
USA. Covid-19 emergency: the challenge of providing assistance to the homeless

(from New York) They stand outside in the cold, seated on sidewalks or steps, eating a packaged hot meal, and yet they are optimistic and resilient, despite the forced closure of food kitchens due to the Coronavirus crisis. Father Tom McCabe of the Pope Francis Center of the Archdiocese of Detroit is impressed by his guests, all of them homeless, who even in this emergency situation show their gratitude and adapt without creating further problems. The Covid-19 crisis caused the closing down of showers, laundry and clinics, in addition to legal counselling services. Father McCabe did not get discouraged and opened sanitation stations and portable sanitary facilities, while, keeping a "healthy distance", he continues distributing fruit juices and hot drinks even to families with children in need of a full meal that was previously provided by schools, now closed to avoid contagion. *The Jesuit priest is aware that in addition to the "ordinary" homeless people he regularly attends to many more will soon be without a job, and since unemployment benefits are insufficient to cover household expenses they are bound to become homeless.* "That will be the ultimate outcome of the recession, and given the shortage of work donations will decrease just when they are most needed." *Our Daily Bread* - the food program of the diocese of Baltimore - has been distributing food to 700 people every day for the past 39 years. They first limited the number of guests in food kitchens, keeping a distance, but as the medical crisis escalated they started distributing pre-packaged meals, strictly adhering to sanitary regulations. Over the past few weeks most of the volunteers were asked to stay at home, while food and money are still being collected for the most disadvantaged. *Shows of solidarity remain constant in this first week of crisis, after the federal Government took stricter measures,* already implemented by many States that did not wait for the central administration's decision to close public spaces, schools, offices and even borders. The State of New York followed suit and past weekend announced total lockdown and home quarantine, while the latest data indicate almost 5,000 cases in the city alone.

Self quarantine is no small challenge for those without a home to retreat to,

such as thousands of homeless people living in California who already constituted a crisis before this crisis. Jennielynn Holmes-Davis, Director of a Catholic charity program in Sonoma County, sought creative ways to assist her 500 guests, working primarily on prevention and education. The charity's 12 shelters are still open, constantly sanitized and with facilities that meet the new safety standards. Homeless people are also among the most vulnerable groups, both because of their health conditions and poor access to health care, a situation shared by millions of Americans and which has led 40 Catholic doctors to seek a solution in these times of crisis. *They opened a free section on the website MyCatholicDoctor dedicated to the virus with information on preventing its spread.* Live video consultations are offered to people who are sick at home with online health care service that improves both access to treatment and, most importantly, prevents contagion. "Our telemedicine service providers are trained to select patients, answer questions, prescribe medications and recommend therapies so that the patient can heal at home," said the developers who encourage a more personal and intimate attitude towards patients. *Medical assistance is complemented by pastoral care. Parish priests hold on-line celebrations and prayers (via Zoom), and drive-in style confessions.* Father Scott Holmer, parish priest in Maryland, decided to sit in the parish parking lot and confess the parishioners while they are in the car at a safe distance. The priest began last Saturday after the announcement of the suspension of celebrations. Every day he listens to at least one hour of confessions and more than six hours at weekends, while a seminarian directs traffic to prevent congestion and especially contagion. Father Holmer meets requests for anonymity by blindfolding his eyes. *"Perhaps it's a radical way of offering the sacraments," said Father Scott, "but*

we priests have to be creative as to how to bring Christ to people when we cannot do it in our churches. And we need to bring Him now. During the week, the priest carries the Eucharist in procession through the various neighbourhoods of the parish and blesses the houses where his parishioners are confined.

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