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## Creative and organized: Caritas response to the second “social pandemic” wave

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic did not find diocesan Caritas centres across Italy unprepared. The first lockdown experience in the red, orange or yellow Italian regions (according to a colour-coded classification), has made it possible to cope with the new social emergency caused by closures and job losses affecting certain sectors. Initiatives proved successful in the spring, with the involvement of some 62,000 volunteers, although many elderly people must remain at home as a precautionary measure. Creative initiatives were put into practice in the most diverse ways: "messages in bottles" or anti-loneliness kits for the elderly, the lonely and the homeless; COVID hotels for quarantined patients; door-to-door food collections to bring a smile and some festive atmosphere, in compliance with regulations in force. Diocesan fundraising activities for those in need or students forced into remote learning affected by the impact of digital divide. Donations and solidarity, extraordinary in the first lockdown, showed a physiological decline but remain substantial. Yet a growing number of new poor are knocking on the doors of community centres. People who had never sought the help of Caritas before or who have returned after many years. Official data for the last few months are not yet available. Figures from the latest report of Caritas Italy, "The antibodies of solidarity", presented in mid-October, show that the proportion of "new poor" rose from 31% to 45% in May-September 2020, compared to the same period in 2019: almost one person in two contacted Caritas for the first time. Families with children, women, young people, many Italians. People knocking on the doors of Caritas are precarious workers, people who can't afford to buy food if they also have to pay the rent and bills. Widespread psychological discomfort is perceived: exhaustion, depression, anger, due to isolation and the umpteenth challenging situation. Follow the first-hand accounts of a number of diocesan Caritas. **An “explosion of solidarity” in Brescia.** In Brescia, Caritas has now learned that homeless people must be sheltered 24 hours a day to ensure the best possible assistance. Helplines for people who are alone or in need of assistance are permanently operational and utmost caution is adopted to avoid the contagion of volunteers and those being cared for. The diocesan Caritas was overwhelmed by a 30% increase in requests for help in the first lockdown (down to 20% in September) coupled by an "outburst" of solidarity shown by businesses and individuals alike. For example, between April and May 2020 they received 838% more baked goods than during the previous year. "Mobilization was extraordinary - said **Marco Danesi**, deputy director of Caritas Brescia - both in terms of diversification of goods and quantities." Even today there is no shortage of resources: the diocese created a Solidarity Fund for people experiencing job challenges. A local newspaper launched "Let's help Brescia" and raised as many as 17 million euros for health and social care. Caritas received €300,000, transferred to Ti.Conto Salute. Naturally, many planned initiatives had to be cancelled, such as the Christmas dinner for 500 people cooked by 9 star chefs. On December 16 it will not be possible for this event to take place and it will be postponed to a later date. **In Rimini messages in bottles and much else.** During the first lockdown in Rimini Caritas diocesan Caritas developed the original idea of collecting a "Message in a bottle" via e-mail (caritas@caritas.rimini.it) consisting in written messages, e-mails, thoughts, poems or stories that volunteers deliver to people in need together with material aid.



Immagine non disponibile

, Director of the Diocesan Caritas in Rimini - we wished to warm the hearts of people in this way. It's a way to bridge distances and receive some human warmth." Caritas has now presented a similar project named "Singing in the shower" with an invitation to send a song in audio files for the poor who use the shower facilities. The exhibition "Nativity scenes from around the world" will be itinerant from December 8 to January 6 on display in shops in the old city centre. A fundraising initiative has been launched to provide hotel accommodation for the homeless during the winter season. **"A bag filled with solidarity" in Potenza.** In the Italian city of Potenza Caritas re-adapted its initiative "A bag filled with solidarity" to the needs of the pandemic, sustained with funds from the *Eight per Thousand* contributions of Italian taxpayers to the Catholic Church: three or four times a year the parish communities in Potenza or in surrounding villages take turns with an impressive mobilizations of volunteers collecting food and basic necessities for those in need door-to-door, with music, balloons and coloured gadgets. "Citizens are always very generous, last time we received about a ton of items", said **Giorgia Russo**, responsible for human promotion at Caritas Potenza. They managed to involve thousands of volunteers starting in 2018, some thirty have remained on a permanent basis to help organize events." In times of pandemic it's harder. Nonetheless around one hundred volunteers participate - she pointed out- previously there were as many as 300. People are not afraid to open the door of their homes, on the contrary they are happy to be given the opportunity to help others. At times they don't allow us to enter the house, or they leave relief parcels outside the door."

**Widespread vulnerability in Genoa, also of a psychological nature.** The Diocesan Caritas of Genoa recorded widespread vulnerability, bordering on depression and more serious psychological conditions. It is as if today the tragedy were less visible and social suffering were less noted. There are presently 250 volunteers working in 34 counselling centres in the diocese. Approximately 2,500 people asked for help in 2020. Most of them had never contacted charity organizations. Over €70,000 in vouchers have been granted since the outbreak of the emergency crisis. **9 thousand in Milan impoverished by the first lockdown.** The latest diocesan Report from Milan, presented at the beginning of November, documented 9,000 people "impoverished" by the previous lockdown, people who had never before sought Caritas services or whose situation grew worse. Caritas Ambrosiana recorded an increase in the number of poor people, in the suffering of the elderly and students, struggling as a result of digital divide. Caritas Ambrosiana has launched a fundraising campaign for the latter named Nobody stays behind. The elderly, once again caught in the grips of anguish and fear, are contacted at home, with exercise kits prepared with geriatricians to alleviate their loneliness, such as mnemonic games, nursery rhymes, crossword puzzles.

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