



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING  
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

*The Prefect*

Vatican City, 2 August 2021

### **Message for the Liturgical Memory of Blessed Ceferino Giménez**

Dear Fr. President, Brother in the Lord,

As you know, the Church today celebrates the liturgical memory of Blessed Ceferino Giménez Malla, the gypsy who was murdered in Barbastro in 1936 for trying to save a priest. In the life of "Pelé," as he is popularly known among the Roma, the central values of Christian life are reflected. He was known for his life of prayer, for his constant charity; he also had the natural gift of counsel. As Saint John Paul II stated during his beatification on May 4, 1997, "he was above all a man of deep religious beliefs" (cf. *Homily of Saint John Paul II at the solemn beatification ceremony of Ceferino Giménez and his fellow martyrs*, May 4, 1997, 4). Certainly such a way of life is rooted in his participation in the sacraments and his devotion to the Virgin Mary, but it is also rooted in the preservation of the traditional values of the Roma culture, such as the promotion of human life, the central role of the family, a religious sense of existence, unconditional hospitality, the human concept of work and the joy of living. However, this year I want to emphasize two essential aspects of the life of Blessed Ceferino Giménez.

"Pelé", was an animal trader with an admirable respect for his animals, comparable to that of Saint Francis of Assisi, whose example he followed as a Franciscan tertiary, as if he were "in communication with all of creation" (cf. Encyclical *Laudato si'*, 11), teaching young gypsies to become acquainted with these animals (cf. Encyclical *Laudato si'*, 33). However, he was not one of those people who was ruled by the "inconsistency to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely (...) unconcerned about the poor" (cf. Encyclical *Laudato si'*, 91).

Consequently, the Blessed gypsy's approach to life was not limited to Creation. Because of his moral authority he was often called upon, as a highly respected person, to settle the disputes that arose among the families of the Roma community as well as the conflicts that usually disturbed relations between the Roma and non-Roma, regardless of ethnicity or social status. One could observe in him the basic principle necessary for social friendship and universal fraternity: "the acknowledgement of the worth of every human person, always and everywhere" (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, 106). This is true social friendship and "the road that leads to true integration" (cf. Pope Francis' *Regina Coeli*, April 8, 2018).

Pelé was born into a culture that lovingly cares for the young and old, knowing that they both need attention because of their vulnerability, at the same time thanking God for the very gift of life. For this reason, today's feast is also an occasion to ask our society to know

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To the Most Reverend

Fr. Claude DUMAS

President of the *Comité Catholique International pour les Tsiganes*

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how to "discover the gifts of each person, to promote that which unites us, and to regard our differences as an opportunity to grow in mutual respect. Patience and trust are called for in such dialogue, permitting individuals, families and communities to hand on the values of their own culture and welcome the good that comes from others' experiences" (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, 134). Because of this intergenerational exchange, the Roma are more likely to do so than most majority societies, since "the values of freedom, mutual respect and solidarity can be handed on from a tender age" (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, 114).

The Roma are experts in fraternity. The difficulties they have had to face collectively over the centuries have created in them a strong sense of group membership and solidarity. This Dicastery learned that their mutual support mechanisms helped mitigate the impact of the pandemic among them - which they were more exposed to precisely because of having large families living in confined spaces. Some families offered material support to other families who had no means to survive. I would also like to note the emergency mechanisms that have been put in place at the diocesan, ecclesial and civil levels. The pandemic has revealed to us our frailty and our lack of solidarity: "solidarity today is the road to take towards a post-pandemic world, towards the healing of our interpersonal and social ills. There is no other way. Either we go forward on the path of solidarity, or things will worsen. I want to repeat this: one does not emerge from a crisis the same as before" (cf. General Audience of Pope Francis, September 2, 2020). Let us not forget that in these times of pandemic, for example, a school and parish for the gypsies of that city was inaugurated in Stara Zagora (Bulgaria).

I would also like to call your attention to the memory of Monsignor Mario Riboldi, a priest from Milan known among the Roma as *o bato Mario*, or *sherò Mario*, who returned to the House of the Father last June 8 after 57 years of life dedicated to the pastoral care of the Roma. He did so much, he was so humble, and we owe him so much! His life was the answer to the question he asked himself in 1957, after he had been assigned to the parish of Gnignano. On seeing a gypsy camp had asked himself: "And who will announce the Gospel to these people?". With a missionary attitude, that of the "church which goes forth" incarnated into the gypsy reality, he was able to inculturate the Gospel and the liturgy and help the Roma families of the urban and human peripheries, sharing their daily life made of joys and sorrows. He even translated the Gospel into Romani, wrote many pastoral guidelines in that language and, beginning in 1971, spent his life on the streets and in the Roma camps all over Europe, in his caravan-Cappella, as head of the Roma pastoral care of the Archdiocese of Milan until 2018.

In 1958 he sent Cardinal Montini, his Bishop in Milan, the proposal for a specific Roma pastoral care. Once elected Pope, St. Paul VI did not forget this project and organized the first international pilgrimage to Pomezia in 1965. Monsignor Mario Riboldi also gave a strong impetus to the international pilgrimage that takes place every year in Saintes-Maries-



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de-la-Mer (France) and to the international meetings of the *Comité Catholique International pour les Tsiganes* (CCIT). But if we remember him in a special way today, it is because he was the one who discovered the figure of Ceferino Giménez Malla and actively promoted his postulation until Saint John Paul II beatified him in Rome in 1997. He then supported the causes of Emilia Fernández, beatified in 2017, and the Servant of God Juan Ramón Gil Torres, who is in the process of beatification. His parish was a caravan with the tabernacle behind the curtain sewn by hand by Roma women.

He was "the priest of the gypsies", a master of inculturation, accompaniment, dedication and humility; he discovered in the Roma one of the few communities in the Western world that chooses fraternity before selfishness - and this is one of the main reasons for their continued exclusion in some areas of society. Monsignor Riboldi knew how to spread gypsy values among the non-Roma, and to Roma families he offered what he had: the Gospel and his own person, devoting himself to their service. When, already elderly, he was asked to slow down his activities to rest, his answer was that the shepherd never abandons his flock. Until 2020 he lived in his caravan at the Roma camp in Brugherio. The Roma, for whom he will continue to work from the House of the Father, will never forget him because he followed Jesus Christ who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being" (*Phil 2:7*).

I wish to conclude by thanking God for the life of Msgr. Riboldi and asking Him, through the intercession of Blessed Ceferino Giménez, not only for vocations to serve the neediest, but also that different cultures discover the gift of social friendship proposed by Pope Francis.

Thanks to the collaboration with the Roma Pastoral Care of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, we will be providing pastoral material to live the memory of Blessed Ceferino and give witness to the legacy that Monsignor Riboldi has left us through his life and faith shared daily with the community where he settled with his caravan. The material can be used on this occasion but also at other times as considered appropriate, especially in these difficult times. We hope it will be a useful tool to transform the memory into a leaven that will allow us to welcome our neighbor in a dimension of true Christian brotherhood.

While expressing my best wishes for this Liturgical Memorial and invoking the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary and the divine blessing of all those who are dedicated to the Roma Pastoral Care, I avail of the opportunity to renew my sentiments of deep esteem

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson  
Prefect