



Faith and Protection: Key Elements in the Catholic Response to Refugees

Briefing Note by the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See in preparation for the Dialogue on Protection Challenges “*Faith and Protection*” organized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - 12-13 December 2012



Building of New Sites in Northern Niger to Receive Malien Refugees - Credit: Mr. Souleiman GALADIMA, CADEV - Caritas Niger

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Caritas Internationalis
Caritas in Veritate Foundation
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Center for Migration Studies
Centro Studi Emigrazione
International Catholic Migration Commission
Jesuit Refugee Service

Introduction

In preparation for the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, 12-13 December 2012, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva took the opportunity to convene major Catholic Church-inspired organizations engaged in the service of refugees, stateless, and internally displaced persons, to reflect on their ongoing engagement in actions related to "Faith and Protection". We wish to thank the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. António Guterres, and his staff for acknowledging the work of religious organizations in this field. These organizations, as the High Commissioner has said, include "*hands-on local actors and respected members of civil society*" that serve "*on the front lines of conflict and acute displacement crises*"¹, and are "*strong advocates for respecting human dignity and empowering vulnerable people who are in the margins of our societies,*" and "*often play a key role in initiating or supporting efforts to resolve disputes and consolidating peace.*"²

The Refugee Experience: at the Heart of the Three Abrahamic Faith Traditions

Migration has been noted as a common backdrop for the three Abrahamic Faith Traditions, which trace their origins to the Patriarch Abraham who followed God's call to migrate from his ancestral home to the land of Canaan. Indeed, the Jewish people were deeply molded by their experience of the "Exodus" – dispersion, exile, and return from slavery, to freedom in the land of God's promise. While still an infant, Jesus was taken as a refugee to Egypt in order to escape the death-dealing sword of Herod. He later invited his disciples to join a new Exodus into freedom and redemption that he established through his own death and resurrection from the dead. Muslims measure time from the founding event of Muhammad's *hijira*, or migration, from Mecca to Medina³. The Qur'an teaches that believers should "*serve God...and do good to...orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer that you meet, [and those who have nothing] (4:36).*"⁴

Adherents to the Catholic Church tradition squarely recognize migration, and, in particular, forced migration, as "*a social phenomenon of epoch-making proportions that requires bold, forward-looking policies of international cooperation if it is to be handled effectively.*"⁵ We believe that "*every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.*"⁶ Our ethic for treatment of refugees and other migrants is firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition: "*You shall not oppress an alien: you well know how it feels to be an alien since you were aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9).*" Our faith tells us that actions on behalf of the most vulnerable in society will determine our Final Judgment by God Himself; as Jesus taught, "*Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me ...'* (Matthew 25:34-35)." Moreover, as Pope Benedict XVI taught on the occasion of the World Day of Migration 2011: "*The situation of refugees and of the other forced migrants, who are an important part of the migration phenomenon, should be specifically considered in the light of the theme 'One human*

¹ "High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, 12-13 December 2012, Faith and Protection: A Concept Paper," <http://www.unhcr.org/501a3ed99.html>.

² *Ibid.*

³ David Hollenbach, SJ, "Migration as a Challenge for Theological Ethics", Political Theology, online version, ISN 1473-1719, p. 807.

⁴ World Relief, "Interfaith Statement in Support of Comprehensive Immigration Reform," 14 October 2005, <http://worldrelief.org/Page.aspx?pid=1524>.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, #62, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html

⁶ *Ibid.*

family' ... This means that those who are forced to leave their homes or their country will be helped to find a place where they may live in peace and safety, where they may work and take on the rights and duties that exist in the Country that welcomes them, contributing to the common good ...”⁷

Response of the Catholic Church to Situations of Refugees as well as Stateless and Internally Displaced People

Over the centuries, the Catholic Church and its related organizations have mounted a response to refugee situations that scrutinizes the “signs of the times”.⁸ Profound in both breadth and depth, such responses have been developed through a network of solidarity. These include, *inter alia*:

- Local and indigenous Church structures in dioceses and parishes;
- National organizations, usually based in offices of Caritas or national Pastoral Commissions for Migration under the leadership of national Episcopal Conferences;
- International networks, comprised of national member organizations and convened by the International Catholic Migration Commission and Caritas Internationalis
- and the orders of religious women and men at both local and national levels, including Jesuit Refugee Service, the Scalabrinian communities of religious men and women, and others.

