



ONLINE MEETING  
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## POPE FRANCIS' CONCERN FOR MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT HEALTH EMERGENCY

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I thank the organisers of this important meeting for their invitation to the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development. We are living in very special times, a real 'change of era', as Pope Francis pointed out in 2015, on the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> National Convention of the Italian Church. If ever there were any doubts about this, the pandemic crisis has dispelled them all. Therefore, I am convinced that it is essential to expand the opportunities for a common reflection in order to better understand the "signs of the times", the signs of change, among which migration cannot be forgotten.

I decided to contribute to this reflection by focusing my speech on four points: the Holy See's initiatives in response to Covid-19; pastoral care of migrants in times of pandemic; the Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People, published a few days ago, and the theme of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2021: "Toward an ever wider 'we'".

### ***The Initiatives of the Holy See***

On 20 March 2020, the Holy Father asked the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development [DSSUI]) to establish a commission, in cooperation with other Dicasteries of the Roman Curia and other institutions, in order to express the concern and love of the Church for the entire human family when facing the Covid-19 pandemic, especially by analysing and reflecting on the socio-economic and cultural challenges of the future and proposing guidelines for addressing them.

The DSSUI therefore set up a Commission, consisting of five working groups, with the task of achieving five objectives: acting now for the future; looking to the future with creativity; communicating hope; seeking common dialogue and reflections; and supporting in order to safeguard.

The Migrants and Refugees Section (M&R) immediately agreed to contribute, according to their specific areas of expertise, to the work of the five groups of the Commission.

The first working group, coordinated by the DSSUI and Caritas Internationalis, is dedicated to serving local Churches by listening to them and supporting them as protagonists of the situations they are facing with due to the Pandemic. In 2020, this group served more than fifty local Churches, in which the M&R Section always took part trying to understand in depth the aspects connected with the pastoral care of migrants. The group also supported more than forty assistance projects presented by local Churches, some of which recommended by the M&R Section.

The second working group deals with research and study of the pandemic, reflecting on society and the post-Covid-19 world, with special emphasis on ecology, economics, labour, healthcare, politics, communications, and security. In 2020, this group produced 150 reports and articles, several area-specific action plans and dozens of newsletters and podcasts for local Churches. The M&R Section contributed to the reflection, focusing on the impact of the pandemic crisis on assistance to the most vulnerable human mobility actors. In this regard, the Group constantly collected information from local Churches, organised five webinars with experts, produced four paggers on urgent topics (access to territories, extraordinary regularisation of migrants in irregular situation, dignity of migrant workers. and detention of migrants) and published weekly bulletins with news on the impact of Covid-19 on pastoral care of migrants in the five continents.

The third working group, coordinated by the Dicastery for Communication, is responsible for disseminating information on the work of the other groups and promoting communication with local Churches, helping them to respond authentically and credibly in the post-Covid-19 world. In 2020, the group regularly disseminated the work produced by the Commission through the Vatican media, published four books (To Heal the World. Catechesis on the Pandemic; Life after the Pandemic and Strong in the Face of Tribulation) and a prayer app (Click to Pray: Crisis & Health), produced podcasts and newsletters, and organised interviews and press conferences. H. Em. Card. Michael Czerny, Under-Secretary of the M&R Section, co-coordinated this group, drawing on the experience of the M&R Section in recent years.

The fourth working group, coordinated by the Secretariat of State, supports the Holy See in its activities and relations with States and Intergovernmental Organisations, communicating to them the fruits of research, dialogue, and reflections. In 2020, the group produced weekly reports on the evolution of the pandemic and its impacts in individual countries, and some reports and reflections on specific topics, including debt, labour, sanctions, and migration. In 2021, the group also organised a webinar on "Access to Vaccine and Care for All" for the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See. I was invited to co-coordinate this group, and thus had the opportunity to highlight the migration issues related to the pandemic crisis and dealt with by the group.

The fifth working group is responsible for fundraising to support the work of the Commission in direct assistance to local Churches and Catholic organisations, as well as in its research, analysis, and communications. In 2020, the group managed to secure the necessary resources for all activities, including those carried out by the M&R Section.

