

# REFUGEES, MIGRANTS, AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

Ary Waldir Ramos Díaz / 28 October 2017

*Interview with Fr. Michael Czerny S.J., Under-Secretary of the Migrants and Refugee Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development of the Holy See.*

“Refugees and Migrants in a Globalized World: Responsibility and Responses of Universities”: this is the theme of the International Conference that will take place 1-4 November at the Pontifical Gregorian University (PUG) in Rome. On Saturday, Pope Francis will meet with the conference participants and share his own reflections on the topic.

The principal organizer of the conference is the International Federation of Catholic Universities. Also attending will be representatives of institutions working to promote educational opportunities for refugees, such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Jesuit Refugee Service.

In order to understand better the reflections of Pope Francis and the challenge facing the universities in this regard, we talked with Michael Czerny S.J., Under-Secretary of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development of the Holy See. At the present time the Pope is personally directing this Section.

“Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has, by persuasive words and effective actions, encouraged the Church to accompany and assist all categories of persons who are forced to flee their homelands. In 2017 he established the Migrants and Refugees Section as a way of implementing this important pastoral objective,” Fr. Michael Czerny explained to Aleteia. The 71-year-old Jesuit was born in Czechoslovakia; the family of four (there was also a younger brother) fled to Canada when he was two and a half. “We have to put ourselves in the shoes of the migrants and refugees and listen to their stories,” he said.

*Do you believe that the globalization of indifference is showing its ugliest side in the case of refugees and migrants, especially in the lack of educational opportunities?*

“No! Such indifference has many variants -- it wears, we might say, many faces. Yes, it is true that the problem of forced displacement of persons gives us a blatant and cruel demonstration of that indifference. The problem is that our societies are organized in such a way that they display various forms of indifference. To cite one example, many homeless persons are suffering from mental illness, and we don't know how to help them. We are unable to give them assistance at either a personal or an institutional level. The indifference towards a homeless person is also blatant and cruel. But

indifference towards persons forced to migrate or seeking asylum has become globalized and generalized, and that is why the recent arrivals in the country also meet with indifference.”

*With regard to the conference taking place at the PUG from November 1 to 4, what will be the contribution of the Migrants and Refugees Section, so favoured by Pope Francis, concerning the role of universities in helping migrants and refugees to improve their educational level and escape from their marginalized situation?*

“The starting point is the vocation of the universities. It’s not a question of telling them to become something different from what they are. The universities must live out their vocation to the utmost. That includes research and teaching, but it also includes social outreach. Our own contribution will be to remind the universities of the diverse ways in which their vocation relates to the many people who are fleeing persecution, violence, poverty, and large-scale climatic changes. Our universities should help people escape from marginalization, but if they simply make themselves comfortable in the tranquil “ghetto” of their privileges, they will not be able to respond to the problem, or they will do so only superficially.”

*What are we talking about concretely? Scholarships? Programs that have more impact on culture and society?*

“We are going to propose a number of practices that Catholic universities can pursue. But for us the most important thing is not scholarships or particular programs. Rather, it is getting the universities to fulfill their vocation in relation to today’s society. For example, a university that is not self-critical in the way it deals with racism, xenophobia, and other ideologies is not contributing in a truly ‘university’ way to the society that is hosting it. Having lots of doctorates, degrees, scholarships, and money is secondary to the university’s true mission and vocation with respect to society.”

*The Pope once said at a pontifical university, “Theology is done on one’s knees.” Could it be that academic studies are also done kneeling down?*

“Exactly! Academic work is done kneeling before the Holy, and in a classroom or a laboratory. But also walking! walking out and encountering society.”

*Why is it so difficult for us to understand Francis when he tries to convince us that the migrants are our sisters and brothers, people in search of a better life?*

“To begin with what is most basic: we’re dealing with the fruits of sin. The most obvious evidence of sin is my refusal to recognize my sisters and brothers as such. Instead, I am always tempted to treat them as obstacles—or worse, as enemies of my own interests. I still don’t have enough, I cannot share with others...”

So, sin is fundamental. Perhaps we need to examine our consciences: do our Catholic universities have interests that blind us to the faces of those seeking acceptance among

us? Why is it that, from our privileged position as Catholic academics, we do not see those faces?”

*Given the mission of the universities, what is the most difficult aspect of Pope Francis’s call to “receive, protect, promote, and integrate” the migrants and the refugees?*

“The most frequent obstacle is that we are ‘too busy’ and always in a rush. We don’t have time to breathe, much less to listen. Universities are continually multiplying the tasks, the jobs, and the duties of their staff. But as Jesus told the anxious Martha: ‘You are worried and distracted by many things, but only one thing is necessary’ (Luke 10:41-42).”

*What are the aspects that we tend to forget from a personal perspective?*

“Right now we don’t have the ability, the facility, or the habit of putting ourselves in the shoes of the other. I’m convinced that everything would change if we really listened to the story of a refugee seeking asylum or a migrant desiring a better future. If we were to listen to their stories, we would instinctively admit: ‘If I were in their place, I would have done exactly the same thing, but I would not have put up with so much adversity with the same patience they showed.’

Indeed, many put up with terrible difficulties with the greatest patience and hope. After interacting with them even for a short while, we cannot help but respond with sympathy and understanding. Unfortunately, however, in this regard the mass media are flooding us with a perverse selection of images and news reports, without providing us much access to the full breadth and depth of the phenomenon.”

*By the end of 2018 the U.N. is supposed to approve a global compact on refugees and another one on secure, orderly, and responsible migration. What contribution will your Migrants and Refugees Section make to these compacts?*

“In order to contribute to these processes, the M & R Section, with the Pope’s guidance, has prepared two documents. ‘Twenty Points for Pastoral Action’ is a document for the use of dioceses, parishes, religious congregations, and church organizations; it can also provide guidance for schools, secular groups, and other organizations of civil society that work with those who are “forced to flee.” The document lays out pastoral priorities for local programs and provides useful themes for homilies, classes, and media messages. The other document, ‘Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts,’ uses more detailed, legal language and is aimed at stimulating dialogue with governments and international organizations. Our hope is to see these concerns of ours included in the global compacts. And indeed the Twenty Points have been formally submitted to the United Nations for the consultations and intergovernmental negotiations, become an official document, and been posted in its six official languages.” [undocs.org/A/72/528](https://undocs.org/A/72/528)

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Pope Francis gave his collaborators the life jacket of a six-year-old Syrian girl who died in the Aegean Sea along with her family. It can now be found in the offices of the Migrants and Refugees Section. To the left, Fr. Michael Czerny S.J., and to the right Fr. Fabio Baggio, the two Under-Secretaries of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for the Service of Human Development of the Holy See.

### ***Migrants and Refugees Section of the Holy See***

The Migrants and Refugees Section, a small department of the Vatican curia, is oriented toward pastoral and social action. It is personally directed by Pope Francis, who is convinced that special attention and effort is needed in order to make sure that persons who are forced to migrate do not end up excluded or forgotten.

The Migrants and Refugees Section encourages the Church throughout the world to provide holistic assistance to persons displaced by conflicts, natural disasters, persecutions, or extreme poverty, as well as to all those who are fleeing in search of safety, are stranded on their journey, or are victims of trafficking.

Original interview:

<https://es.aleteia.org/2017/10/28/refugiados-y-migrantes-responsabilidad-de-las-universidades-catolicas/>

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