

## **Living together with refugees and migrants, our brothers and sisters Declaration of the bishops of Belgium**

***“Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all. For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis.” (Pope Francis in Evangelii Gaudium, n°210).***

Thousands of refugees are at our gates today. They are fleeing war, violence, dangers and hopeless situations in massive number. They come here, in Europe and in Belgium, for protection, asylum and a better life. Because here, there is peace and well-being, even though it is not a paradise. Today, these hundreds of thousands of refugees are added to other migrants who are apparently leaving their countries for other reasons: famine, lack of economic development and decent life. We see all that every day in the media.

We are witness to these situations as they unfold and cannot close our eyes. We see people flock through the Mediterranean to Italy, Malta, Spain, Greece, the Balkans, en route for the North. We see columns of people on foot on the roads, in crowded trains, motor coaches and cars.

We often see very clearly the causes of these tragedies, like the zones of conflict in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea, the fanatical persecutions in Africa, the Near and Middle East and Eastern Europe. Elsewhere in the world, people are fleeing from floods, droughts, ethnic cleansing, and dislocated political powers.

We are witness to a problematic ‘imposed’ migration on a world scale. “Changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.” (Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*, n° 25). Very often, borders are opened easier to capital, industry, trade, art, science, technology, than to people in distress.

We are witness to the complex political debate, that is growing in the International Community, the European Union and our country when discussing reception, integration, conditions of recognition and refusal, solidarity and distribution of responsibilities, closed borders and walls, political negotiations, and military and humanitarian interventions.

We are also witness to choices of courage and generous welcome. The international community is debating to determine how it can welcome people in a humane manner, integrate them, and enable them to go back in safety.

We are witness to open reception centres, but also closed detention centres for migrants. Refugees and migrants today live in nearly all the cities, municipalities and parishes of Belgium. A new culture of integration is emerging. Belgium has become a visibly “diverse population.” We are very happy that in many places, refugees and migrants are accepted and respected irrespective of their origin, religious, social or political convictions, and that many volunteers from other cultures have undertaken to help. And we also realise that there is another feeling: people are afraid, concerned and wonder how the arrival of refugees and migrants will impact their own lives. Everyone is emotionally concerned and affected, whereas history teaches us that migration has been an ever present phenomenon on all continents.

We are witness, but not mere spectators. The Church has a long history of welcoming strangers. As Christians, it is our evangelical duty to be at the side of those who suffer. We cannot do otherwise. “I was a stranger and you invited me in,” Jesus says in the Gospel according to Matthew (Matthew 2, 35). With many Christians and people of diverse views, with our Church organisations and movements, we, the bishops of Belgium, are particularly concerned about the fate of people who were forced to come to our country without any known point of refuge, without support and without prospects.

The context and reasons of these “uprooting” migrations are varied and complex. But we have known since time immemorial that people leave their country only in the hope of finding a better life elsewhere. When people flee war, oppression, hunger, abject poverty, persecution and discrimination, there is no ready-made structural solution to deal with the situation. Everybody knows that forced migration will not cease as long as the country of origin and the living and working conditions have not fundamentally improved.

Since we are witness but not mere spectators, our deep concerns in the face of these complex phenomena must never prevent us from asking questions and seeking answers. What relation can we -- and do we want to -- have as the Church in Belgium and as Christian communities with refugees and migrants? What do they expect from us? What can we put together?

### **1. How can we, as citizens or Christians, welcome the migrants?**

Our first concern will always be reception, irrespective of the person who shows up. That is the mission we have been assigned by the Gospel. Our first concern will always focus on the dignity of the person in front of us who says: “We are brothers and sisters.” On this point, we cannot compromise as the Church. Our first questions must never pertain to the conditions that raise fears in others or find their source in fear. There can be no question of erecting a “wall” between the other and myself, even if we diverge on certain matters.

