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Archbishop Fisichella: by washing refugees' feet, Francis demands respect for them all

Vatican City, 22 March 2016 – Welcoming refugees, as a work of mercy, is for Christians a tangible form of living the Jubilee of Mercy, writes Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation, in an article in which he explains the meaning of Pope Francis' decision to celebrate Holy Thursday with refugees in a reception centre for asylum seekers.

"Millions of refugees are showing the world the real features of a new exodus in which we see the movement masses of destitute people, who now have neither home nor homeland", he writes. "They reluctantly flee under the pressure of gratuitous violence, pointless war and hunger, towards destinations that are often a figment of the imagination rather than reality. Nonetheless the wealthy countries of the west in particular remain indifferent in the face of a drama that is troubling on account of both its duration and the number of people involved. ... In his appeal on 6 September last year, during the Sunday Angelus shortly before the beginning of the Jubilee of Mercy, the Pope asked that every parish, religious community, monastery and shrine to open its doors to a family, starting with the diocese of Rome. A small but concrete gesture to promote awareness of the international drama. It set in motion a movement that led to the expression of great solidarity amid the silence. However time passes and the initial provocation, unfortunately, seems to have diminished while the problems remain and become increasingly acute. In the first months of the Holy Year of Mercy a significant influx of people from around the world has been registered, a clear sign that Christians experience this moment as an opportunity offered to them to feel God's closeness, tenderness and forgiveness".

"Among the seven works of corporal mercy, there is, with its current relevance, that of hospitality", remarks Archbishop Fisichella. "Welcoming refugees thus becomes for Christians a tangible expression for living the Jubilee of Mercy. In this year, one Friday each month Pope Francis usually gives concrete witness of these works. In the month of December he opened the Holy Door of the 'Don Luigi di Liegro' hostel that offers shelter to the homeless and distributes meals every day. In January he visited many elderly people and patients in a vegetative state to demonstrate that the 'throwaway culture' has little to do with the Christian vision of life. In February he visited a rehabilitation community for young drug users to offer them hope for the future. This coming Holy Thursday Pope Francis will go to Castelnuovo di Porto to spend time with the young refugees sheltered in the Reception Centre for asylum seekers. ... The visit will be accompanied by the rite of the washing of the feet. The Pope will bow before twelve refugees and wash their feet as a sign of service and attention to their condition. In last Saturday's Jubilee audience, commenting on the gesture of washing the feet, the Pope

said, 'Washing the feet of the apostles, Jesus wanted to reveal God's way of acting towards us, and to give the example of His new commandment of loving each other as He loved us, that is, giving His life for us'. Even more specifically, he added, 'Love is the concrete service that we render to each other. Love is not words, it is works and service'.

"In the light of these considerations, it is possible to understand the symbolic value that Pope Francis intends to bestow upon his visit to the Centre at Castelnuovo di Porto, and his bowing down to wash the feet of the refugees. He wishes to say to us that it is necessary to give due attention to the weakest at this historical moment; that we are all called upon to restore their dignity, without recourse to subterfuge", emphasises the prelate. "This drives us to look towards Easter with the eyes of those who transform their faith into a life lived in the service of those whose faces bear the traces of suffering and violence. Many of these young people are not Catholics. The sign Pope Francis offers therefore becomes even more eloquent. He indicates the path of respect as the high way towards peace. Respect, in its semantic value, means recognising there is another person beside me. A person who walks with me, suffers with me, rejoices with me. A person who, one day, will be able to lean on me for support. Washing the feet of the refugees, Pope Francis demands respect for each one of them".
