News



Immigrants search for warm clothes Aug. 13 to help them face the winter in Santiago, Chile. Around 20,000 Venezuelans have arrived in Chile this year, 15 times more than 2016. (CNS/Jane Chambers)

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Around 20,000 Venezuelans have arrived in Chile this year — 15 times more than 2016. The vast majority of them say they are fleeing the political crisis in their country and going to Chile in search of a better life. Many of them are choosing to make the journey by bus — a 12-day ride.

"They arrive here with a suitcase which can only carry 20 kilos (44 pounds). They come from a tropical country where they are used to wearing summer clothes, and they don't even have a winter coat to cope with the cold here. So we do everything we can to help them," said Carmen Vegas, who has lived in Chile for the past 13 years. She is part of the community already living in Chile who try to help their fellow Venezuelans when they arrive.

On a recent cold winter morning, a line of immigrants patiently waited outside Our Lady of Pompeii Parish, also known as the Church for Immigrants. Luna Ramirez was busy organizing her volunteers. In the patio behind the church were tables piled high with winter clothes, coats, trousers, sweaters and shoes. Local residents had brought cars full of black plastic bags of clothes.

Ramirez let 10 people in at a time, and they could choose up to five items of clothes, a limit meant to ensure there is enough for everyone.

"This community has been so kind to me, giving me the winter clothes I need and helping me out," said Daniel Alvarado, a young photographer who arrived by bus in July.

Alvarado said the situation in Venezuela is getting more difficult all the time. He said people have lost an average of 22 pounds, because food is expensive and scarce. Security is an issue: Gangs kill people for their phones. Because inflation is so high, it is increasingly difficult to find the money to get out of the country. Flights that cost around $600 are infrequent, and many people choose the $300 bus ride, which allows their savings to go further.

Despite the situation, Alvarado said he still believes things will get better. "I have always believed in God; even though the situation is difficult, there are always moments of light. There is a reason for everything, and God will never abandon anyone. I have a lot of faith in God and in the people in my country."

Our Lady of Pompeii Parish runs workshops to help new arrivals like Alvarado with their paperwork and to find jobs. Like Alvarado, most immigrants arrive on a tourist visa and have 90 days to find work and apply for a temporary visa. He has found work in sales with a local phone company.

Scalabrinian Fr. Marcio Toniazzo, parish priest, told Catholic News Service: "Faith without works of charity is dead. Christ lives through our help. We have immigrants coming here every day in need of things."

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Toniazzo stressed that for new arrivals to have a dignified life, they need to find employment. But many professionals like lawyers or doctors end up waiting tables to make ends meet.

At the tables behind the church, Venezuelan Maria Flore was busy choosing some winter clothes for her little girl.

"I didn't realize how cold it was going be in Chile. I am so grateful to the community for helping us," she said.

Volunteer Carolina De Lima explained why she does this work.

"We are Catholics. I have a deep faith, and part of that faith is helping others who are less fortunate than I am. At the moment, it is our Venezuelan brothers and sisters who need our help. Part of our goal is to be there for them and to help them as much as we can. I know what it is like to be an immigrant, how sad it is to leave your country, especially when it wasn't out of choice, but because of what is going on there. These people arriving are very sad and need many things. It is part of my faith to inspire and help them," she said.