible to live with on a human level.

That?s the basis of the current protest?

Yes, and it should be said that this is a non-violent protest, posing no danger at all to the center itself. They?re trying to ask everyone to reflect on the conditions faced by immigrants in Italy, especially those warehoused in detention centers.

Where did the idea of a letter to the Pope come from?

I went to the center to celebrate a Mass for Christmas, because a handful of the detainees are Christian ? there?s one from Sri Lanka, one from Georgia, and so on. I try to do that every time I get the chance. Before Mass, I saw what was happening, that some of the immigrants had sown their mouths shut and were refusing to eat. After the Mass I went to talk to those guests, who are all Muslims, in order to hear what they had to say and to spend time with them.

They wanted to do something both to highlight their situation and to show respect for the Christmas season, and so the idea of suspending their protest while they wrote to the pope came up spontaneously. It was their idea, not mine. They really felt that if someone explained their situation to him, he would do something.

They told me that they?ve seen how much love he feels for immigrants, and they wanted to write to him. We got together in the men?s dining room in the detention center, and with the help of some of the workers there who could translate from Arabic to Italian, I listened to them and then wrote down what they wanted to say to the pope.

Have you delivered the letter?

Well, I did the best I could under the circumstances. It was around 8:00 in the evening on Christmas night, and the only thing I could think of was to go to St. Peter?s Square and put the letter in a Vatican mailbox address to the pope. Based on the options that were open to me at the time, it seemed like the best choice.

You don?t know if the letter actually got to Francis?

No, but I?m sure the pope is already following the situation closely and is well informed about what?s going on. Assuming he gets the letter, it will be another way of providing him information, but I?m sure he already knows the essentials.

Do you expect him to respond to the letter?

I don?t know, but I?ll put it this way: It certainly wouldn?t be surprising if he did.

Are the immigrants who wrote to the pope all Muslims?

Yes, they?re exclusively Muslims, mostly from Tunisia and Morocco. Some are living in what we call an

?irregular? situation in Italy, because they didn?t enter the country legally. The truth is that they had no way of getting into Italy in a legal fashion, because there are no clear and reliable laws here that provide a way to enter legally. Others have spent time in Italian prisons after having been charged with minor crimes, and after their sentence was finished they were sent here. Naturally, they see their detention as a form of double jeopardy, and they also wonder why whatever investigation the immigration services needed to do couldn?t have been done while they were in jail.

How do these Muslim immigrants feel about Pope Francis?

They trust him, which is why they immediately wanted to appeal to him. They told me that they saw the images of Francis in Lampedusa, they heard his words that day, and they knew that they came from the heart. They said that they feel close to him on a human level, and that when he speaks about immigrants it?s obvious that what he?s saying is real, it?s not just chatter.

How do you expect this protest to end?

It will end when the bureaucrats in Rome who are ultimately responsible for these detention centers actually show up to talk to these people, which so far they haven?t done. I also think it would be very helpful if the protestors were to see the parliament having a serious discussion about putting together a decent immigration law. Up to now, the people who have power over the lives of these immigrants haven?t communicated to them in any noticeable way that they?re listening.

Are you worried about the health of the protestors, if they refuse to eat and insist on sleeping out in the open?

Yes, especially since some of them have started sleeping outside again. The staff at the center has said they?ll have health care people on standby, a doctor and a couple of nurses, 24 hours a day. I hope they?ll be in a position to ensure the basic health of these people. Also, I have the protestors themselves show some good judgment and don?t put themselves at risk, maybe finding alternative ways of making their point. I believe they?re already taking turns among themselves, which ought to reduce the risk. The bottom line, however, is that they?re determined to keep this protest alive, and I share their protest.

Do you believe Francis shares it too?

That?s not for me to say, but what I can say is that this pope obviously feels close to any person who suffers and can?t live a dignified life. I hope that the protest, and the pope?s example, touches those who are responsible for this situation, awakening their compassion and their intelligence, so they can improve things.

Any other point you want to make?

I?d like to say that even though these detention centers are degrading in objective terms, the people who actually work there, the social workers and the security people, do it with a great sense of humanity, and they should be praised. It?s a tremendously difficult situation, but their presence is respectful and dignified.

*(Follow John Allen on Twitter:**@JohnLAllenJr**)*

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