



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

« I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU MADE ME WELCOME... »

A reflection by the Commission of Episcopal Conferences of the EU (COMECE)
on the question of Refugees, Migrants and Integration

The past couple of months have seen several hundred thousand refugees and migrants arrive in Europe. The reasons why they have come vary from war, violence and social disruption to persecution, corruption and poverty in their countries and regions of origin. A scenario has come about which shows no sign of improvement in the near future and can only be addressed and managed with a well thought-out, systematic strategy. Such a large number of people coming in the direction of Europe within such a short time has given rise to a variety of reactions. It is worth noting that one of those reactions has been an impressive willingness to lend assistance. It is also important to note that legitimate questions have been raised and anxiety expressed, in the light of the challenges any successful integration may pose, as to how social stability, respect for the rule of law and the inviolability of the social and cultural ethos of European societies can avoid being undermined.

In this situation, « *the Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim 'to interfere in any way in the politics of States'. She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation.* » (Benedict XVI)¹. This calling of the Church is articulated in Catholic social teaching and the guidance it gives in finding solutions which reconcile transcendental human dignity with the pursuit of the common good.

In a case where a state fails in its basic duty to its citizens and can no longer provide the essential requirements which enable people to live in dignity and enjoy their natural rights, the social teaching of the Catholic Church affirms it as the individual's right to save his own life and that of his family, and to emigrate. The Catholic Church, in accordance with its understanding of itself, its history, its tradition and its vocation, has stood right from the start on the side of people who were obliged to leave their native land and look for a new home. The child Jesus even was a refugee. It is also the teaching of the Church that sovereign states have the right and the duty to protect their territorial borders and regulate migration in accordance with the standards of justice, mercy and respect for the common good.²

It is essential that in this current situation states, communities and citizens of Europe have trust in one another. It is only through trust that a favourable political and social atmosphere can be created in which a culture of welcome and acceptance can evolve

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, [Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate](#) (29 June 2009), 9: « *Without truth, it is easy to fall into an empiricist and sceptical view of life, incapable of rising to the level of praxis because of a lack of interest in grasping the values — sometimes even the meanings — with which to judge and direct it. Fidelity to man requires fidelity to the truth, which alone is the guarantee of freedom (cf. Jn 8:32) and of the possibility of integral human development.* »

² See also the [pastoral statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#): *Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples*

in harmony with the overall pursuit of the common good. Solidarity between the EU member states and their citizens will depend hugely on the degree to which security, stability and social cohesion are guaranteed. The same applies the preservation of the social, cultural and historical individual identity of long-established European states.

The culture of welcome to which we legitimately aspire risks being undermined by a feeling of insecurity or the fear, already present among some sections of the EU population, that our traditional culture and the lifestyle of our native societies are susceptible to dramatic change being imposed on them. It is essential that a serious and far-reaching integration of migrants and refugees be implemented « *with a view to safeguarding the needs and rights of individual migrants and their families, and at the same time, those of the host countries* »³. This mutual respect assumes the responsibility of migrants to recognise the common good of the communities and states which receive them, to make their own the positive values of these societies and to respect their laws.⁴

Charity demands justice. Justice means a recognition of and respect for the rights of individuals and peoples. And yet charity reaches beyond justice, given that it creates relationships and « *relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion* »⁵. The appropriate approach which the state, society and the individual need to take in regard to those among us in distress must be characterised by a responsible and generous openness, which can be backed up with concrete action. The people we are being called upon to serve are often victims of war, terrorism and other forms of violence, corruption or bureaucratic caprice, or subject to social or economic pressures, which make it barely possible for them or their families to cover their most basic needs.

The current refugee and migration phenomenon cannot be successfully addressed without more effective co-operation between the EU member states. That starts with a fairer sharing of responsibilities and more rigorous application of the Dublin system. Also necessary is better and more standardised control of the EU external borders. There must be a common commitment to stick to the agreements reached and to implementing legal obligations. The very future of the European project is at stake in the successful overcoming of this crisis. It is not just a question of material support, it is imperative that it take into account the needs of real people, their families and their aspirations for the future.

An essential step in tackling the migrant crisis is to develop better co-operation with the countries of origin and with those through which the migrants transit on their way to Europe. The Catholic Church is ideally placed to render service in this regard. It has an enormous, worldwide network of parishes, church congregations, religious houses (monasteries, convents), communities of consecrated life, and lay associations with

³ *Caritas in Veritate*, 62.