To the question “Who is my neighbour,” Jesus replied with the ever living example of the good Samaritan (Lc 10, 25-35). We can see a method for dealing with our fellow human being in difficulty. The Samaritan sees a man robbed and seriously wounded by the side of the road. It awakens emotion and indignation in him. That cannot be! He stops, interrupts his activity and does what he can with the means at his disposal, i.e. oil and a little wine. It is the image of the first reception of refugees. But then he has the man carried to an inn on his beast of burden. We would say today: to a relief organisation. The Samaritan is touched and

swings to action, but not in any unreasonable manner. He combines emotion and reason and calls for cooperation and mutual assistance. He then goes back to the inn to pay the bill. The reception is carried out by several intervening parties: the one who had the first contact, the one who welcomed the man in his home, he who watches over him, and finally the organisation that provides support for the rescued man with its experience and professionalism.

It is quite a task to receive migrants with respect for fundamental human rights. The reception concerns the entire person with his life, country, household, family, language, culture and religion, psychological or physical injuries, strengths, dreams and ambitions. The reception must be sustainable and must really create new opportunities; get registered within a reasonable period; be provided with means and support so that the chances offered can take root and make the people autonomous in a climate of peace and freedom.

It is in this vein that Pope Francis launched an appeal to the Christian parishes and communities to participate in concrete terms in this movement by welcoming a family of asylum seekers or refugees. And we are delighted to see that positive responses were not late in coming.

Migrants are human beings full of hope. Every reception must be attentive to that hope. Migrants and refugees hope that we will recognise and respect their hopes. Welcoming means also assuming responsibilities in what happens afterwards to these people. Welcoming means that our country, its Communities, Regions, cities, municipalities, society body and social movements, NGOs and citizens' committees, Churches and denominational communities are ready to help. An open door policy means a strategy of guidance and support. Migrants are present in too high a number for a single organisation to be able to deal with the situation on its own. Furthermore, political or economic interests must not play a predominant role here. People are at issue here and that is a call for us all. We must search together to put decent reception structures in place. Many houses in our cities are uninhabited. Why not put them at the disposal of refugees before they deteriorate or are squatted? The owners can be invited to make their studios and apartments available, and financial resources can be released. In brief, both the institutions and individual citizens, and in particular, Christians, must participate in finding responses. Above all, it is important to set up a guidance and support structure for the migrants. Children need education and instruction, and so do the parents. Medical and social care as well as the distribution of food is urgently needed. Above all, there is a need to chart an employment policy to ensure equal opportunities for all. The Church can make its international network available to provide more concrete aid.

## **2. How to improve the reception policy?**

We recently (each in our own diocese) visited open and closed centres for migrants and refugees. These are places where men, women and children are living while waiting for a decision concerning their future: either to be able to stay in our country, or go back where they came from. During these meetings, we listened to their fears, frustrations, anxious waiting, great uncertainty. And we were very impressed by the social workers who support so well, and with so much care and tact, these persons who are living in such difficult conditions.

As regards the closed (detention) centres, we ask: Does society have the right to deprive people of their freedom because their application for asylum is still in abeyance and they cannot produce official documents? Are people without valid papers, after a serious inspection, still criminals or a danger to society?

As regards migrants housed in return centres or waiting there, we ask: Are they properly prepared to return to their country with dignity and with serious and stable prospects?

What is a correct reception policy when you are aware that all human beings have the same dignity, without distinction? Is our country's policy capable of resisting the fears of the population, the pressure from the voters, when the human dimension must be given priority?

We are also confronted with the question of meaning, from the human point of view, of the appeal of a country that attracts and invites migrants because they would be, at times provisionally so, economically interesting and above all useful. We may wonder whether it is justified, in a general migration policy, to 'weigh' and select people on the basis of their material utility for our country. Attracting highly qualified migrants from 'third world' countries means an impoverishment for their country of origin. Does a human being have real value when it constitutes an economic gain for our country? Such a policy would wind up welcoming certain people and refusing others, whereas less qualified people and their country of origin could be helped if the latter underwent training in our country. It might perhaps be more appropriate, based on our Christian principles, to welcome the more vulnerable migrants who would not be welcome anywhere else but here. A policy and an attitude are needed to turn the world into a "home for everyone." This will promote solidarity for a preferential option for the poorest members of society (Laudato si', n° 158).

