

Showers for homeless being built in St. Peter's Square

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Showers for the homeless will soon be located under the sweeping white colonnade of St. Peter's Square.

The Vatican's deputy spokesman, Ciro Benedettini, said that the project was a joint initiative of the pope and Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, the papal almoner who distributes charity on the pope's behalf. Construction is due to begin Monday (November 17) on three showers in refurbished public restrooms provided for Catholic pilgrims along the marble columns leading into the historic basilica, which was completed in 1626.

"I think it's a good thing," said Adrian Sztrajt, a 27-year-old homeless man from the Polish city of Chelm. "I would like to go for showers there."

Sztrajt and his companion Grzegorz Bialas, also from Poland, sleep with half a dozen others under the porticoes in front of the Vatican press office beside St. Peter's Square.

Bialas said he's a fan of the pope but thinks the showers are "a bad idea" since they could attract hundreds of homeless to the Vatican. He also said it was possible for the homeless to get a shower elsewhere in Rome.

Dariusz Puszkarcz, a construction worker from Gdansk, said the showers were less important than finding work. He said he was fed up with the priests and cardinals who walked past their group every day without stopping to help them.

"They don't do anything," he said in Polish through an interpreter. "They think we don't want to work. Because we drink, everyone thinks we are alcoholics. No one says there is work for you."

The Italian daily *La Stampa* reported Thursday that Krajewski had pressed for the showers to be built after he met a homeless man called Franco in October.

When he learned it was Franco's 50th birthday, he had invited him for dinner. But the man said he was too embarrassed because of his body odor while complaining there were no toilet or wash facilities around the Vatican.

Krajewski, who is also Polish, was not available for comment. He told *La Stampa's* Vatican Insider that he had visited 10 parishes in Rome where the homeless gather and asked them to install shower facilities. He said he tells parish priests: "The Holy Father is paying!"

The Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic charity that helps Rome's homeless, also publishes a handbook, titled "Where to eat, sleep and wash," in several languages.

"It is not simple, because it is easier to make sandwiches than run a shower service," Krajewski said. "We need volunteers, towels, underwear."

But Catholic charity is unlikely to stop there. Next on Krajewski's list is haircuts. He said he has asked a local hairdressing school if students may be available to give haircuts to pilgrims without a home.