First Response

“... [A]ssistance or ‘first welcome’ are of the greatest importance ... in response to the emergencies that come with migrations”⁹. Most situations that produce mass involuntary displacement require immediate response that is knowledgeable about and sensitive to respective cultures and circumstances. The parishes and dioceses of the Catholic Church often provide such first response together; they offer shelter, food, and other elements of basic hospitality. When the situations exceed local capacity, the national, regional, and international organizations related to the Catholic Church reach out in solidarity by providing additional financial and human resources as well as capacity-building and infrastructure strengthening, but always in partnership with and deference to the autonomy of the local Church. When the situation warrants intervention by international humanitarian and refugee protection agencies, such as UNHCR and other UN bodies, the Church-inspired organizations often are recruited as implementing partners, as they assume responsibility for various elements of the immediate response to refugees.

Comprehensive, Integral, and Long-Term Solutions

Long before the international community engaged itself in such matters, Catholic Church-inspired organizations were committed to, and developed expertise in, the search for comprehensive, integral, and long-term solutions for refugees and host communities. Thus we continue to provide professional, transparent, and accountable programmes that aim toward effective and just solutions, including assistance with determining refugee status, developing and managing temporary shelter, providing nutritional support, education, employment skills training, and legal and psycho-social services in both camps and urban settings, facilitating safe voluntary return and follow-up services, implementing refugee resettlement

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *One Human Family*, Message for the 97th World Day of Migrants and Refugees: (2011), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/migration/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100927_world-migrants-day_en.html

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, #4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

⁹ Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 2004, #43, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html

and promoting integration into the host community when no other alternative is possible. In addition, these organizations are engaged in the promotion of peace and reconciliation in conflict zones; such efforts may create more favorable conditions to the return of involuntary migrants to their places of origin.

Once again, the global extension of the Catholic Church in all parts of the world makes possible a comprehensive and integrated approach to refugee situations: “*In the work of pastoral care of refugees, cooperation between the Churches of the countries of origin, temporary asylum and permanent resettlement is now more necessary than ever ... Fraternal cooperation between Churches and coordination on the regional level can set in motion or increase dialogue between the various parties involved with assistance to refugees.*”¹⁰

These Church-based organizations range from small programmes with one part-time or full-time staff and volunteers to large complex structures, which are counted as significant stakeholders, and expend hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars, within the world of humanitarian and refugee assistance. These organizations recognize that, while “*professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient when dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern.*”¹¹ In this sense, these services “*aim at the progressive integration and self-sufficiency of the immigrant through family unification, education of children, housing, work, associations, promotion of civil rights.*”¹² They also respect and encourage various ways in which migrants participate in their host society and “*... make efforts to involve immigrants themselves in their structures.*”¹³

These services are provided to all in need without any distinction on the basis of racial, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, or religious origin. They conform to the Principles promoted by many international humanitarian networks, including equality, transparency, responsibility, and complementarity. At the same time, Catholic Church-inspired organizations insist on maintaining their religious identity, integrity, and freedom to conform to the Teaching of the Catholic Church, including such fundamental doctrines as the unique, God-given dignity of each and every human person and the sacredness of human life at all stages from conception to natural death.

