

Take truth, justice to the world's streets, says Vatican document

VATICAN CITY - Truth, justice, charity and hope must be taken to the streets, lanes and alleyways crisscrossing the world's cities and villages, said a new Vatican document.

The 59-page instruction, "Guidelines for the Pastoral Care of the Road," looks at ways the church can evangelize and offer pastoral care to the millions of people who are on the road, be they motorists, truck drivers, prostitutes, street children or the homeless. The Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers released the document June 19.

The growing number of people forced to live on the street and an insufficient number of pastoral responses to the homeless have prompted the Vatican to sponsor its first international congress dedicated to the pastoral care of homeless people.

During a press conference presenting the document, the council's secretary, Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, announced the special congress would be held at an unspecified date in November.

By issuing the guidelines, the council hopes to enlighten and encourage national bishops' conferences, parishes and lay movements to reach out to those on the world's highways and byways, Archbishop Marchetto said.

The document said that "the plight of the poor no longer moves people; they have become a problem of law and order, and irritation toward beggars is increasing."

The Bible "censures any form of irritation or indifference toward poor people," said the document, which urged people to look upon the homeless with respect and love as if a homeless person were Christ.

The road has become a place "where we spend a great deal of our lives," the document said, and the church is called to tackle the dangers and risks present there.

Christians are called to be prudent and courteous drivers who not only follow traffic safety rules and regulations, but buckle up, knowing Jesus “travels with us and sits beside us” and gives motorists the hope of “arriving safely at their destination.”

The guidelines presented a “Ten Commandments” for safe, careful and Christian driving, urging people to “courteously give way to pedestrians,” never drive while impaired, avoid unpleasant behavior such as “rude gestures, cursing, blasphemy,” and keep vehicles serviced regularly.

“The vast majority of car accidents are the result of serious and unwarranted carelessness – if not downright stupid and arrogant behavior by drivers or pedestrians,” it said. The church can do more in advocating road safety education, and Catholic radio can take “advantage of its personal training potential” since people often listen while they are in the car.

The guidelines looked at ways the church can help offer pastoral care to prostitutes as well as free these women from the “extremely serious problem” of human trafficking and the sex trade.

While religious orders, especially women’s congregations, are in the forefront of helping such women reach safety, more needs to be done in working with the “customers” who “need help in solving their most intimate problems and in finding suitable ways of directing their sexual tendencies.”

The social condemnation of those who exploit women through prostitution is not enough, it said; clients must be punished by laws.

The church needs to start educating people when they are young, helping them develop “correct judgments regarding human and Christian relations, respect, dignity, human rights and sexuality.”

Educators “should not let an inappropriate sense of embarrassment prevent them from engaging in appropriate dialogue on these issues,” especially concerning “the abuse of sexuality.”

The document expressed concern about the growing number of street children, calling their plight a social and pastoral emergency. It said most government

responses to street children are inadequate, especially when the problem is viewed solely as “a potential threat to law and order.” However, “specific pastoral care is even more lacking.”

The church cannot sit back and wait for young people to ask for help; religious and pastoral workers must intervene, interacting with children on the street, in dance clubs or other places they congregate, the statement said.

“Commitment with street children is certainly not easy and may sometimes appear inconclusive and frustrating, which may lead to the temptation to give up,” it said. But by sharing resources and ideas and training qualified people who display “great human maturity,” pastoral programs can still reach out and plant the seeds for helping the child turn his or her life around, the document said.

The problems people on the streets share are not just exposure to drugs, alcohol, crime, violence, HIV/AIDS or prostitution, but also “the terrible evil of the ‘death of the soul,’” it said.

“All too often, even though in the full bloom of youth, these people are ‘dead inside,’” the statement said.