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Economically Stressed Argentines Pray to Patron Saint of Work

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Buenos Aires, Aug. 7--(AP) The line stretched for blocks Wednesday as tens of thousands of worshippers, carrying rosary beads and long stems of wheat, descended on a church where they believe all their prayers will be answered.

Even as U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill was visiting the Economy Ministry with hopeful talk of an economic turnaround, jobless Argentines were calling on their favorite saint to get the job done. Wednesday was Saint Cayetano day, when Argentina's Roman Catholics pay annual homage to the patron saint of work and prosperity. With the unemployment rate now at a record 22 percent and more than half of Argentina's 36 million people living in poverty, the number of visitors to Saint Cayetano Church has soared in recent years. Hundreds of thousands of people were expected to visit and pray before the end of the day this year. "Every time I come here I ask him to help me find a job. It has not happened yet, but he will help me. I'm sure of it," said Voldanero Alvarez, a former factory worker who has been unemployed for four years.

For the past 70 years, thousands have made the pilgrimage on Aug. 7 to the working class district of Liniers, northwest of Buenos Aires, to pay respects to Saint Cayetano, whom many Catholics believe can bring them "peace, food and work." Lastenia Morales, a 67-year-old retiree, said she barely survives on her pension of 100 pesos a month, worth only dlr 35 these days. "We've never had a time like this in Argentina. I suffer every day for the mistakes of our government and leaders. That is why I come here to ask for salvation," she said, shuffling along on a rusty metal cane.

Many stood in line for hours - some camped out for days or weeks - waiting to touch the faded red and white statue of Saint Cayetano. Church workers kept the crowd moving. After some touched the icon, they hugged the waiting priests. Others prayed on their knees, weeping. "I came here to ask for work to help my family eat," said Antonio Frutos, 48, who came with his wife, five children and four grandchildren. "I haven't worked for several months, but thankfully my older sons help put food on the table for all of us," he said as he clutched white plastic rosary beads dangling from his neck.

His grown daughter sat in an old beach chair, breastfeeding her infant grandson. Like many others, she had waited all night. "We came to ask Saint Cayetano for our continued health and for work. We always have hope," said Frutos.

Hope is the only thing that many in Argentina have these days. But even that is hard to come by. Four years of crippling recession, hunger and desperation sparked deadly riots in December that claimed 29 lives. Those protests toppled an elected president, and triggered default and devaluation, and brought about continued denials of fresh international assistance from international lending agencies.

A parish priest, Carlos Bernardone, said the people are suffering but find solace by coming together at this time of year. "The people of Argentina's faith is always strong," he said, pausing between taking confessions. "Lots of these people can't even afford to take the train or bus here anymore, so they walk, some of them for hundreds of kilometers (miles)."

But if faith is strong, the commercial aspect of the saint's day is even stronger outside the church walls. Narrow streets surrounding the church bustled with boisterous food vendors selling homemade meat pies and chocolates. Inside the stores, shoppers mulled over rows of religious candles and crosses.

Business was brisk inside Cuzco Cien, a shop where owner Raul Sanchez was busy restocking sweet-smelling incense. "I'm selling lots of things, but it is all the cheap stuff, for one or two pesos. Nobody is buying anything expensive this year."

While most people came to pray for work and food, others came to mourn. It's been a year of joblessness, poverty and rising crime, all blamed on the crippling crisis. "I come here every year to ask San Cayetano for help, but this year I am here to say a prayer for Franco," said Hector Cisneros, who was wearing a button with the picture of his 19-year-old cousin who was killed six months ago in a robbery attempt.