

“Quedate en casa!”, also in Argentina. But the poor living in slums are taken care of by “street priests”

“Quedate en casa”. It's the same advice given to us Italians, and to the whole world, in Spanish: "Stay at home". It also happens in Argentina, where the whole country went into lockdown for the coronavirus a week ago (502 have tested positive to date, with 8 victims). Yesterday the *curas villeros* were received by the President of the Republic. *"Staying home" is easier said than done especially when the home is a shack or a dilapidated building lacking sanitation.* Or when parents, children, grandparents live together in a tiny flat. It's a snapshot of the "*villas miserias*", slums in the poor neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. These areas were already in a state of emergency before the coronavirus, within an increasingly severe economic crisis. Last week the Commission for Human Rights and Inclusion of the Archdiocese denounced the lack of drinking water, or food shortage, as recorded by the Argentine Catholic University's Observatory of Social Disadvantage, according to which 40% of the population in the metropolitan area live below the poverty line. **Bringing together quarantine, solidarity and social peace.** In these districts, therefore, talking about precautions, restrictions, isolation is a major challenge. And yet, there are those who are making the effort of respecting authorities' recommendations. They attend to the needs of the most vulnerable without undermining community bonds formed through tireless efforts over the years, while maintaining social peace.

It's the activity of so-called "*curas villeros*", “street” priests who offer their services in the *villas* of Buenos Aires.

As known, the then Archbishop Jorge Mario Bergoglio formed an organic pastoral care for the *villas*. He entrusted this service to Father **José Maria di Paola**, known as Father Pepe, perhaps the most famous *cura villero*, serving at *villa* La Carcova.



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Or that many people live crammed into small homes, entire families, from children to grandparents? Or that there are minors and young people living on the streets? Instead of tackling these problems the topics of debate are fellow countrymen stuck on cruises, or Dybala who tested positive." However, in the last few hours Argentina's government announced an extraordinary contribution of 10,000 pesos to precarious workers. **An entire floor of the parish building accommodates the elderly.** However, even in this unfavourable situation, "people are starting to realize the gravity of the problem, they see what is happening in Italy, or in other European countries. We provide information and help to our people." Thus the challenge takes shape. *"First we ensured that soup kitchens were kept open along with food delivery services,"* the priest said. We try to make fast deliveries, of ready-made food, taking all the necessary precautions. Secondly, the parish in Villa Carcova set up a dedicated room for the elderly, those who run the greatest risk of infection: "We set up a fourteen-room area on the first floor of the parish building and invited the elderly who live in the Villa to spend

their quarantine here, in isolation. They were in greater danger in their homes, surrounded by other people. They are more protected here." Another space is reserved to the homeless: "Here people sleep in cars, there are many situations of exclusion." Thus, protection has also been planned for them, in a more isolated place. *In short, the criterion is to avoid crowds in precarious hygienic and economic conditions. The aim is to create homogeneous and isolated community groups.* Closed schools is yet another problem, "even though I understand that teachers are organizing classes for their pupils through whatsapp." Then there is the liturgical aspect, Mass is celebrated only privately, as in most of the world in the last few weeks: "*We arranged for Holy Mass to be broadcast over the local radio station and on social networks.*" **Hospitals without intensive care units.** The quality of health care is Father Pepe's other major concern: "The local clinic is open every day. But in suburban hospitals the E.R. is collapsing, there is no intensive care unit. *This pandemic is happening at a very precarious time for Argentina's health system.* According to the government, the main problem of health care today is to guarantee the freedom of abortion. By contrast, hospitals are in poor condition and overcrowded. It's a problem that needs to be urgently addressed."

Bruno Desidera