

1984

Letter to Card. Bernardin Gantin, President of the Pontifical Commission
for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People

The Refugee Problem is Still Grave

Card. Agostino Casaroli
Secretary of State

5 August 1984

My Lord Cardinal,

[1028]

The Holy Father was most interested to know that this year, on the occasion of Migrant's Day, the particular Churches throughout the world have been invited to consider the dramatic problem of refugees and clandestine immigrants. This subject draws the attention of humanity to a situation which, in view of its dimensions and tragedy can leave no one indifferent.

1. From the Second Vatican Council emerges a concern for a specialized active pastoral care for those who, because of their situation, not only economic but also social, political and religious, have been uprooted from their own country, their own local community, their own social, cultural and ecclesial environment (cf. *Christus Dominus* 18; *Gaudium et Spes* 84). The directives of the Council were subsequently diffused and received with feeling throughout the Church through the Pontifical Documents on the pastoral care of people on the move. The new Code of Canon Law has transformed into laws of the Church the most important of the migratory pastoral directives (cf. *Can* 568). [1029]

In his message for Migrant's Day observed by the particular Churches in 1979, the Holy Father had stressed how, these days, "the concept of migrant coincides tragically with that of refugee" (*Insegnamenti*, II, 2 [1979] 1309). Refugees are those who are obliged to seek refuge in a foreign country, abandoning their own land and all that is most dear to them. [1030]

Amongst the many suffering brothers who travel with us through this earthly life, the refugees appear to be the most stricken; for their very survival they depend completely on other people, strangers and unknown, even for the most elementary necessities of life: housing, clothing, acceptance. [1031]

Christ the exile, obstructed, excluded, discriminated against, lacking even a stone of which to lay his head, begging, seems to live on today in the millions of refugees. [1032]

Millions are suffering

[1033]

2. With the present message, the Holy Father would like to draw the Church's attention to the tragedy of millions of human beings who constitute almost a substratum among the refugees themselves – a kind of submerged and sorrowing

society – and who, therefore, cannot but be close to the heart of the representative on earth of him who said: “Come to me all you who are weary and oppressed, and I will refresh you” (Mt 11:28). These people are known as irregular or clandestine immigrants, who because of their situation find themselves deprived of even the most basic security and are often the object of the most ignominious exploitation.

To call attention to the duty of understanding and helping clandestine immigrants in the light of the principles of justice and charity, obviously does not mean to contest or in any way deny the right of every civilized and ordered community to protect its own territory, to take proper measures to safeguard its legitimate national interests, to take measure against the circulation of fugitive criminals, subverters of public order and traffickers of arms and drugs; but to take care of human beings especially young people, minors, children incapable of defending themselves because they lack protection under the law and are often ignorant of the language of the country in which they have been obliged to seek refuge, driven by natural catastrophies, wars, invasions and genocide; there are so many causes which the Church, in her maternal concern, cannot ignore. [1034]

Neither can one forget in countries afflicted by great poverty, there sometimes come into being pseudo-employment agencies which approach young people, men and women anxious about work and their future, promising them jobs and assuring them that they can arrange for them to get, without the necessary legal permits, into those countries where they would like to settle, to seek a way of life which their own country cannot manage to provide. Once arrived, however, in the country which they have set out for, these “clandestines” have to face difficulties and obstacles which were either unforeseen or at least presented as easily overcome. All this leads to permanent or long-term unemployment or under-employment, being victims of unscrupulous exploiters and obliged by their circumstances to accept contracts in virtue of which the salary is reduced in favour of the purveyors of clandestine labour. One could rightly speak of almost a new trading in slaves who, unhappily, are also easily exposed to the continual danger of falling into the coils of immorality and criminality, as a form of outlet from their desperate situation. [1035]

Some problems Christians called to face [1036]

3. The fervour, the generosity, the charitable impulse of the Christian communities impels them without doubt to make these refugees the object of their consideration and concern, so that they too may be guaranteed at least their elementary human rights.

To overlook the needs of these brothers of ours would be an outrage against that civilization that the world has achieved, thanks also to the constant evangelizing action of the Church. [1037]

4. The Holy Father, in last year’s Message for Migrant’s Day, deplored not only the reality, but also the very term xenophobia “as foreign to biblical and Christian language in which the very opposite is repeatedly exalted, ‘philoxemia’” (Insegnamenti VI, 2 [1983], 182) [1038]

Sometimes the particular Churches see their efforts for those who are seeking asylum in order to survive, impeded and occasionally rejected, because these immigrants arrive in the midst of critical situations which place the labour market in difficulty, situations in which, almost inevitably, the immigrants themselves become the first victims: when to this is not added nationalistic or racial prejudices. [1039]

The Church, faithful to the Gospel and to the social teaching which flows from it, cannot allow economic, political, ideological or other such motives to prevail over consideration for the human dignity of men and of their condition as sons of the same Father (cf. Mt 5:45). [1040]

In their generous commitment to human and Christian promotion, which has up to now been a source of great comfort to refugees and an example to all, the particular Churches will facilitate every activity which may serve to break the solitude of refugees and to call for the reuniting of their families. Let there be promoted amongst the various bodies concerned the greatest possible coordination with a view to the more timely provision of help. Let refugees be encouraged to hope and to have more confidence in themselves: “Our world... needs you and your contribution”, said the Holy Father to the refugees at Phanat Nikhom in the course of his Apostolic journey to Thailand. Grasp every opportunity offered you to study a language and develop some specialization, so as to be able to adapt yourselves socially to the nation which will open its doors to you and be enriched by your presence (cf. L’Osservatore Romano, 12 May 1984, p.1). [1041]

Those are the problems which the Christian communities, for their part and with their sensitivity are called upon to face. It is very much the mind of the Holy Father that they continue to appeal to the faithful, to all men of good will and especially those responsible in the various sectors of social and civil life, for an effort directed also in this field, towards the proper distribution of the goods provided by nature, by technology and by progress. May they go on being “a voice for these who have no voice”, so that in the present historic situation of human mobility, and confronted with the grave problem brought to our attention by this Migrant’s Day, the message of Christ may work as a ferment and a leaven for the achievement of a more just and fraternal social order. [1042]

It is with this confidence and these wishes that the Holy Father, earnestly associating himself with the human Christian action of the particular Churches for refugees and clandestine immigrants, invokes God’s comfort and reward, in pledge whereof he warmly imparts his Apostolic Blessing. [1043]

I willingly avail myself of this opportunity to offer my respectfully and religious regards.

Your Eminence’s devotedly in Christ

Agostino Card. Casaroli

Source: *Message from the Cardinal Secretary of State, on the Pope's behalf, to the President of Pontifical Commission for Migrants: "The Refugee Problem is still Grave."* *On the Move*, 14:42 (1984): 25-29.
