

Defending the Rights of Refugees: A Catholic Cause

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ABSTRACT: Globally, the number of people forced to flee their homes due to conflict or persecution has reached a record high of more than 65 million. Catholic Social Teaching presents a framework through which this critical issue of our time can be addressed. A close examination of the Gospel, Papal teachings, and the example of Pope Francis himself, demonstrate that we are called to welcome the stranger in whatever form that may take. Whether through direct service and advocacy by organizations like Jesuit Refugee Service, or through personal reflection, each of us is called to take action.

KEYWORDS: refugee, migrant, migration, jesuit

INTRODUCTION

Global displacement has reached record-high numbers, with more than 65 million people forced to leave their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This translates into one in every 113 people, with an average of 24 people forced to flee every minute of every day.¹

These staggering figures have placed the plight of refugees front and center in the news media, in our halls of Congress and in our communities. While some have welcomed refugees with open arms, others have shunned them.

¹“Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016,” UNHCR, 2016. <http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf>.

What are we as Catholics called to do? How are we to regard refugees? Can Catholic Social Teaching serve as a guide?

I was first formally introduced to the concept of Catholic Social Teaching as a student at Villanova University, where community service and outreach to the most vulnerable was a core part of campus life. The benefits of a Catholic education became clear to me, as living a life in service of others was deemed equally as important as achieving academic success.

Catholic Social Teaching, as a framework for my Catholic faith, made sense to me. I had always been interested in helping others, both in my own community but also looking overseas through the eyes of a global citizen. I came of age watching the Bosnian War, and its after effects, unfold. I remember first hearing about the Rwandan genocide in the news and wondering how it could be possible that this was happening in the world I lived in. In this context, I sought to understand the root causes of conflict and explore ways in which I could help make a difference. What began as an exploration of my faith and the role it played in addressing what I saw playing out on the global stage, has brought me today to Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). A ministry of the Society of Jesus—"the Jesuits"—JRS focuses its work solely on refugees and the forcibly displaced. In many countries and contexts, refugees are often the most marginalized, the most disenfranchised and the most vulnerable. Although refugees have inherent human rights, those rights are often overlooked as they are denied the ability to work, to go to school or to find permanent safety and security.

The Catholic Church, and the Gospel stories at its foundation, provide us with a clear-eyed view of how we as Catholics must regard refugees. In Church teachings and through messages delivered by Pope Francis, and others, is it clear that displaced persons—including refugees—are special in the eyes of God.

THE MISSION OF JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE

Jesuit Refugee Service was founded by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., then Superior General of the Jesuits. In 1980, deeply shocked by the plight of thousands of Vietnamese boat people fleeing their war-torn country, Fr. Arrupe felt compelled to act. He called on the Jesuits to "bring at least some relief to such a tragic situation." Jesuit Refugee Service was born, as a global response to a refugee crisis in Asia.

Today, JRS works in more than fifty countries by meeting the educational, psychosocial, health, and emergency needs of over 750,000 refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. JRS works side by side with the displaced, providing assistance to refugees in camps and cities, individuals displaced within their own countries, asylum seekers in cities, and those held in detention centers.

The mission of JRS/USA is to accompany, serve and advocate for the rights of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. JRS/USA is inspired by the compassion of Jesus, who made it his mission to reach the most marginalized people of his time. The JRS mission is built on a faith in God who is present in human history, even in its most tragic moments. We are inspired by this faith and by core values that inform all the work we do. These include:

- **Compassion**, which compels JRS to work to alleviate the suffering of our fellow beings. JRS sees its service as a call to love, to treat others with equity and response, as we ourselves wish to be treated.
- JRS aims to give **hope** to refugees by providing a spiritual and practical response to their plight.
- JRS believes in the intrinsic **dignity** of every person by working with refugees regardless of race, gender, religion or politics.
- JRS is committed to a **justice** that empowers refugees to become people with a voice of their own, working together with them to challenge systems that deny human rights.

