



Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, meets with Syrian refugees at Camp 004 near Kfar Dlaqous, Lebanon, Feb. 21, 2025. One out of four people living in Lebanon is a refugee. (CNS/Vatican News/Salvatore Cernuzio)

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While Pope Francis was hospitalized in Rome's Gemelli hospital, one of the cardinals closest to him traveled to Lebanon to demonstrate the pope's ongoing concern for refugees and for peace in the Middle East.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, visited Lebanon Feb. 19-23.

"With the Holy Father hospitalized and sharing in the sufferings of all who suffer, there could be no better way to pray for Pope Francis during the past four days than to help make him present to the suffering people of Lebanon," the cardinal told Catholic News Service.

"The incursions of violence and destruction, the economic crisis, the political instabilities, the huge refugee problems" all have a concrete impact on real people, whom he visited in the pope's name, the cardinal said Feb. 23 after he had returned to Rome.

"Every encounter included heartfelt prayers for him," Czerny said, "including with those who do not share our faith but do share our admiration, gratitude and love for him."

At the Basilica and National Shrine of Our Lady of Lebanon, where a towering statue of Mary overlooks Beirut, the cardinal entrusted the pope's health to Mary, Vatican News reported.

And visiting the tomb of St. Charbel at the St. Maron Monastery in Annaya Feb. 20, he lit a candle and prayed for the pope's health, joining thousands of people who visit the tomb each year seeking the saint's intercession to heal them or a loved one.

And after a meeting with the cardinal, Sheikh Mohammad Imam, the Muslim mufti of Tripoli, asked Vatican News to record a get-well message for the pope.

"We ask God to heal him completely, to restore his health, enabling him to return to the leadership of his noble papacy, with all that it contributes to a message of love, solidarity and balm for the wounds of various communities around the world," the mufti said.

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Czerny spoke to the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon, which had invited him to visit. And he held a discussion with young adults involved in the Leadership Academy for Peace, an initiative of his dicastery. The academy aims to help Catholics under 35 from the Middle East and North Africa prepare to be political leaders with a grounding in Catholic social teaching.

But a key focus of his visit was on refugees. With a population of about 5 million and with 1.5 million refugees, mostly from Syria, the U.N. refugee agency has said, "Lebanon remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita and per square kilometer in the world."

Visiting Camp 004 near the village of Kfar Dlaqous Feb. 21, Czerny was welcomed into the "home" of a family from Syria, a one-room cinderblock shack where a family of eight lives in one room.

"There's water everywhere, over us and under us, but not for washing," Fteim, the 50-year-old mother and grandmother of the family told the cardinal and a reporter from Vatican News as rain entered the shack. "The children are dirty, they don't have clean clothes and they don't go to school because they are not allowed on the buses."

The adults cried and asked for help, Vatican News said.

But they also were grateful for the visit of an illustrious guest, the report said. "Baba Francis," they shouted, until a priest told them, "No, it is not Pope Francis, it is one of his collaborators."

Czerny told them, "We have come to meet you and listen to you, and we share your hope to return home, to Syria."

"The pope is happy that I am here among you," he told them. "We weep for your suffering. The pope weeps with you, he loves you."