

Speech by Lesley-Anne Knight, Secretary General, Caritas Internationalis

The Jesuit Refugee Service and the John Felice Rome Center

Photo Exhibition

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Respecting Strangers: replacing fear with welcome

Your Eminences, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to speak to you this evening on a topic that forms a core part of our work in Caritas Internationalis; and to be able to see the amazing collection of photographs assembled in this exhibition.

Each of these pictures tells an individual story of courage and dignity in the face of hardship and persecution. But if there were a soundtrack to these images, I imagine we would be hearing in the background the sounds of doors slamming shut... of shutters being drawn... of barriers coming down. For as the world sinks deeper into economic recession, borders are closing, jobs are disappearing and life is becoming harder for refugees and migrants everywhere. As people become fearful for their own futures, the stranger becomes the target of anger and resentment.

One in every fifty human beings – more than 150 million people – live outside their countries of origin as migrants or refugees¹. The International Organisation for Migration predicts that the total number of international migrants will be close to 250 million by the year 2050. Forced migration will be exacerbated by poverty, war, famine, drought and epidemics, plus the increasing threat of rising sea levels and extreme weather associated with global climate change.

The United Nations University estimates that as many as 50 million people will be displaced for environmental reasons over the next 10 years². This migration will be driven not only by natural disasters, but also by conflicts over diminishing natural resources.³

Migrants work long hours, receive low pay and often do not enjoy access to benefits or other protections. Migrant workers traditionally are employed for what are known as the '3D jobs': dirty, dangerous and difficult. They are usually at the margin of

1 International Migration, Racism, Discrimination and Xenophobia , International Labour Office (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) , Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), August 2001

2 United Nations University, As ranks of "Environmental Refugees" swell worldwide, calls grow for better definition, recognition and support, United Nations University Press, 2005.

3 Displacement and Climate Change: Towards Defining Categories of Affected Persons. Working paper submitted by the Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, September 2008

protection by legislation covering workplace safety, health, minimum wages and other standards. Their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse is often exacerbated by problems with languages, unfamiliarity with local custom and culture, and lack of networks for social support. Women and children migrants and refugees are especially at risk of exploitation and abuse, including xenophobic hostility.

The effect of the economic crisis has been to increase the proportion of international migration that is irregular and unauthorised, leaving migrants even more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Lack of legal status leaves them reluctant to seek police protection, means to redress or access to justice. Trafficking and migrant smuggling are on the rise in parallel with increasing obstacles to legal migration. Migrants are considered to be 'removable' when domestic unemployment rises or when rising political tensions prompt the targeting of scapegoats.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay has noted that migrant workers are already being affected in many countries, and that there is a clear risk of increased xenophobia as a result of the global financial crisis. Migrants will be the first to lose their jobs, not only because their status is called into question, but also because they are employed in sectors that are particularly affected by the economic crisis. Recession also leads to greater xenophobia, discrimination and even attacks against migrant workers and their families.⁴

Examples of anti-foreigner hostility are being reported around the world. These include exclusion, hostility and violence based on migrants perceived status as foreigners, as well as discrimination in employment, housing or health care.

In the Middle East there has been a large influx of women service workers from countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines. Migration has often been encouraged by Asian governments as a source of foreign income in the form of remittances. Asian female live-in domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries often live under conditions close to slavery. There is widespread abuse of these women, who suffer violence, sexual abuse, torture, restriction of movement and exploitative employment.⁵ On a visit to Sri Lanka last year I met a woman who had been burnt with an iron by her employer and thrown out of an upstairs window. Another woman told me she was desperately trying to trace her daughter who had gone abroad to work and had not been heard of for two years.

In Latin America, migrant workers from Bolivia, Paraguay and Peru now make up 80 per cent of the foreigners living in Argentina. Most of them are women, who have travelled alone, often leaving their children behind. Increased migration has unleashed a wave of xenophobia against immigrants from within the Latin American region, who are seen as a threat to Argentina's 'European' identity.⁶

In Africa, refugees from Somalia, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, were subjected to violent attacks when poor South Africans

4 UN News Wire, 20 February 2009

5 Migrant Workers and Xenophobia in the Middle East, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2003.

6 Latin America: Women immigrants target of xenophobia, Marcela Valente, Inter Press Service, 2001.

struggling to survive turned against their foreign neighbours, accusing them of stealing jobs and committing crimes. More than 60 people were killed and tens of thousands fled their homes⁷.

And finally, in Europe a survey carried out in 12 countries, found that 30 per cent of respondents had experienced discrimination in their employment. A quarter reported discrimination by the police and in education. Twenty-nine per cent reported discrimination in commercial transactions⁸. And eighty-six per cent of respondents who had experienced discriminatory practices did not report their experience to any authority.

The Church has long recognised the plight of the migrant within our societies. In his message for World Migration Day in 2000 Pope John Paul II said:
“The Church hears the suffering cry of all who are uprooted from their own land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home anywhere. She senses the anguish of those without rights, without any security, at the mercy of every kind of exploitation, and she supports them in their unhappiness. (no. 6)

And his words were echoed by Pope Benedict XVI in his own message for the 95th World Day of Migrants and Refugees this year when he said: *“How can we fail to meet the needs of those who are de facto the weakest and most defenceless, marked by precariousness and insecurity, marginalized and often excluded by society.”*

As individuals, our treatment of migrants should be guided by the commandment from Leviticus:

You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the Land of Egypt. (Leviticus 19:34)

And as for governments, they need to be reminded of their moral and legal obligations under Human Rights legislation to provide a refuge for those fleeing violence and conflict in their home countries, and to protect those who are living and working within their borders.

Last year, Caritas Internationalis established a new advocacy team to focus on the issue of migration, and in particular the migration of women. Around half the world’s migrants are women and their numbers are growing. Caritas provides counselling and bureaucratic assistance to migrants. It offers legal advice, language courses, training and skills development and help in finding employment. It also offers moral and psychological support. Caritas advocates for more legal channels of migration and raises awareness among communities and host governments about the meaning and benefits of integration.

⁷ Displaced migrants live in fear, despair, AFP, February 8, 2009.

⁸ Migrants’ Experiences of Racism and Xenophobia in 12 EU Member States, European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, May 2006.

Above all, in all our work we seek to foster an appreciation that we are all part of one humanity, but one in which diversity and the dignity of the individual is respected.

The other evening I was watching a fascinating nature documentary on television that demonstrated the amazing variety of plant and animal life on our planet; and it made me think how strange it is that we can marvel at this extraordinary diversity in nature – so many wonderfully different varieties of birds, flowers, mammals, insects and fish – and yet we seem incapable of appreciating the equally wonderful diversity within our own species. On the contrary, it is more often a cause of conflict and hostility.

How wonderful it would be if the arrival of a stranger in our midst were welcomed with the same excitement and wonder we feel on spotting a rare bird or discovering an exotic flower growing in our garden.

Just as television documentaries have made us more aware of the wonders of nature – and the importance of protecting them – so can events such as this make us more aware of the wonders of *human* nature and the importance of protecting those who are suffering and in danger. I hope that over the coming weeks a great many people will visit this exhibition and learn more about this increasingly urgent issue and the vital work being done by the Jesuit Refugee Service.