A GOSPEL FOUNDATION

Families forced from their homes due to conflict and persecution are not new to the Catholic Church. Indeed, the Holy Family themselves were refugees, fleeing the horrors of King Herod by making their way to Egypt, after the birth of Jesus. Fr. Jim Martin, S.J., penned an article in *America Magazine* making this point most clearly by saying:

In the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we read the story of the “Flight into Egypt” in which, after the birth of Jesus and the visit from the Magi, an “angel of the Lord” comes to Joseph in a dream and warns him to leave Bethlehem for Egypt (Mt 2:12–15). Why? Because King Herod was planning to “seek out the child to destroy him.” So, according to the Gospel of Matthew, what is going on? A family is forced to flee their homeland for fear of persecution. This is the classic modern-day definition of a refugee.²

The fact that baby Jesus himself was a refugee should not be lost on us as Catholics. The reality of refugees today is that any one of us could become a refugee. Circumstances beyond an individual’s control, including civil strife,

²James Martin, “Were Jesus, Mary and Joseph Refugees? Yes.” *America Magazine*, December 27, 2017. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/12/27/were-jesus-mary-and-joseph-refugees-yes>.

war, or even natural disaster, could force us to leave our homes with no notice and with little, if any, preparation.

In addition to recognizing that our Savior was a refugee, later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs us to welcome the stranger: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt. 25–35). This is often quoted in the midst of the current refugee crisis our world is facing, with record levels of global displacement. As countries, including our own, are closing borders and turning those in need away, we must be reminded of who we are as individuals living the Catholic faith. Not only are we called to love and support those who are like us and those that we love, but we are called to welcome the stranger. To demonstrate an extraordinary act of love by reaching out to those who are not like us.

PAPAL TEACHINGS

Pope Pius XII, in *Exsul Familia Nazarethana* (On the Spiritual Care of the Migrant) clearly articulates the unique circumstances of a refugee and the role of the Church to “foster Christian hope” by “looking after them with special care and unremitting aid.”³ He continues by documenting some of the ways in which the Church has been active on behalf of migrants, exiles and refugees, noting that care for the displaced has been a critical part of the Church’s work, and will continue to be.

In the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), Pope John XXIII speaks of the compassion we must have for “the plight of those who for political reasons have been exiled from their own homelands.” He also emphasizes the inalienable rights of refugees by stating that, “refugees are persons and all their rights as persons must be recognized. Refugees cannot lose these rights simply because they are deprived of citizenship of their own States.” He continues by emphasizing the rights of refugees to leave their country of origin, if compelled to do so, and seek asylum, or safety elsewhere, “and among man’s personal rights we must include his right to enter a country in which he hopes to be able to provide more fittingly for himself and his dependents.”⁴

The Church continued to recognize the plight of refugees and asylum seekers who flee persecution. In his encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Social Care), Pope John Paul II refers to the world’s refugee crisis as “the

³Pope Pius XII, “Exsul Familia Nazarethana,” 1952. <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12exsul.htm>.

⁴Pope John XXIII, “Pacem In Terris. Encyclical on Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty,” 1963. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

festering of a wound.” In his 1990 Lenten message,⁵ Pope John Paul II chose to focus on “the problem of refugees” and calls on all the Church’s members to “be sensitive to this appeal, inasmuch as they are followers of Jesus.” He urges us to seek to help our brother and sister refugees in every possible way by providing a welcome that will lead to their full participation in the everyday life of society. Pope John Paul II also took this opportunity to reiterate the rights of refugees, who are “guaranteed 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; and to receive adequate health care.”⁶

In the 2013, the Vatican issued Pastoral Guidelines to clearly articulate the link between Catholic Social Teaching and behavior towards refugees and migrants, “the Church is guided in her commitment to refugees and other forcibly displaced persons essentially by the Sacred Scripture, the Tradition and the Magisterium, and for what concerns social matters, by the “permanent principles” of her Social Doctrine that constitute the very heart of Catholic social teaching.”⁷

The Guidelines also outline a very unique aspect of Catholic Social Teaching and its approach to refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. The legal definition of a refugee, as outlined in the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”⁸ The Catholic perspective is broader than this narrow approach, and is a perspective at the heart of the work of Jesuit Refugee Service as well.

Following Catholic Social Teaching, JRS understands the term “refugee” to include not only persons persecuted because of race, religion, membership in social or political groups, but also internally displaced persons and “de facto refugees” who are driven from their homes by armed conflict, erroneous economic policy, or natural disasters.

⁵Pope John Paul II, “Message of His Holiness John Paul II for Lent,” 1990. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/lenen/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19890908_lent-1990.html.

⁶Pope John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” 1987. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

⁷“Welcoming Christ in Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons: Pastoral Guidelines,” Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2013. <http://www.pcmigrants.org/documento%20rifugiati%202013/927-INGL.pdf>.

⁸“Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” United Nations, 1951. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10>.

