
In Sao Paulo, Brazil, street priests are a veritable "task force" against the pandemic

In São Paulo, Brazil, where, despite political pronouncements, public transport is still overcrowded, "street priests" are a veritable "task force" and play a fundamental role in welcoming, informing, raising awareness, helping the homeless, the poor, the most disadvantaged, the inhabitants of the favelas of the largest metropolitan area in South America, which has become the Latin American "capital" of Covid-19 since the outbreak of the epidemic. In fact, the first cases of infection were reported in São Paulo, as well as the first deaths. Still today, while the virus has spread to many other areas of the country (the Northeast and in particular in the State of Pernambuco and the city of Manaus, in the Amazon region) recent data show that nearly 50% of over 2,000 deaths, and over a third of cases, are concentrated in the State of São Paulo. But São Paulo is equally at the centre of political controversy between Governor João Doria and the President of the Republic Jair Bolsonaro, who persistently minimizes the extent of the pandemic and a few days ago dismissed Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who advocated more restrictive measures. **Belém Mission: a whole building to house the homeless.** *Those assisting the poor are mostly worried that the infection could spread across relief shelters and densely populated favelas.* "It would be a catastrophe," said Father **Giampietro Carraro**, born in Venice, founder of Belém Mission that led to the establishment of 170 homeless shelters worldwide, 140 in the vast area of São Paulo alone, and 60 in the city centre.



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"We currently house a total of 2,200 people and 700 of them have pre-existing conditions, we want to ensure they will not be infected by the virus." Over the past few weeks, Belém Mission opened a shelter for the homeless, so as to keep them isolated in a ten-storey building provided by the archdiocese. The facility includes an infirmary with 72 beds and five volunteer doctors providing a precious service, just when government officials decided to close a shelter near the so-called Cracolândia, "the land of crack" a kind of "black hole" in the centre of São Paulo, a small area that had become the reign of drug dealers and addicts. "The data provided by public authorities are unreal", said Father Carraro, "the numbers are at least four times higher, as confirmed by some

doctors who work in hospitals. Moreover, swab tests are carried out only on those with severe symptoms and patients in intensive care. Everyone else who goes to the hospital is usually sent back home. People are dying, but no one has diagnosed them with Covid-19." **No precautions in the hell of Cracolândia.** If and to what extent the virus affects people living on the streets and in the most degraded areas is hard to figure out. "The streets - continued Father Carraro - are not the 'romantic' place imagined by some, they are marked by alcohol and drugs. *In Cracolândia no prevention measures exist, only alcohol and drugs, no one wears face masks, and there may be up to 500 people smoking crack together.* If one of them passes out, no one knows if they were infected with the virus." The priest voiced concern over the health system as a whole, "even though São Paulo has the best hospitals in Latin America. There were 700 beds in ICUs, they created wards in two stages to provide an additional two thousand beds in what could be defined as "light" intensive care. Two thousand ventilators may seem a large number, but it must be remembered that São Paulo has 14 million inhabitants, including 35 or 26 million inhabitants in the surrounding districts. **The priest in the favela of Paraisópolis.** From *Cracolândia* to the *favelas*, one of the largest in São Paulo in particular, Paraisópolis, with 98,000 estimated inhabitants. It's the parish of Father **Luciano Borges**, a priest with great enthusiasm and zeal:



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Thus, paradoxically, besides some praiseworthy attempts at self-organization, only two players are doing something to maintain order and some attention in the favelas:

Either drug dealers and traffickers, or the Church.

This is the case in Paraisópolis. In the parish of Saint Joseph, said Father Borges, "we organized the distribution of food packets as well as personal hygiene products in the parish. Our commitment is also to inform and raise awareness, in addition to our pastoral activities. We broadcast Holy Mass on Facebook and I drove through the streets of the favela transporting the Blessed Sacrament by car, to bless the people". The priest concluded: "I prayed and we prayed together for Italy, I lived in Tuscany and I asked Our Lady of Aparecida to protect your people."

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