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Pope Leo Meets US Homeless Helpers Who Lived on Streets

A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.

KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY

"Lighting a fire"

(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

The Story - Part One

Twenty leaders from Authentic Response, a Catholic initiative that brings together 10 American apostolates caring for homeless people, met Pope Leo XIV during the General Audience in Rome on Wednesday 18 November 2026. They came to share a simple idea with the Pope: that caring for a homeless person starts with a relationship, not a programme. The group asked for his blessing to keep "lighting a fire" underneath the American Church.

The woman who led them into that room knows the streets from the inside. Jessica Echeverry was living on the streets by the age of 16, after a difficult family situation and childhood trauma. She spent seven years homeless - four of them sleeping rough - and lost two children while homeless. Today she runs SOFESA, an organisation in Los Angeles that walks alongside homeless families and women. When she talks about encounter, she is not quoting a theory.

"It was a beautiful experience," Echeverry told Vatican News after the meeting. "We wanted the Pope to know that we were a group with the mission to reignite the Church in the United States with authentic Catholic Social Teaching, with the encounter of the person in need. That's what we were here for, to get his blessing to continue our mission of - what I like to say - lighting a fire underneath the American Church."

Authentic Response began its work in March 2025. It gathers 10 apostolates across the United States that all work the same way: they put relationships at the centre of how they care for people experiencing homelessness. The leaders who travelled to Rome represented that whole network, and they wanted the Pope to hear, in person, what they have learned on the streets.

Authentic Response: 10 Groups, One Idea - The Person Comes First

The heart of their message is a line Deacon Charlie Echeverry, Jessica's husband, put plainly: "At the center of homelessness is not a policy or a program, but a person." The couple have been helping homeless people for almost 30 years through SOFESA. Over those years, they watched help for the poor become more and more about resources and programmes. Tools and funding are good, Charlie says, but without a relationship - without really seeing the person - they are far too limited to do what God wants from an encounter.

The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

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