The 2013 Pastoral Guidelines note that “over the years the situation has become more complex and consequently the protection awarded to refugees has been extended to other groups, such as people fleeing from war.” The needs of internally displaced persons, those whose human rights have been violated but have not crossed a border, are also acknowledged. This document has become a core reference document for those of us who work in this sector and continue to argue for greater inclusiveness of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons in the work of the Church and in our everyday lives as Catholics.

POPE FRANCIS

This essay would not be complete without highlighting the incredible role Pope Francis has played in drawing attention to the needs of refugees, by personally welcoming them, standing with them, and calling on all Catholics to do the same. From urging parishes to house refugee families in 2015, at the height of significant migration into Europe, to personally bringing 12 Syrian refugees home with him after a visit to Lesbos, Greece and facilitating their resettlement at the Vatican.

Pope Francis’s leadership and vision regarding how the Catholic Church must welcome refugees and work to meet their needs, is a core component of his Papacy. Each January, the Vatican celebrates the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. In Pope Francis’s message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, held on January 14, 2018, he emphasized the need “to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate refugees.”⁹

The Pope notes how he has repeatedly expressed his particular concern for the situation of many migrants and refugees fleeing from war, persecution, natural disasters, and poverty, throughout his Pontificate. And returns to where we began, to Jesus Christ, since “every stranger who knocks on our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age.”

U.S. RESPONSE

The U.S. bishops have taken the Gospel teaching and the teaching of the popes and applied it to the U.S. context. In January 2003, the U.S. bishops issued the pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In this letter, the bishops noted that “those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants

⁹Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018,” August 15, 2017. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html.

have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.”¹⁰ The Bishops asserted that persons who flee their home countries because they fear persecution should be afforded safe haven and protection in another country. Conflict and political unrest in many parts of the world force persons to leave their homes for fear of death or harm. The Bishops urge the United States to employ a refugee and asylum system that does not erect barriers to prevent persons from obtaining safety in our country.

This message has become ever more critical in our current political climate where refugees poised for resettlement in the United States have become political targets. In January 2017, the Trump Administration issued an Executive Order that banned refugees from certain countries and has since decreased the number of refugees expected to resettle in the U.S. from an anticipated 110,000 to 45,000.

In response to these current efforts, the U.S. Bishops have been consistent in their message. Bishop Joe S. Vásquez of Austin, Texas, chairman of the Committee on Migration, stated, “today, more than 65 million people around the world are forcibly displaced from their homes. Given this extraordinary level of suffering, the U.S. Catholic Bishops will redouble their support for, and efforts to protect, all who flee persecution and violence, as just one part of the perennial and global work of the Church in this area of concern.”¹¹ The U.S. Bishops will continue to raise concerns for any U.S. policies that threatens refugee rights and protections.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of the global refugee crisis and the political, legal and social ramifications of cross-border flows, cannot be understated. But regardless of this, the Catholic position remains the same. To identify with refugees; to welcome the stranger; to ensure that all basic needs of refugees are met are inherent to what it means to be a Catholic. Given the historic levels of forced displacement, we must change the way we respond, both on an individual level and at a global level.

In 2018, a two-year global process to re-examine, and improve, the global mechanisms in place to respond to refugee needs will conclude with a Global

¹⁰“Strangers No Longer Together on the Journey of Hope,” U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm>.

¹¹“USCCB Committee on Migration Chair Strongly Opposes Executive Order Because It Harms Vulnerable Refugee and Immigrant Families,” U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, January 27, 2017. <http://www.usccb.org/news/2017/17-026.cfm>.

Compact on Refugees and Global Compact on Migration. We at JRS are working closely with Catholic partners, and the Vatican, to help inform this process through a uniquely Catholic lens. We are utilizing Pope Francis's message to "welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate refugees" and encouraging drafters of the Global Compacts to consider "Twenty Action Points" developed by the Vatican to better meet the needs of refugees and migrants.¹²

On an individual level, I encourage us all to take a look at what we can do in our own lives, in our own communities, to welcome the stranger. We can take the time to learn more about the crisis in Syria or South Sudan—two of the largest refugee producing countries. We can send a letter to our policymakers encouraging them to resettle more refugees in the U.S. and boost support for humanitarian assistance overseas. There are many ways we can become engaged and take concrete action, as Jesus would have done. It will take actions, large and small, to address this great challenge of our time.

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¹²"Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points," Migrants and Refugees Section, Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2017. https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/stocktaking_holy_sec.pdf.