

Pope makes surprise visit to new cardinal's dinner with homeless

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As new Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, was treating the poor and homeless of Rome to a dinner on Friday night, Pope Francis surprised them with a visit and joined their celebration. Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, popularly known as Fr Corrado, the Pope's official almsgiver, who was made cardinal by Pope Francis at the Consistory the previous day, June 28th, had invited 280 for the special dinner.

Pope Francis surprised everyone when he arrived at the Vatican employees' canteen. The Holy Father dined with the guests and spent about two hours chatting with them. There were about 60 volunteers serving the meal, including Carlo Santoro of the Community of Sant'Egidio of Rome, who works with Cardinal Krajewski's Office of Papal Charities, to assist the homeless in Rome.

"It was a specially warm visit, because it was a dinner of the new cardinal with the poor," Santoro said. "To the surprise of all, the Holy Father arrived. We thought it was a simple greeting and he would be off soon," he said. The new cardinal turned to Santoro asking him to make room close to him for the Pope.

Santoro said the Pope greeted everyone with great affection. At the Pope's table were several Syrian refugees who had arrived through the efforts of the Sant'Egidio Community. One of them travelled to Rome with the Pope after his visit to the Greek island of Lesbos on April 16, 2016. The man told the Pope he is now working and is integrated in Italy. Santoro heard the Pope saying that several times in recent months he has met refugees from Lebanon and was struck by the fact that children were the first to speak Italian. For the Pope, it is important for people to integrate as well as being

made welcome when they first arrive. Where there is no job, the Pope said, there is no integration because without job there is no future.

Santoro said that at the table there was another refugee who told the Pope how he arrived in Italy. It was an 11-month journey through the desert, a journey full of dangers and pitfalls. He has been in Italy for some years and he too is now well settled.

A Muslim guest, from Senegal, told him that this was the third time at a meal with the Pope. He had been with both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI for lunch, and this was the third time. Pope Francis jokingly told him: "Make a collection of Popes!"

Santoro said that they introduced to the Pope some of the homeless who sleep around St Peter's Square at night and work with them every day. Sometimes they have organised funerals for people who die on the street. Santoro said the Pope was very warm and caring to his neighbours.

The volunteer of Sant'Egidio Community noted the Pope was touched by and enjoyed the presence of children around him. The Pope blessed a Syrian baby girl, born a few months ago, who was baptized on June 28. Talking with the volunteers, the Holy Father expressed his worry over the issue of children being separated from their mothers in Texas, United States.

The Pope repeated that Europe was on the verge of suicide because by not accepting immigrants and not having children gave the continent no hope for the future. He noted this worrying trend in other parts of the world, particularly in the US.

Santoro said the Pope also talked to some former prisoners, repeating something that he has often said: "But why not me?" meaning he could have been in their shoes.

When the volunteers told Pope Francis the story of a homeless, alcoholic man, the Holy Father said: "Alcohol could affect any of us because it's an evil that kidnaps you, an evil that doesn't leave you, it's an evil that you can only get out of with the help of others." Our problem, even as a Church, is to help people come out of difficult situations and do so together, the Pope said.

The Holy Father was very moved to hear that many of the homeless people help the volunteers help others like themselves. He heard how during severe cold snap earlier this year, many homeless people helped distribute blankets.