

Reach Out and Touch the Poor, Pope Says in Lent Message

Pope Francis called for a fair distribution of wealth and equal access to education and health care on Tuesday in a Lenten message where he urged people to reach out and touch “the poverty of our brothers.”

In his message for the period between Ash Wednesday and Easter, he also said Christians should help those suffering from moral poverty, such as the “thrall” of alcohol, drugs, gambling and pornography.

During Lent, which begins on March 5 this year, Christians are called on to carry out acts of self-denial and help those less fortunate.

Francis, who was known as the slum pope in his native Buenos Aires because of his visits to the poorest people, said the wounds of poverty “disfigure the face of humanity” and were crying out to be healed.

“We Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it,” he said.

He again called on the wealthy to share their good fortune, to not be blind to the needs of others, and not to practice superficial solidarity or vain displays of self-denial.

“When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a fair distribution of wealth,” Francis said. “Our consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing.”

Francis said material poverty and moral destitution were often intertwined.

“How many people no longer see meaning in life or prospects for the future, how many have lost hope! And how many are plunged into this destitution by unjust social conditions, by unemployment, which takes away their dignity as breadwinners, and by lack of equal access to education and health care,” he said.

He defined moral destitution as “slavery to vice and sin,” including alcohol, drugs, gambling and pornography. “In such cases, moral destitution can be considered impending suicide,” he added.

Francis’ style is characterized by frugality. He shunned the spacious papal apartment in the Vatican’s Apostolic Palace to live in a small suite in a Vatican guest house, and he prefers a Ford Focus to the traditional papal Mercedes.

In Tuesday’s message, he said “Lent is a fitting time for self-denial” but condemned superficial shows of sacrifice or concern for the poor and needy.

“Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance. I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt,” he said.

Francis has in the past attacked unfettered capitalism as “a new tyranny” and has said huge salaries and bonuses were symptoms of an economy based on greed and inequality.

Since his election in March as the first non-European pope in 1,300 years, the Argentinian has several times condemned the “idolatry of money” and said it was a depressing sign of the times that a homeless person dying of exposure on the street is no longer news but a slight fall in the stock market is.

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