### *Pastoral Care of Migrants in Times of Pandemics*

In the previous points, I have explained how the M&R Section has engaged in serving local Churches and other Catholic actors by carefully listening to them in view of understanding in depth the impact of the pandemic crisis on the pastoral care of migrants. This feedback clearly showed the difficulties of following up on the assistance programmes implemented in previous years and of designing new ones in response to the new migration challenges.

Among the various difficulties mentioned, special emphasis was placed on the reduction in the funds allocated to this kind of programme, the limitations in terms of movement and direct action imposed by Covid-19, and a progressive 'indifference' or 'forgetfulness' on the part of the institutions and people in general, all of whom are busy putting their own things in order before thinking of others. In this regard, the Holy Father made a heartfelt appeal when celebrating Easter last year:

This is not a time for indifference, because the whole world is suffering and needs to be united in facing the pandemic. May the risen Jesus grant hope to all the poor, those living on the peripheries, to refugees and the homeless. May these, the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters living in the cities and peripheries of every part of the world, not be abandoned (.....). This is not a time for forgetfulness. The crisis we are facing should not make us forget the many other crises that bring suffering to so many people. May the Lord of life be close to all those in Asia and Africa who are experiencing grave humanitarian crises, as in the Province of Cabo Delgado in the north of Mozambique (*Urbi et Orbi Message*, 12 April 2020)

Listening to the local Churches also revealed a strong tendency to exclude people living in the existential peripheries from prevention and treatment to fight the pandemic. Often those excluded include migrants, refugees, displaced people, and victims of trafficking, who should certainly be counted among the most vulnerable to the threats of this terrible virus. As early as September 2020, the Holy Father asked the international community to give special attention to these groups:

I renew my appeal to political leaders and the private sector to spare no effort to ensure access to Covid-19 vaccines and to the essential technologies needed to care for the sick. If anyone should be given preference, let it be the poorest, the most vulnerable, those who so often experience discrimination because they have neither power nor economic resources. (*Video Message to the United Nations*, 25 September 2020)

If the Holy Father felt compelled to repeat this appeal many times in recent months, it means that there is still a long way to go in this direction.

In times of pandemic, the M&R Section, however, has collected many positive

and edifying experiences of generous and creative pastoral care of migrants. Many of these stories of everyday heroism were shared through social media channels. Many testimonies were documented, thus contributing to the wealth of good practices that the Catholic Church can rightly be proud of.

In 2020, the M&R Section commissioned qualified study centres to prepare three reports showing the result of the analysis of thousands of pastoral care programmes for migrants, refugees, displaced people, and victims of trafficking on three continents (Europe, Africa, and South America). These reports can be downloaded from the Section's website (<https://migrants-refugees.va/resource-center/documents/>).

### ***Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People***

On 30 March 2021, the M&R Section published a new document entitled *Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People*. Again, the Covid-19 global crisis contributed to a better understanding of the close link between climate crisis and displacement.

The consultations carried out by the M&R Section from July to October 2020, in which representatives of more than 70 Catholic Bishops' Conferences and many Catholic organisations and religious congregations participated, highlighted that displacement caused by the climate crisis is happening on all continents and to a much greater extent than we would have expected. The vulnerability of climate displaced people, who are often invisible to most people, has been exacerbated by the pandemic and the closure reactions it has caused in many countries.

The Holy Father wrote a few lines in his preface to the 'Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People' in order to highlight their importance:

*The Pastoral Orientations on Climate Displaced People is a booklet full of relevant facts, interpretations, policies and proposals... but at the very beginning, I suggest we adapt Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" and affirm: "To see or not to see", that is the question!" Where it starts with each one's seeing, yes, mine and yours (Pope Francis, Preface).*

The verb 'to see' is the first step in a process of awareness-raising that aims to act on the causes of the climate crisis and its consequences on migration.

The climate crisis has a 'human face'. It is already a reality for a multitude of people worldwide, especially for those living in the existential peripheries. The Catholic Church has a motherly care for all those who have been displaced by the effects of this crisis. This particular situation of vulnerability is the *raison d'être* of the M&R Section's document.

The Magisterium of the Catholic Church has already considered the plight of internally displaced people and has produced reflections and instructions concerning their pastoral care. These new Orientations focus exclusively on climate displaced people – i.e., those individuals or groups of persons who are forced to move out of their

habitual place of residence on account of acute climate crisis– highlighting the new challenges posed by the present global scenario and suggesting adequate pastoral responses.

