

**Migrants and Refugees: Challenges and Opportunities:  
The Role of the Catholic Church**

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Introduction

Honorable President, Honourable Ministers, distinguished participants in this Exchange on the Religious Dimension of Intercultural Dialogue,

The Holy See, as Observer to the Council of Europe, would like to contribute to today's debate, which is dealing directly with religious groups and their role in providing effective responses to the challenges posed by contemporary migration flows.

In the case of the recent massive movements of migrants and refugees to Europe, such challenges frequently seem to conceal the opportunities offered by the same phenomenon. Beyond the dramas and hardships, there is a huge potential for development that should be unleashed for the benefit of all, local communities as well as migrants.

My remarks will focus on how the Catholic Church, present and active in all the member states, is responding to the challenges of contemporary migrations. In keeping with the titles of the two sessions of this Exchange, there will be three main points: (a) the integration of migrants and refugees, (b) the formulation of more humane and effective migration and asylum policies, (c) several basic concerns we all share.

From Welcoming to Integrating Migrants and Refugees

From the beginning of his pontificate, using persuasive words and deeds, Pope Francis has encouraged the Catholic Church to continue accompanying all people who are forced to flee their homes and native lands. At the beginning of 2017, he established the Migrants & Refugees Section within the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, entrusting to it the responsibility of assisting Catholic Bishops and their collaborators in this important endeavor.

In February 2017, the Holy Father addressed the ~~the~~ International Forum on Migration and Peace meeting in Rome. He declared that the response to the challenges of contemporary migration should be shared among the political community, civil society

and the Church, and it should be articulated in terms of four interrelated actions: to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate.

Looking at the present migration scenario, welcoming means enhancing safe and legal channels for migrants and refugees. The Holy Father translates such enhancement into “[...] offering broader options for migrants and refugees to enter destination countries safely and legally. This calls for a concrete commitment to increase and simplify the process for granting humanitarian visas and for reunifying families.” (*Message for the World Day of Migrants 2018*). Migrants and refugees knocking at the doors of Europe represent a concrete opportunity to exercise justice, practise solidarity and build fraternity, all of which are values that are among the main pillars of the European heritage.

As Pope Francis stated recently, “Protecting involves offering trustworthy and verified information to migrants and refugees prior to their departure, defending their basic rights independent of their legal status, and watching over the most vulnerable, the young children.” (*Address to the National Directors of the Pastoral Care for Migrants, 22 September 2017*). The Holy Father’s special concern for the latter led him to dedicate to migrant and refugee children the 2017 Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. Acknowledging this concern, the Holy See would like to commend the European Council for the “Action Plan on Protecting Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe.”

The third action, ‘to promote,’ has to do with integral human development, the fulfillment of every person’s natural aspirations in all dimensions of human life. There are many possibilities for promoting migrants, refugees and hosting communities. As the Holy Father states, “Development [...] is an undeniable right of every human being. As such, it must be guaranteed by ensuring the necessary conditions for its exercise, both in the individual and social context, providing fair access to fundamental goods for all people and offering the possibility of choice and growth.” (*Address to Participants in the International Forum on Migration and Peace, 21 February 2017*).

Integrating, according to Pope Francis, “concerns the opportunities for intercultural enrichment brought about by the presence of migrants and refugees.” Integration is not a synonym for assimilation. It is a bidirectional process of learning, respecting and valuing each other’s culture, with a view to building up an enriched, cohesive and intercultural society. In his message for the 2018 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, the Holy Father reiterates “the need to foster a culture of encounter in every way possible – by increasing opportunities for intercultural exchange, documenting and disseminating best practices of integration, and developing programmes to prepare local communities for integration processes.”

### Towards more humane and effective migration and asylum policies

The Holy See appreciates the United Nations' initiative and process to adopt two Global Compacts - one for safe, orderly and regular migration, and the other on refugees - as an important opportunity to respond together through international cooperation and shared responsibility.

The Catholic Church has already taken a stand on many of the issues which will be included in the Global Compacts and, drawing on its diverse and longstanding pastoral experience, seeks to contribute actively to the two processes. To support this contribution, the Migrants & Refugees Section, consulting with various Bishops' Conferences and Catholic NGOs working in the field, has assembled many best practices responding to the needs of migrants and refugees at the grassroots level. On this basis, Twenty Action Points have been prepared. Without exhausting the Church's teaching on migrants and refugees, they provide practical considerations which Catholic and other advocates can use, add to and develop in their dialogue with governments concerning the Global Compacts.

The Twenty Action Points advocate effective and proven measures which together constitute an integral response to the current challenges, highlighting the human development opportunities for all. In accordance with Pope Francis's teaching and approved by him, the points are grouped under four headings: to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate. These are calls to action and to cooperation. Starting from what is currently possible, their ultimate goal is the building of an inclusive and sustainable common home for all.

The Holy See hopes that these Twenty Action Points will provide welcome guidance to policy-makers in shaping more humane and effective policies for migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons, with special attention to the most vulnerable. The Holy See has formally submitted the Twenty Action Points to United Nations for the consultations and intergovernmental negotiations, in this way making them an official U.N. document, posted in its six official languages (cf. [undocs.org/A/72/528](https://undocs.org/A/72/528)).

The full text of the Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts has also been appended to this allocution.

## Several Concerns We Share

Having made these constructive proposals, the Holy See would also like to reiterate the deep concern of the Holy Father “about manifestations of intolerance, discrimination and xenophobia that have appeared in various parts of Europe. Often this reaction is motivated by mistrust and fear of the other, the foreigner, those who are different.” (*Address to the National Directors of the Pastoral Care for Migrants of the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of Europe CCEE, 22 September 2017*). The Catholic Church is eager to support the Council of Europe in its efforts to eradicate such negative attitudes, in compliance with its institutional mandate.

In this regard, special protection should be assured to minority groups and children, who are generally the most vulnerable. Nonetheless, protecting is not enough: there is an urgent need to overcome the negative narratives and fearful perception of migrants and refugees in the media and among local populations. We need, instead, to highlight the opportunities that migration can bring about.

Human rights violations against migrants and refugees need to be detected quickly and remedied, and in the long run effectively prevented. In this context the Council of Europe has a mandate to monitor closely the migration and asylum policies and programs of all member states, to assess their compliance with the minimum standards provided by the relevant international conventions, and to promote a civilization based on maximum respect for human dignity and on the rule of law.

## Conclusion

With gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to this important Exchange, let me conclude by quoting the strong words addressed by Pope Francis to the European Parliament nearly three years ago (25 November 2014): “Europe will be able to confront the problems associated with immigration only if it is capable of clearly asserting its own cultural identity and enacting adequate legislation to protect the rights of European citizens and to ensure the acceptance of immigrants.”

Thank you!