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Syrian Refugees

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Introduction

17 January 2016 was celebrated by the Catholic Church as the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. Many people will think immediately of the current refugee crisis affecting the Middle East and Europe, but the concern of the Church for migrants and refugees is rooted in the Gospel and has a long history. For example, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) was founded in 1951, in the wake of the massive human displacement caused by the Second World War. The ICMC is an international non-governmental organisation and in 2008 was officially granted public juridical status by the Holy See (see www.icmc.net).

Christian concern for the welfare of migrants and refugees is part of the Gospel injunction to love our neighbour and it has a further expression in the principle of “solidarity” articulated in Catholic Social Teaching: *“The principle of solidarity, also articulated in terms of “friendship” or “social charity”, is a direct demand of human and Christian brotherhood”* (Catechism of the Catholic Church para 1939). The “principle of solidarity” is also referred to in Article 80 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and states that in the field of border checks, asylum and immigration, the *“policies of the Union...shall be governed by the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications”*.

So in the light of that background, what is the Catholic Church saying about the current refugee crisis?

Pope Francis

Pope Francis issued a Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees which he entitled “Migrants and Refugees Challenge Us. The Response of the Gospel of Mercy”. The Message describes the current plight of migrants who are increasingly the victims of violence and poverty and says that

“Today, more than in the past, the Gospel of Mercy troubles our consciences, prevents us from taking the suffering of others for granted, and points out ways of responding which, grounded in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, find practical expression in works of spiritual and corporal mercy...Migrants are our brothers and sisters in search of a better life, far away from poverty, hunger, exploitation and the unjust distribution of the planet’s resources which are meant to be shared equitably by all. Don’t we all want a better, more decent and prosperous life to share with our loved ones?”

At the same time the Holy Father recognises that the *“presence of migrants and refugees seriously challenge the various societies which accept them. Those societies are faced with new situations which could create serious hardship unless they are suitably motivated, managed and regulated”*. He

goes on to say that it is important to view migrants as people who are capable of contributing to progress and the general welfare and *“this is especially the case when they responsibly assume their obligations towards those who receive them, gratefully respecting the material and spiritual heritage of the host country, obeying its laws and helping with its needs”*.

The Pope also calls for assistance for the countries which migrants and refugees leave and refers to *“solidarity”* and *“international interdependence”*. He adds that *“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”*.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Cardinal Vincent Nichols speaking in November last year said that *“so much more needs to be done”* in the UK and Europe to respond to the refugee crisis. He said that he appreciated the Government’s initiative to bring 20,000 Syrian refugees to the UK but that progress was slow and the plight of refugees could not wait. The Cardinal has referred in particular to the refugees camping near Calais and said that the conditions of the camp *“dehumanise those living there and rob them of their dignity”*. He has recently questioned the Government’s policy of taking refugees from camps run by the UN in the region given that many Syrian Christians are not in those camps but prefer to be in camps run by Christian faith groups. Last year, Church of England bishops called on David Cameron to increase the number of refugees that the UK would accept to 50,000 but this appeal was firmly rejected.

Proposed Solutions to the Crisis

In September last year, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) identified five actions required to end the current crisis, relieve the burden of host countries in the region and facilitate greater numbers of migrants and refugees.

1. **Dialogue must be intensified** among all governments involved in the politics and conflicts of the Middle East and North Africa to terminate the conflict, reduce the impact of ISIS, rebuild stability in Libya and support humanitarian responses.
2. Governments worldwide should reconsider their **maximum capacity to contribute to present humanitarian budgets** and establish a more sustainable system of fixed contributions to respond to major and protracted crises.
3. The international community as a whole must come up with an **organised mechanism for safe, legal and orderly migration** – perhaps like the Comprehensive Plan of Action in the 1970s and 1980s in respect of Vietnamese Boat People – to provide refugees and migrants with genuine alternatives to risking fatal journeys as their only hope for survival.
4. Pope Francis has encouraged every Catholic parish to welcome at least one Syrian family. As a corollary, **cities and communities in Europe and elsewhere need to be provided with means to allow for more arrivals**, including access to services and integration programmes in simplified and fast track procedures. Imposing quotas of refugees without providing corresponding resources, information-sharing and capacity-building merely relocates and prolongs the crisis.

5. Clear, confident choices should be made to **integrate the local population**, resident diaspora and civil society actors of all kinds in the increasing, often spontaneous efforts to host refugees and migrants. Many of today's local initiatives remain uncertain due to residence, working and other permits either not immediately available or not permanently granted to refugees and migrants.

At a meeting in November last year at the International Organisation for Migration, John Bingham, Head of Policy of the ICMC reiterated the call for a Comprehensive Plan of Action including a substantial Orderly Departure Programme and recalled how the world – not just one or two regions – stepped up with a combined global response to a similar movement of people forty years ago in South East Asia. Much the same number of refugees and others were moving desperately, without legal channels, in dangerous journeys by sea or land, with enormous suffering and death. The Comprehensive Plan of Action drawn up then was regarded as successful and has been described as *“a model for multilateral co-operation, built on the principles of international solidarity, burden sharing and proper acceptance of responsibilities”*.

Meanwhile in the EU, an attempt at a regional plan of action is contained in the “Juncker plan” (embodied in Council Decision 12098/15 of 22 September 2015) under which Member States will be obliged to take part in a relocation system that assigns 120,000 refugees according to GDP, population size, unemployment rate and the number of refugees already resident in the respective Member State. The Decision was (unusually) adopted by Qualified Majority Vote against opposition from Romania, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia who claimed infringement of their sovereignty and their wish to maintain cultural and religious homogeneity in their respective countries. The UK Government has said that it will not participate in this relocation scheme but take the 20,000 people it has undertaken to resettle directly from refugee camps in the region.

On 4 January 2016, the leaders of 27 leading charities including CAFOD, Christian Aid and Caritas Social Action Network wrote an open letter calling on David Cameron to “approach this new year with new resolve to address the appalling plight of refugees in Europe”. The letter welcomed the leading role the UK played in offering international aid to places affected by conflict, especially in the Syria region and commended the UK for providing assistance to those helping refugees in Greece and the Balkans but said that the UK's offer to settle 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years was “too slow, too low and too narrow”.

The letter endorsed what it called four refugee principles as follows:

- The UK should take a fair and proportionate share of refugees, both those already within the EU and those still outside it;
- Safe and legal routes to the UK, as well as to the EU, need to be established;
- Safe and legal routes within the EU, including the UK, should be established;
- There should be access to fair and thorough procedures to determine eligibility for international protection wherever it is sought.

Conclusion

No-one can deny the enormous complexity of the current migrant and refugee crisis. Every element of a solution carries risks of further problems, including the poor human rights situation in some countries of refuge, the activities of human traffickers, and how to cope responsibly with the understandable political reactions to terrorist outrages like the attacks in Paris.

On the other hand, this crisis is not unprecedented, the Catholic Church and lay organisations such as the ICMC, Catholic Relief Services, Aid to the Church in Need, CAFOD and the Jesuit Refugee Service continue to work to apply Catholic principles to alleviate and try to bring an end to this crisis.

We can all play our part and fulfil our duty of solidarity through prayer, by donating to the various charities working in the field and calling on the UK Government to play the fullest possible part in bringing this crisis to an end.