

Refugees: An opportunity to grow together
Joint ecumenical statement for World Refugee Day 2017

The Christian Bible tells the story of two men, Peter and Cornelius, utterly divided by religious belief and culture, who in encountering each other discovered a truth about God's common will for them that neither had previously grasped. They learnt that the Holy Spirit brings down walls and unites those who might think that they have nothing in common.

All around the world, women, men, and children are forced by violence, persecution, natural and human-caused disasters, famine, and other factors, to leave their homelands. Their desire to escape suffering is stronger than the barriers erected to block their way. The opposition by some countries to the migration of forcibly displaced people will not keep those who undergo unbearable suffering from leaving their homes.

Wealthy countries cannot evade their responsibility for the wounds inflicted on our planet – environmental disasters, the arms trade, developmental inequality – that drive forced migration and human trafficking. While it is true that the arrival of migrants in more developed countries can present real and significant challenges, it can also be an opportunity for openness and change. Pope Francis poses this question to us: “How can we experience these changes not as obstacles to genuine development, but rather as opportunities for genuine human, social and spiritual growth?” Societies that find the courage and the vision to go beyond the fear of foreigners and migrants soon discover the riches that migrants bring with them, and always have.

If we, as a human family, insist on only ever seeing refugees as a burden, we deprive ourselves of the opportunities for solidarity that are also always opportunities for mutual learning, mutual enrichment, and mutual growth.

It is not enough for Christians to profess to love Christ: belief is authentic only if it is expressed in loving action. We are one Body of Christ, undivided. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “It is only through Jesus Christ that we are brothers and sisters of one another.... Through Christ our mutual belonging is real, integral, and for all time.” If we are one body, we are knitted into a solidarity that defines us and makes demands of us.

Signs of solidarity can be multiplied beyond the borders of religion and culture. Meeting believers of other persuasions encourages us to deepen our knowledge of our own faith, and in our encounter with our refugee brothers and sisters, God speaks to us and blesses us as He did Cornelius and Peter. In every genuine encounter, an exchange of gifts takes place. Sharing with others what we have and own, we discover that all is given freely by God. At the same time, in welcoming those whom we encounter, we meet the God who is always already present with the vulnerable, at the peripheries, and in the other.

Increasingly around the world we witness the building of walls to keep out the displaced: not just physical walls, but also walls of fear, prejudice, hatred, and ideology. Let us all, as one human family, strive to build bridges of solidarity rather than walls of division. Our refugee sisters and brothers present us with opportunities for mutual enrichment and flourishing: it is God who brings us together.

With the development of new international frameworks – Global Compacts on Migrants and on Refugees – in 2018, States should not only ensure a more effective responsibility-sharing in response to large movements, but they should also accept the opportunity to recognize and highlight the significant contributions that refugees and migrants make in their host communities.

ACT Alliance
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Anglican Alliance
Caritas Internationalis
Catholic Charities USA
Community of Sant'Egidio
Dominicans for Justice and Peace
Entreculturas
International Union of Superior Generals (UISG)
Franciscans International
Jesuit Refugee Service
Lutheran World Federation
Pax Christi International
Scalabrinian Missionaries
Scalabrini International Migration Network (SIMN)
Talitha Kum – Worldwide Network of Religious Life against Trafficking in Persons
Union of Superior Generals (USG)
Vivat International
Voices of Faith
World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO)

World Refugee Day, 20th June 2017