

Msgr. David Charters
“Street Homelessness and Catholic Theological Ethics”
U.N. Church Center, 2nd Floor, 1:15-2:45
February 10, 2020

Distinguished Fellow Panelists, Dear Friends,

It’s an honor to join you today for this panel and book launch. I bear the greetings of Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, the new Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, who regrets he cannot be with us this afternoon because of previous commitments on his calendar. He asked me, however, to express his congratulations and thanks for the new volume entitled *Street Homelessness and Catholic Theological Ethics*, which examines the troubling phenomenon of pervasive homelessness from the lens of Catholic social teaching, history, and action.

It is fitting that the book is being launched today, as the United Nations Economic and Social Council begins the 58th Session of its Commission on Social Development dedicated to the theme of “affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness.”

Liturgical coincidence – cf. Isaiah 58, from 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time year A.

One of the reasons for this work, as Father Keenan noted in its introduction, is that people living on the streets are neglected not only by passersby, but they have also been largely ignored by those in the academy and many in the Church — an absence this new work is intended to rectify. Homelessness, however, has also often been insufficiently addressed by the international community.

There is, somewhat shockingly, no specific mention of homelessness in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Studies have estimated that 1.6 billion people worldwide are either without any housing at all, living in temporary or crisis accommodations like shelters or refugee camps, or dwelling in slums or other situations inadequate to their dignity and protection. Yet, despite homelessness’ being an obvious indication of poverty and insufficient development, reducing or eliminating homelessness did not make it explicitly into the 2030 Agenda’s 17 Goals and 169 targets. Target 11.1 does commit the international community by 2030 to ensuring “access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing,” but does not provide any indicators to measure or spur the achievement of that goal.

That's why it's key that the Commission on Social Development has decided to focus this year on adequate safe and affordable housing as one of the essential aspects of adequate social protection. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirm that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including ... housing." Yet nearly one-quarter of the world's population is presently not enjoying the fulfillment of that right. So the deliberation must take place with a certain urgency. To get the estimated 1.6 billion in the world today living in inadequate shelter into such adequate, safe and affordable housing means that by December 31, 2029, 442,723 people a day must be helped.

Pope Francis, in both word and action, has been trying to bring the plight of the homeless, and the urgency to get involved, to the conscience of each person.

In his encyclical on Care for our Common Home, *Laudato Si'*, whose fifth anniversary we're preparing to mark this June, he emphasized the type of concern we must have for those who do not have dignified lodging in our common home. "Lack of housing," he wrote, "is a grave problem in many parts of the world, both in rural areas and in large cities, since state budgets usually cover only a small portion of the demand. Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families" (LS 152).

The day before he came to the United Nations in September 2015, Pope Francis visited a homeless shelter in Washington, DC and spoke about that personal dignity. He pondered the situation of Mary, Joseph and Jesus in Bethlehem when they encounter a situation in which there was no room for them, "no shelter, no home, no place to stay. The Son of God," he underlined, "came into this world as a homeless person. [Jesus] knew what it was to start life without a roof over his head. How is it that [Jesus] has no home? ... Why are we homeless, without a place to live? And those of us who do have a home, a roof over our heads, would do well to ask: 'Why do these, our brothers and sisters, have no place to live?'" He went on to stress: "There is no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing."

Not only is this unjustified situation tolerated, however, but in some cases it is aggravated. In his letter for the World Day of the Poor last November, Pope Francis said that a culture of widespread indifference is metastasizing in some places to one of downright animosity. "We have come to the point," he noted with sadness and concern, "of devising a hostile architecture aimed at ridding the streets of their

presence, the last places left to them. They roam from one end of the city to the other in the hope of getting a job, a home, a sign of affection... Even where justice might be expected to prevail, they meet with violence and abuse.” In the paradigmatic document of his papacy, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he tried to open the consciences of all humanity to recognize the idols that can lead us to harden our hearts to our neighbors when he poignantly asked, “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?” (EG 53).

Pope Francis, however, has done more than speak. He has sought to address head-on the problem of his own 16,000 homeless neighbors in Rome and to set an example for the Church and civil, political and religious leaders across the world.

Three months ago, through the office of his papal almoner, he renovated the four-story Palazzo Migliori right outside the colonnade of St. Peter’s Square to accommodate 50 homeless men and women, with 13 new bathrooms with showers, hot meals twice a day, classes on using computers, and doctors providing medical assistance as well as psychological counseling for addictions. It’s been dubbed the “Palace of the Poor,” as many of those who used to find shelter sleeping on cardboard underneath Bernini’s colonnade now have a real roof and bed.

Since his election, he has also opened free bathrooms, showers, laundromat and barbershop, so that the homeless can keep themselves and their clothes clean. He has distributed sleeping bags. He has opened up a free medical center that sees hundreds of homeless patients a day, staffed by doctors who are expert in general medicine, cardiology, infectious diseases, gynecology, obstetrics, podiatry, dermatology, rheumatology and ophthalmology. He has given free apartments in the Vatican to refugees from Syria and Iraq.

He has also tried to remind the homeless and the world of their profound dignity. He has invited them — both in small groups and in big ones numbering up to 4,000 — to meals with him on his birthday and on the World Day of the Poor. He has given concerts in their honor in the Sistine Chapel. He has provided them the opportunity to go to a beach north of Fiumicino Airport and then treated them to pizza.

Personal example from Bangui and helping IDPs – whom he had visited from Centre Jean XXIII and Saint-Sauveur parish (and later from another smaller site) make their way to rented accommodation...

While Pope Francis' personal attention to the crisis of homelessness has certainly brought more attention to the plight than perhaps of his predecessors, the attention of the Catholic Church to our poor brothers and sisters, as chapters in this new work highlight, is something that goes back to the earliest ages of the Church. The 1987 Vatican document, *What Have You Done To Your Homeless Brother?*, released during the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, describes that, "from the time of the earliest Christian communities, the Church has always shown a preference for the poor, the needy, the outcasts of society, in her social and charitable works. The human and spiritual wealth of those countless charitable and philanthropic works, established by the Church throughout her existence, constitutes the most striking historical monument to this dedication and preferential love for the poor."

The Catholic Church today, through its institutions and so many organizations inspired by the Catholic faith — from many religious orders dedicated to the loving service of the poor, to Caritas, the Catholic Worker Movement, the Sant'Egidio Movement, St. Vincent de Paul Society Chapters, and many other entities — continues to try to accompany and help the homeless in the short-term and end the predicament of homelessness long-term. Catholics try to provide material help like the emergency shelters, construction of houses and apartments, food dispensaries, educational and integration programs, family support and more. At the same time they have sought to dialogue with governments and all other stakeholders to try to formulate housing policies, jobs and other socioeconomic reforms favorable to the poor. Many of those inspiring efforts — which can help inform the international community, and, if scaled up with further resources, could help so many more people in need — are beautifully detailed in this work.

In conclusion, the Commission on Social Development's Priority Theme this year really is a priority theme. The international community has ambitiously committed itself, within the next decade, to ensuring that every person and family will have adequate, safe and affordable housing. That commitment is premised on the conviction that homelessness not only can be confronted but ended. This book and the efforts it describes are a part of a necessary worldwide mobilization to bring that commitment to fruition.

I thank the authors for their important work and thank all of you for your kind attention.