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Francis' pro-immigrant appeal ends hunger strike

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NCR Today

Rome — Though Pope Francis himself may not have stepped outside the bounds of the usual Christmas events yesterday, his influence clearly did, as perceptions of his sympathy to immigrants reportedly helped suspend a protest that had seen poor migrants in Rome stitch their lips together, refuse to eat, and sleep outside despite freezing cold at night.

Those gestures were intended to highlight what migrants describe as inhuman treatment at their Rome detention center, formally known as the "Center for Identification and Expulsion".

The hunger strike began last weekend, when four Tunisians at a detention center in Rome called Ponte Galeria sewed a single stitch in their lips, a protest that was soon joined by five Moroccans. Still others joined the hunger strike, soon reaching twenty or more.

On Christmas morning, Fr. Emanuele Giannone, who's the director of the Catholic charities operation in the Rome diocese, celebrated Mass for the migrants in the detention center, appealing to them to end the hunger strike on health grounds.

Some of the protestors had also decided to sleep in the open on Christmas Eve, despite cold temperatures, in order to highlight their situation.

At first the protestors were hesitant to agree, but according to reports, what persuaded them was a vow by Giannone to carry a letter from the group directly to Pope Francis.

Despite the fact that many of the migrants aren't Catholic, the promise of papal attention was apparently enough to do the trick. Medical personnel were summoned to remove the sutures from their mouths, and a small meal was organized.

"We came to seek a better life, but we've only found the bars of a jail cell," the immigrants wrote in their letter to Francis, according to extracts published by Italian newspapers.

"Holy Father, we are the new poor, but we're not meat for a butcher shop," they wrote. They asked the pope to support their requests for improved treatment and the opportunity to seek work.

"We're suspending the protest because we see that you've created a hearing for our requests," they wrote. "We decided to appeal to the pope because he's a great spiritual guide and he'll know how to make sure we're heard."

They added a warning: "We repeat, we're only suspending the protest - we want results."

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Giannone said that had the hunger strike and sleeping outside gone on much longer, the protest would have posed "serious threats" to the health of the detainees.

Francis has spoken out repeatedly in defense of immigrants, coming to it again yesterday in his *Urbi et Orbi* address.

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

Lampedusa is an island in the southern Mediterranean, considered part of Sicily, which is a major arrival point for scores of impoverished migrants and refugees seeking to enter the European Union.

Often paying outrageous prices to coyotes, and frequently falling victim to human trafficking and other forms of abuse along the way, these migrants eventually arrive in either Libya or Tunisia, where they board rickety and over-crowded boats to attempt to cross the Mediterranean.

An estimated 20,000 migrants have died trying to make the crossing in the last two decades, including some 366 Somali and Eritrean refugees who perished in October when their boat capsized, caught fire and sank.

Facing popular outrage in Italy, the government at first promised a state funeral for the victims and immediate assistance for the survivors. The state funeral never materialized, and many of the 155 survivors remain warehoused in a detention center.

More recently, an Italian TV network captured hidden-camera footage of naked immigrants forcibly being hosed down for delousing in a detention center at Lampedusa, images that many Italian commentators compared to Abu Ghraib and even to Nazi concentration camps.

The revelations have once again generated wide outrage in the country, a context which led an especially pointed political edge to the pope's line yesterday.

Lampedusa has long been a source of special concern for Francis. His first trip outside Rome was actually to Lampedusa on July 8, where he condemned what he termed a "globalization of indifference" to immigrants and laid a wreath in the sea to commemorate those who have died making the crossing.

That background has given Francis special credibility with the immigrants, which seemed to be the key to unlocking the protests at the Rome detention center.

To be sure, Francis has not offered any particular blueprint to immigration reform, nor is he likely to do so given his repeated insistence on the church keeping its distance from the details of public policy.

Nonetheless, very few people anywhere, and apparently nobody in Italy's increasingly notorious detention centers, would dispute that this is a pro-immigrant pope.

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