### **3. How can we help the countries of origin of migrants?**

There is a great lack of political, social, and family stability in many countries. As Pope VI wrote in "Populorum Progressio, ch. IV," "Development is the new name of peace." We are therefore launching an appeal to public opinion, our leaders, and the European Union to commit themselves more resolutely in favour of peace, both in national policies and in international relations. The challenges in this respect are so immense that only international cooperation can improve the situation. As these people are our brothers and sisters, we must take care of them as well as their country. As a Church, we can often provide assistance to these countries which can reach the population at the local level.

In particular, the development of agriculture is of the utmost importance. Agriculture caters to the basic needs, promotes well-being, provides good employment and reinforces family solidarity. Social tensions and conflicts between population groups endanger any cooperation. This entails the involvement of the local population in every development operation (Laudato si', n°183).

The stimulation and development of local agriculture will be 'humanised,' i.e. just, efficient and interesting for the local population, on condition that international trade does not undermine, stifle or crush this local development. The development must be protected.

The main factor must nonetheless be the education of the children, up to the level of vocational and secondary education. To offer a future to young people and to countries, a well-functioning education system is indispensable. Very important work has been done in the past and up to now by the local religious congregations and churches on this front. To that end, intense cooperation is indispensable between the authorities of the developing countries on the one hand, and the church associations and communities on the other, both on the local and international level.

School institutions deserve special attention because all development is based on good education and quality instruction. Pope Francis has called for a radical change of course. In his view, humanity is endangered by the economy and technological development: the technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life: "The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy (*Laudato si'*, n° 109). Therefore, as regards the financial resources that our country (0.45% of GNP in 2014) and the European Union devote to aid for development, many pertinent questions are being asked: Do these resources reach the most needy segments of the population? Are these ever so restricted resources commensurate with our prosperity? This does not translate the fact that attention for developing countries is wavering, whereas it should be part of what a country "invests in humanity"

#### **4. The dignity of each person**

"The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies. At times, however, they seem to be a mere addendum imported from without in order to fill out a political discourse lacking in perspectives or plans for true and integral development" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n°203). Together, we are all responsible for all creation. This leads us to a brotherhood of man and to equal dignity between rich and poor, strong and weak, between those who are in good health and those who are sick or disabled.

As bishops, we wish to underscore that the principle of the reception and integration of migrants, wherever they come from and irrespective of the reason why they came here, is based on this equal dignity of all human beings. The dialogue of Jesus with the Pharisee is concluded thus: "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell into the robbers' hands" (Luke 10,36). The earth was created by God and given to humanity as a whole. We are users and servants, not the owners thereof. No one is entitled to play a dominating role, to humiliate or enslave his neighbour, to attack nature.

The words of Jesus are for all of us: "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; (...) every time you did those things for one of the least of these, you did it for me" (Mt 25, 35.40).

As the Church, we want to be concerned for the entire person. This means that we are as concerned about his attitude to God, his neighbour and nature, his mental and spiritual health. "The discrimination the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. (...); They need God." (*Evangelii Gaudium* n° 200). This is a field of action for all the local communities of believers.

In the name of our own faith, we respect and support, always without reservation, the religious dimension and religious experience of persons. Refugees and migrants must never feel obliged to 'change religion' in order to get a better reception. We will never accept that a country refuses or excludes people because they are Muslims, Christians, Buddhists or because of any other conviction that they have.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the face of this major migratory event that we are witnessing, we want to ask ourselves what we are called upon to do and what commitments we are capable of, which would be fair to migrants and refugees. We want to take the time to speak together at all levels: in the parish, in associations at work, in the church bodies and structures, with the political leaders of our country, our Communities and Regions.

We have no definitive answer to these difficult questions, but we plan to continue to explore them in greater depth, in particular by proposing documents and initiatives likely to pursue action and reflection on this subject. To that end, we are counting on "The Holy Spirit (which) can be said to possess an infinite creativity, proper to the divine mind, which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, even the most complex and inscrutable" (Evangelii Gaudium n° 178). We believe that we have the strength and sufficient trust in the other to discover and appreciate the richness of each person. The arrival of new people may entail a fresh impetus for our 'old continent' and constitute an opportunity for our society.

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