The main purpose of these orientations is to provide a series of key considerations that may be useful to Bishops' Conferences, local Churches, religious congregations, Catholic organisations, Catholic pastoral agents and all Catholic faithful in pastoral planning and programme development for the assistance of climate displaced people.

The orientations suggested in this document are deeply grounded in the Church's reflection and teaching and in her practical experience responding to the needs of climate displaced people, both displaced within the borders of their countries of origin and outside.

The Pastoral Guidelines on Climate Displaced People are the result of listening attentively to the voice of the local Churches and the many religious congregations and Catholic organisations working in the field. While approved by the Holy Father, they do not presume to exhaust the teaching of the Church on climate crisis and displacement.

The Orientations start with a brief glossary intended to clarify certain key terms used in the document, followed by a general introduction that explains the purposes of the Orientation and the working method adopted.

The core of the document consists of ten points. The first is devoted to a general survey of the matter and aims to clarify the state of the art on the connection between climate crisis and displacement. The following nine points focus on particular aspects of the phenomenon, according to a pattern of challenges and responses.

First, this section mentions the need to raise awareness on this topic in order to allow everyone to "open the eyes to the realities of the impact of the climate crisis on human existence" (p. 21). Sometimes hasty departures can be avoided by finding alternatives to climate displacement: this is the topic the third point deals with. If their departure is inevitable, then it is necessary to prepare people for displacement (fourth point), to foster their inclusion and integration with the communities receiving them (fifth point), to exercise a positive influence on decision-making processes affecting them (sixth point) and to ensure that they receive pastoral care (seventh point). The eighth point focuses on cooperation between all actors in planning and strategic action for climate displaced people. The ninth point addresses the promotion of professional training in integral ecology for pastoral agents. The last point emphasises the need to increase academic research on the climate crisis and related displacement.

The Orientations end with a brief chapter providing practical guidance on how to use the document, mainly intended for local Churches and other Catholic actors.

Like the documents published by the M&R Section, these mostly consist of

directions and pastoral suggestions, which need to be contextualised and translated by the local Churches.

### ***Towards an ever greater "us"***

For the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, to be celebrated on Sunday 26 September 2021, the Holy Father has chosen the theme, "Towards an ever greater us". This theme has a strong connection to the moment we are living in, as Pope Francis explained in his Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*:

*Once this crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation. God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of "them" and "those, but only "us". If only this may prove not to be just another tragedy of history from which we learned nothing. [...] if only this immense sorrow may not prove useless, but enable us to take a step forward towards a new style of life. If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth, with all its faces, all its hands and its voices, beyond the walls that we have erected. (FT, 35).*

The theme chosen for this year's World Day of Migrants and Refugees is a call so that after all this, we will be no more "others" but only "us". A universal "us" recalling a double challenge: "us" meaning a unified Catholic Church illuminating all men and women worldwide, "us" meaning a unified humanity (cfr. LG 1 and 13).

The need to reconstitute ourselves into a single, ever-wider and more welcoming "us", meeting all those who live in conditions of estrangement, leaving behind the distinction between ourselves and others in order to feel part of the one people of God (cfr. *Gen 11:1*) is a natural dimension of the individual (cfr. *CDSC149* and *Gen 2:20.23*), who has always been at the centre of the maternal care and concern of the Church (cfr. *Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*).

Once again, this year, in anticipation of the Holy Father's Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees soon to be published, the M&R Section has set up a communication campaign through which the general theme and the six sub-themes of the Message will be explained and examined in depth. Multimedia aids, information material, and reflections by theologians and experts will be offered on a monthly basis, in order to deepen the theme and the sub-themes proposed by the Holy Father.

### ***Conclusion***

I would like to take this opportunity to renew, on behalf of the M&R Section, the thanks that the Holy Father expressed to you in 2017 «for your generous commitment to the complex and urgent work of offering pastoral care to migrants» (Address to the National Directors of Pastoral Care for Migrants, 22 September 2017). I also take this opportunity to confirm the commitment of the M&R Section to assist you in this important mission, to the best of our possibilities.