⁴ [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), Pt. 2241: « *The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him.*

Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens. »

⁵ *Caritas in Veritate*, 6.

their own particular initiatives, involving those working full-time and volunteers, with institutions in the education, health-provision and social sectors, all composing a sort of nerve system penetrating society at every level, within Europe and beyond. With its finger on the social pulse, with its particular sensitivity to the necessary political solutions, and with a unique capacity to implement policy on the ground, the Catholic Church can show that it is serious about its preferential option for the poor and the most marginalised in society, especially refugees and migrants. It is of huge benefit to exploit every possible link between the Church in Europe and the countries of origin and to enable that relationship to be characterised by gratuitous generosity, mercy and fraternity. No one must be allowed to slip through the net.

The dialogue between the European Union and the Catholic Church under the provisions of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU is an excellent instrument for exchange of opinions, perspectives and experience on the subjects of migration and refugees. It can help acquaint the institutions of the European Union with the wide range of practical experience and the intimate knowledge of the human plight of countless thousands of people and the expertise of the Catholic Church in this domain. This is experience, knowledge and expertise garnered by the Catholic Church in all the member states through hands-on engagement with the welcoming and reception of refugees, under watchful supervision right from the start and at every stage of their journey toward integration.

As we move into the 21st century, home affairs and external affairs are becoming more intertwined. This is particularly the case where migration and refugees are concerned. Refugees and migrants in large numbers undertake a journey from far-flung and distant countries of origin to Europe which is long, arduous and often at the risk of their lives. They have to cross through countries of North Africa or the Middle East before they reach their goal destinations in Europe. Over the years thousands of these people have lost their lives at sea. It is not just the EU member states but also the countries of origin and transit, as well as the international community, who have an urgent duty to do all within their power to take the necessary preventive measures to spare refugees and migrants such a fate and to see to it that they do not become victims a second time at the hand of human traffickers and smugglers. It is essential to recall the importance of a global approach to migration policy, to strengthen the steps to be taken by countries of origin and transit in developing a responsible approach to migrants and refugees, as well as to highlight the undeniable link between migration and development policy.⁶

The principal causes of the refugee crisis and migration need to be addressed up-front and head-on. The war in Syria must be brought to a close. An end must be made to the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in third countries. It is often the case that Christians are those who endure the most intense persecution in countries outside Europe. One of the principal policy challenges facing Europe into the future is the creation of new relationships and more favourable conditions to facilitate and promote development in third countries. It is only thus that these countries will

⁶ See also [Message of Pope Francis for the world day of migrants and refugees 2016](#): « *This will demonstrate that solidarity, cooperation, international interdependence and the equitable distribution of the earth's goods are essential for more decisive efforts, especially in areas where migration movements begin, to eliminate those imbalances which lead people, individually or collectively, to abandon their own natural and cultural environment. In any case, it is necessary to avert, if possible at the earliest stages, the flight of refugees and departures as a result of poverty, violence and persecution.* »

receive the necessary incentive to fashion social and economic infrastructure, which will enable their citizens to legally benefit from them so as to avoid having to leave their native land, and so that those who still feel obliged to leave may eventually return in safety and with decent prospects in regard to their future.

We wish to appeal to the international community and to the individual states, including the EU member states, to provide a responsible common answer to the current crisis of migration and refugees. It has to be an answer that puts people at the centre and that tackles the causes of the crisis. It is essential that it be an answer that develops a new model of international co-operation and reaches legally binding agreements. It must be an answer that is adequate to the dimensions of the challenge: it must involve all the EU member states, but it must not put the common good of European societies at risk. We would nonetheless invite all those responsible at local, regional, national and EU level to continue in their support of a culture of welcome. Positive experiences in relationships with refugees and migrants will only strengthen efforts to develop a more courageous reporting on the issue and a culture of welcome free of prejudice. It remains important that legitimate questions and the concerns of society not be overlooked. Concerns can be alleviated through reference to the positive experiences with the newly arrived.

The Catholic Church is prepared, in accordance with her mission, to reach out to those who come to us from afar, especially those with the most pressing needs, to provide help and support so as to facilitate the integration of the newcomers into society and to encourage the migrants who have settled in working together with the people of the host country. And still, this is not quite enough: the needs of refugees and migrants, who are after all our neighbours, represent a wider call to the whole of society and to each individual to change « *life-styles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies* »⁷. We must manage somehow to replace the widespread culture of insatiable egotism and « *compulsive consumerism* »⁸ by that « *civilisation of love and peace* »⁹ (John Paul II), which unites the inalienable dignity of every human being with the welfare of all peoples.

Brussels/Eisenstadt, December 2015

Bishop Ägidius Zsifkovics
Bishop of Eisenstadt
COMECE Coordinator on the question of Refugees, Migrants and Integration

-Translation from the German original-

⁷ Pope John Paul II, [Encyclical Letter Centesimus Annus](#), 58.

⁸ Pope Francis, [Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'](#), 162 & 203.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, [Message for the celebration of the world day of peace 2001](#)