Advocacy: An Important Role for Religious Leaders¹⁴

We cannot forget the urgency of advocating for and with refugee populations in order to guarantee protection of and respect for all the human rights that they are entitled to enjoy. Blessed Pope John Paul II, of happy memory, served as an inspirational model in this regard. In his 1990 Lenten Message, he strongly urged: “*Concern for refugees must lead us to reaffirm and highlight universally recognized human rights, and to ask that the effective recognition of these rights be guaranteed to refugees. Thus it is a matter of guaranteeing to refugees the right to establish a family or to be reunited with their families: to have a stable, dignified occupation and a just wage; to live in dwellings fit for human beings; to receive adequate health care...*”¹⁵ Catholic Church-inspired organizations regularly participate in the Annual UNHCR-NGO Consultations

¹⁰ Pontifical Council Cor Unum and Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerants, 1992, *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, #30, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_corunum_doc_25061992_refugees_en.html

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, #31, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

¹² *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, op. cit., #43.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For more on this important topic, cf. Silvano Tomasi, *Human Rights as a Framework for Advocacy on Behalf of the Displaced: The Approach of the Catholic Church*, in David Hollenbach, s.j., Editor: *Driven from Home: Protecting the Rights of Forced Migrants*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010. Pp. 55-69.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Message for Lent*, 1990, #3 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/len/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19890908_lent-1990_en.html

and thus are effective in bringing to the global level the voices of both involuntary migrants and those providing protection to them.

Protection and Assistance to Refugees Must Embrace the Needs of the Whole Person, Including Pastoral and Spiritual Needs

Catholic Church-inspired organizations are committed to a holistic approach to protection, one that addresses both material and spiritual needs. They do so, however, while maintaining due respect for the diverse faith affiliations of such persons. As the Holy See has observed:

*All refugees have the right to a type of assistance that includes their spiritual needs during the time of asylum spent in a camp and during the process of integration in the host country. Thus, they can find the comfort to bear their harsh trial and to grow in their own religious experience. Therefore ministers of different religions must be allowed full freedom to meet with refugees, to live with them and to offer them an adequate assistance. The Church, however, deplores all forms of proselytism among refugees that take advantage of their vulnerable situation, and upholds the freedom of conscience even in the difficulties of exile.*¹⁶

While we are well aware of the reticence of some governmental and secular funding agencies to cover costs for such services, we believe that faith-based groups have the moral obligation to provide such services. These services are particularly meaningful to migrants who see their own experience through the lens of their faith. The spiritual dimension of recovery from trauma cannot be underestimated; “*faith helps people to cope with trauma; it validates their humanity; informs their decisions, and offers guidance, compassion, consolation and hope in their darkest hours.*”¹⁷ The exercise of one’s faith and ongoing spiritual development, protected by international law, are key aspects of the notion of integral human development, and contribute to resiliency of the displaced person.

With Firm Hope that this Dialogue Will Continue

The Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva, and the above-cited organizations seek no special privileges in the fulfillment of our mission but expect our faith-inspired initiatives to be respected and accorded equal consideration in partnership arrangements and funding decisions. Most importantly, we look forward to ongoing dialogue and collaboration with UNHCR, as full partners and not simply as “sub-contractors”, on the most effective actions to be taken in order to adequately address “*the immense poverty and suffering entailed in migration, often leading to painful and tragic situations*”¹⁸. In this manner, we hope to assist refugees and other involuntary migrants to “*experience, along with the difficulties, new, welcoming relationships which enable them to enrich their new countries with the professional skills, their social and cultural heritage and, not infrequently, their witness of faith.*”¹⁹

¹⁶ *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, op. cit., #28.

¹⁷ “UNHCR’s Annual Consultations with NGOs 28-30 2011, Rapporteur’s Report, <http://www.unhcr.org/ngo-consultations/ngo-consultations-2011/2011-Rapporteurs-Report-final-with-cover-page.pdf>

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Migrations: Pilgrimage of Faith and Hope*, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2013, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/migration/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20121012_world-migrants-day_en.html

¹⁹ *Ibid.*