

From the Vatican, March 7, 2014

**Message of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of
Migrants and Itinerant People to the
Members of the *International Catholic Committee for Gypsies (CCIT)*
(Cavallino-Treporti, Italy, April 4-6, 2014)**

Dear Father Dumas,
Dear Members of the Committee,
Dear Participants,

I am sorry that I cannot be present at the work of your meeting as your President hoped. However, I send you my warm greetings and express deep interest in the topic you have chosen to deal with: *“Tearing down the walls of isolation and exclusion: the evangelical challenge of a social dynamic”*.

In our globalized world, in fact, walls continue to be built that divide the peoples of the same continent, people from the same country or the same city. Also among the European countries, some are still negatively influenced in their political choices regarding the Roma to whom you are close in your respective pastoral commitments.

In bringing the good news to people, Jesus also took their conditions upon himself. He opened the doors and tore down the walls of division and animosity, as he demonstrates in the encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Cf. *Jn* 4:1-42). He makes an age-old barrier between two neighboring peoples fall and proposes a culture of encounter based on the sincerity of dialogue.

In exhorting us to build an open, inclusive world free from fears and separations, John Paul II said: *“Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows 'what is in man'. He alone knows it”* (*Homily at the beginning of his papacy*, October 22, 1978, No. 5). Just last year you dedicated your meeting to the theme of openness and welcome. The Gypsies' life seems to be an enigma at times, but Christ, who moves your hearts towards them, knows what is in man and reveals it to you as a precious gift in the friendship you build with them. Over the years you have gained the awareness that the Gypsies' history *“is a sacred history”*, like that of all men made *“in God's image”*.

The challenge you face with evangelical courage in your pastoral activities demonstrates that to tear down walls, one must begin in the heart, the first space where another is included, and as long as hearts are not open, it will not be easy to achieve an inclusive society. So this moment of reflection offers you the opportunity to put your energies together to create a social dynamic in which the different cultures can live together.

During the Audience with representatives of different ethnic groups of Gypsies and Roma, Benedict XVI recalled their sad history and then described their present-day situation in this way:

“Today, thanks be to God [...] new opportunities are unfolding before you while you are acquiring new awareness [...] Many races are no longer nomadic, but seek stability with new expectations as they face life. The Church walks with you and invites you to live in accordance with the demanding requirements of the Gospel, trusting in the power of Christ, towards a better future [...] I ask you, dear friends, to write together a new page of history for your people and for Europe! The search for housing and dignified work and education for your children are the foundations on which to build that integration of which you and the whole of society will benefit. You too offer your effective and loyal collaboration so that your families may fit into the civil fabric of Europe with dignity! Many of your children and your young people wish to be educated and to live with and like others” (Address to the representatives of different ethnic groups of Gypsies and Roma, June 11, 2011).

Of course, all of this takes time, and you, dear pastoral workers, have wisely adopted the line of faith and hope that help to do everything with the patience that leads to the expected results. Pope Francis, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, talks about time that surpasses space. This principle, the Pope writes, *“enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans”*. He goes on to say, *“It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time”* (No. 223). Yes, the commitment for the Roma calls for such patience without which it is easy to believe that everything is useless.

The Gypsies need the humanity of the society in which they live in order to feel like members of the human family and benefit from the rights enjoyed by the other members of the community in respect for their dignity and identity (Cf. *Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of Gypsies*, No. 48).

This may be the way to tackle some questions that continue to be a challenge for Europe, the cradle of human rights. There is a need for tenacious, patient work on everyone's part. The Church can be of inspiration and make the efforts converge into a common commitment in order to face the following dilemmas at the basis of the Roma's human difficulties:

1. Many Gypsies still live in precarious housing conditions due to economic problems aggravated by the crisis. In addition to the usual accommodations, many *“families live in overcrowded social housing”*. Living in shantytowns and on the sidewalks of cities, subject to pollution, near highways and industrial areas, in derelict housing *“with no potable water, electricity or a trash collection system”* is a scandal that cannot be accepted. Some would like to get out, but they often encounter enormous difficulties that weaken their will, and so they fall back into their *status quo*.

2. In many European countries there are differences between the health indicators of the Roma and those of the majority population. The fact that they may not have identity documents complicates their access to ordinary health care services, without forgetting the discrimination they undergo in some cases from health care workers, such as general practitioners who refuse to go into the Roma neighborhoods or camps.

3. Also, the Roma face difficulties in their access to education. In Europe, half of Roma school-age children have never attended school; 50% of the adults are illiterate. In many European

regions Roma children do not have a qualified education; they are excluded from the social fabric and the political and cultural debate even though they are Europeans. The logistical situation of their housing, the extreme poverty, the prejudices and their family traditions often lead them to leave school.

4. They also encounter enormous difficulties in the area of work. Many times they are discriminated against because they do not have sufficient education and cannot compete with the other more qualified workers. Most of the time they are excluded just because they are Gypsies. All of this leads them not infrequently into criminal activity, begging, and activities dangerous to their health.

The Council of Europe promotes all the experiences that have proven to be positive in this area. These practices are carried out by mediators between the Roma and the majority populations, put in place locally, and then proposed on a broader scale. With regard to *education*, the example of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is interesting with its project, "Inclusion of Roma children in preschool education," which began in 2006. The same is true for Albania and Slovakia. Spain's experience is also good which indicates the stages to be carried out in this mediation. The Bulgarian experience is valuable for their integration into the *health* sector.

Finally, the document "*Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Gypsies*" continues to be a fundamental reference for you and you should use it as well as possible for your service in the midst of this People because it offers important guidelines that are the fruit of common work.

Dear brothers and sisters, aren't these the challenges to be faced? And isn't this the dynamic that is needed, that is, to give space and time to the Gypsies' dreams and motivate them so they can emerge? The Roma have the right to be recognized at least as ethnic minorities in the countries where they live since they are the largest minority in the European Union. The Church has the task to bring Jesus' Gospel in their midst but also to support their dream of integration which passes through education, health, work and housing, and all of this in collaboration with people of good will.

I hope that your days of work will be fruitful and may God bless you all!

Antonio Maria Cardinal Vegliò
President

✠ Joseph Kalathiparambil
Secretary