

PRESS CONFERENCE FOR THE PRESENTATION OF THE MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER FOR LENT 2022

“Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up. So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all” (*Gal 6: 9-10*)

(Press Office, Thursday, February 24, 2022)

Testimony of Fr. MASSIMO MOSTIOLI, Diocese of Pavia, Roma pastoral work

I am Fr. Massimo Mostioli, priest of the diocese of Pavia and of the *Comunità Casa del Giovane*, founded by the Servant of God Fr. Enzo Boschetti who, with Fr. Mario Riboldi, accompanied me to the priesthood and to the encounter with the Gypsies. In the book *One Thousand Years of the History of Gypsies*, by François de Vaux de Foletier, a chapter is entitled "many names for one people". It is because of this plurality of names that I prefer to use the term "Gypsies".

Fr. Mario Riboldi, who recently passed away, embodied in his daily life the example of a life spent with and for them. Encouraged by the then Cardinal Montini, who suggested "charity, prudence and patience" in approaching them, Fr. Riboldi chose to live in a caravan, a nomad among the many nomadic communities that walked with him, possessing the unique ability to create bridges between the Church, the Pope, the Roma and the Sinti. His discipleship was characterized by his service to the people, and this allowed him to learn their customs and language; he translated the Gospel into various dialects so that the Gypsies could follow Christ. He discovered the figure of an "illiterate gypsy with the makings of a saint", Ceferino (Zeffirino) Jiménez Malla, the patron saint of this people and a model for the vocations that were so dear to this "Gypsy priest". This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beatification of Zeffirino, known as "El Pelé", which took place in Rome on May 4, 1997.

Of the Message of the Holy Father for Lent, I was touched by St. Paul's appeal to the Galatians: In the face of concern over the challenges that lie ahead, in the face of discouragement over the poverty of our means “The Lenten season calls us to place our faith and hope in the Lord (cf. *1Pet 1:21*), since only if we fix our gaze on the risen Christ (cf. *Heb 12:2*) will we be able to respond to the Apostle’s appeal, “Let us never grow tired of doing good” (*Gal 6:9*)”. Since 1996, my experience as "chaplain of the nomads" has been rooted in this. Like Fr. Mario Riboldi, I too live in a camper to meet and be welcomed by the Gypsies where they are, living their life and learning their language. I am happy with this service, I love the Gypsies and they love me, too. The possibility of bringing them the Word of God that saves and liberates gives me so much joy, despite failures, disappointments and misunderstandings, which however teach us to grow in humility. Our vocation must make us fall in love: I offer my passion, nourished by the courage and certainty that it is the Lord who guides our steps because "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path" (*Ps 119*). I am content to till the soil for the sowing of the Word, following in particular the groups of Catholic gypsies: I approach them for baptisms, communions and confirmations, I celebrate mass and organize days in which we read and pray with the Bible. Under the Covid pandemic, events such as funerals, which draw relatives from all over Italy to honor the deceased, are difficult for law enforcement to manage. Before the pandemic, I used to organize pilgrimages in Italy and abroad, occasions suited to their sensitivity, involving entire families.

In pastoral work, in life, the people we meet and who are in need are not always good, polite and kind: sometimes they lie, deceive and cheat you... “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how

often must I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus answered, 'I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times'".

It is important not to be intoxicated by anger and resentment because of the risk of being manipulated or becoming a credit card, resulting from a badly set up relationship: is it always true that we have to solve all the problems because we feel indispensable? ... Maybe not. Very often we approach gypsies with many good intentions and good will, but with very little attention. Will cannot replace attention, listening and love, we must let ourselves be touched by situations that leave us breathless. I have engraved in my mind and heart the sad eyes of a little gypsy girl whom I baptized and confirmed, with whom I have been reading the Bible for years. My friend's father died suddenly six years ago in a car accident while drunk and driving his brother to buy drugs because he had seen him fighting with his wife over money. My friend's young widow, mother of this sad-eyed little girl, ran off with a married man after four years, leaving the little girl and her brother to her mother-in-law, mother of seven and widowed at the age of forty-five. Every morning I go to this grandmother's house for coffee and on the walls I see the photos of her young children, now all married, and on a piece of furniture those of her deceased husband and son with flowers and candles always lit. This grandmother, who is humble and good, lives only for her children and grandchildren, she always comes to mass and the rosary and sometimes she tells me "we are nuns!". When I return to my camper in the evening, I see through her glass door the little girl with sad eyes playing cards with her grandmother: when she wins, a smile lights up her face.

Thank you.