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Clergymen prepare to celebrate a Mass Sept. 5, 2023, in the villa 21-24 neighborhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina. (OSV News/Agustin Marcarian, Reuters)

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In his native Argentina, Pope Francis' vision of "a poor church, for the poor" is a reality.

"There is no choice," according to Vincentian Father Fernando Sanchez Donati, "these people are poor, and their church is poor," he told OSV News on a visit to one of Buenos Aires' most challenging communities where poverty and drug abuse are rife.

"The missionaries and the pastoral workers live alongside the people, they share their lives," said Donati, who is national director of the Pontifical Mission Societies in Argentina.

In the nearby parish dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima, Marianist Father Andrés Tocalini, told OSV News that the local people hold a memory of answered prayers.

The area first started to grow in the post-World War I (1914-1918) era, with an influx of immigrants, many of them from Portugal, where the Virgin Mary appeared to three shepherd children in Fatima in 1917.

The people had long desired that a church would be built to honor Our Lady of Fatima in the neighborhood, but hopes were dashed when in 1954 President Juan Perón, just a year before he was overthrown and exiled, announced that the Buenos Aires' quarter Villa Soldati had been designated as the city's new red-light district for legal prostitution.

Tocalini told the story, which is embedded in the local folk memory: "The community, spearheaded by the Portuguese migrants, prayed a novena to Our Lady of Fatima," he recalled, and "on the ninth day, the government overturned the decree, giving no reason whatsoever."

According to Tocalini, "It was a miracle to the people, through the intercession of the Madonna of Fatima — and so the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima was built, and the parish dedicated to her protection."

The parish is the heart of the community, and just across the street from the parish church is a bustling education complex also under the patronage of Our Lady of Fatima.

It is home to around 3,000 students, from kindergarten up to a trade school for teenagers.

According to Tocalini, Francis was particularly anxious that the trade school would be established during his time as archbishop of Buenos Aires from 1998–2013.

"Cardinal (Jorge) Bergoglio did the groundbreaking ceremony here just four months before he was elected pope," Tocalini told OSV News.

"Cardinal Bergoglio told me that he believed it (the trade school) would change the economy of the neighborhood, and he was right," said Tocalini.

Now, hundreds of teenagers learn to be electricians, computer repair workers, carpenters and nursery school teachers in an area traditionally blighted by educational disadvantage and underachievement.

According to Tocalini, the transformation has been phenomenal.

"Ten years ago, if anyone was brave enough to leave the neighborhood to continue their education, they would leave and never look back," he said, but today "they study here and then often they work here, or go (to the city center) and come home after work. It is also encouraging to others to see their neighbors progress and make a better life for themselves."

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Tocalini is the only priest in the sprawling parish of some 41,000 souls that also has a soup kitchen that feeds 350 families every weekday, and 1,200 on a Sunday.

A massive focus for the parish is youth diversion to try and ensure young people do not fall into bad habits, like drug abuse. "Our priority is prevention," Tocalini said.

"We try to make sure the kids don't have time to even consider drug use. So, when they leave school, they go directly to an extra activity: soccer, volleyball, tennis, orchestra, choir, guitar lessons, school support, etc," Tocalini said.

"A child in this neighborhood who has two hours to spare is a child at risk of drug addiction, or becoming a criminal," he said.

Tocalini is inspired by the pope's vision of a church walking alongside poor and vulnerable people. "To this day, I will never forget, one of the first confessions I heard when I moved here was that of a 15-year-old boy who admitted he prays every day to not become like his brothers, because his brothers are all criminals," the priest said.

"Can you imagine going to bed every night saying, 'I don't want to be like my family?'" Tocalini told OSV News.

He too is greatly humbled by the faith of the people he lives alongside. "Faith here in the slum is lived through what we call popular piety, and coming here you understand what Pope Francis means by a church that goes out and encounters people where they are," the Buenos Aires priest said.

"We have many communities here of people who come not only from various countries but diverse regions each having their own Marian devotion," he said. "When I first arrived here, they would celebrate their feasts in a home, or a street, but it was mostly about eating and drinking. Now, we still have the feast, but every celebration begins with Mass, and in most cases, they're now also doing a novena in preparation."

"And I find that the more I go to encounter them where they are, the more they then come to encounter Christ in the Eucharist here (in the church)," according to the priest.

In these neighborhoods, priests have little choice but to just roll up their sleeves and respond to the evident needs.

"When I first came here, I cried myself to sleep every night," Father Pedro Cannavó told OSV News. "The needs (of the people here) here were so great, and the resources so little," he said speaking in the modest parish church where the community gathers in good times and bad.

However, Cannavó said he soon became moved by the deep and devout faith of the local people.

"I cannot deny that this is a tough assignment. But, if I go to sleep thinking about all that was left to do in the day, all the resources I'm going to need to find to feed people tomorrow, I wouldn't sleep," he said.

"But instead, I remember the blessings of the day that is ending. The families we were able to feed, the young man who decided to come to the Hogar de Cristo (rehabilitation center) and save himself from a life of addiction. The children who played soccer here, as a way of accompaniment and preventing them from falling into drug addiction," Cannavó said.

"My faith is a gift from the people I serve," he told OSV News.