



“I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me”

Pastoral Letter on Welcoming Refugees

Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

I. WHY WE ARE WRITING

1. The immense and unprecedented refugee crisis today is heart-breaking, moving us to tears and urging us to act. As leaders of the Catholic Church in Canada, we believe that discussion is not enough; this is a time for urgent action. Every single day, desperate people try to cross a vast ocean of indifference. These people are called refugees. They are often treated simply as a problem or a concern, but to us they are our brothers and sisters, fellow human beings who need our help right now.



Refugees at a railway station in Budapest, Hungary, on September 5, 2015.

Photo: © Alexandre Rotenberg / Shutterstock.com

2. Pope Francis has urged us all to reach beyond the “globalization of indifference”¹ to listen to the cries and to hear the silent suffering of our brothers and sisters. He has challenged every European parish to welcome a family of refugees.² We must respond to this crisis, here and now, as Christians, as Canadians, as human beings.

The United Nations reported that by the end of 2014, the number of people displaced by wars, conflict, and persecution had reached 59.5 million – even more than in the period following World War II.⁴

“Millions upon millions of refugees from so many countries, of every religion, are living stories of tragedy, marked by wounds that will not easily heal. Let us make them our neighbours, sharing their fears and uncertainty for the future, and concretely alleviating their suffering. May the Lord sustain the persons and institutions who generously work to ensure the acceptance and dignity of refugees, and to give them reasons for hope.”³

- 1 Francis, Homily at Lampedusa, Italy, July 8, 2013. “In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference. We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business! ... Let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty of our world, of our own hearts, and of all those who in anonymity make social and economic decisions which open the door to tragic situations like this.”
- 2 Francis, Angelus Address, September 6, 2015.
- 3 Francis, General Audience, June 18, 2014, World Day of Refugees. CCCB translation from the Italian.
- 4 UNHCR, *Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase*, 18 June 2015. <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>

During the past 20 years, over 20,000 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Boats are leaving the harbours of the African continent every day. Traffickers prey on the desperation of fleeing Eritreans, Somalis, Syrians, and others.

What is a Refugee?

According to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

3. In 2006, a pastoral letter on immigration and the protection of refugees was addressed to the Catholics of Canada by their Bishops.⁵ This letter retains all its relevance and applicability today. Yet in light of the deterioration of the global situation and the pressing pleas of Pope Francis, a new call is being issued to Catholics that demands a fresh and renewed response. On September 8, 2015, the President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) issued an open letter to Catholics on the refugee crisis. Then, at their annual assembly, the Bishops of Canada called on "every Catholic parish and religious community in Canada that has the resources to sponsor a refugee family to seriously consider doing so, either alone or working in collaboration with others."⁶ Now, this pastoral letter is being issued to renew the call to our consciences and to stir us to action to help these millions of people who struggle to survive and who search for living conditions that respect their dignity and freedom. The urgency of the present situation is also one of the reasons why the specific focus of this letter is limited to refugees, rather than the broader category of immigrants.



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Kosovar refugees fleeing their homeland. March 1, 1999.

4. The Catholic Church recognizes that the standard definition of refugees is no longer adequate. For the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* and the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *de facto* refugees are persons who are victims of armed conflict, destructive economic policies, or natural disasters. We can now add a new category of climate or environmental refugees.⁷ All these are recognized by the Church as *de facto* refugees for humanitarian reasons, given the involuntary nature of their flight. The involuntary and obligatory nature of their migration demands of us a spontaneous response of charity built on the foundation of justice.⁸

5 CCCB Commission for Social Affairs, "We Are Aliens and Transients before the Lord Our God," January 15, 2006.

6 Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Resolution n.3, 2015 Plenary Assembly, Cornwall, ON. www.cccb.ca/site/images/stories/pdf/Plenary_resolution_on_refugees_-_EN.pdf.

7 "There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees." (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 25)

8 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 6.

Pope Francis' homily on the small island of Lampedusa gives us pause for thought:

"Where is your brother?" His blood cries out to me, says the Lord."

This is not a question directed to others; it is a question directed to me, to you, to each of us. These brothers and sisters of ours were trying to escape difficult situations to find some serenity and peace; they were looking for a better place for themselves and their families, but instead they found death. How often do such people fail to find understanding, fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity? And their cry rises up to God!

– Pope Francis, Homily at Lampedusa, Italy, July 8, 2013

5. In an ideal world, no one would have to leave the country of their birth. Unfortunately, in our world today, persecution, oppression, and war are giving rise to one crisis after another, and forcing the innocent to take flight. One has only to think of the situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, parts of North Africa, and particularly Iraq and Syria, where the jihadist group known as the Islamic State is seeking domination and control. Lebanon is currently facing a tremendous challenge posed by the presence of 1.2 million Syrian refugees; along with Palestinians, they make up a full third of the country's population.

6. One of the new but tragic elements of the current dire situation is the massive increase in the number of Christian refugees. Most of these are fleeing Syria and Iraq, where along with Yazidis and other religious minorities, they have been persecuted, enslaved, even killed. While our world has often seen conflicts like these, we cannot simply resign ourselves to the inevitability of this situation. On the contrary, we must stand up to anything that devalues or threatens the life and dignity of any human being. We do not accept intolerance and barbarism. Rather, we emphatically affirm that we are all brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. This is why we must stand in solidarity with refugees and offer help adapted to their real needs – because they are our family.



Iraqi Christians survey the damage at the altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad on November 3, 2010, after an attack left 46 dead.

Photo: AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images

II. BIBLICAL TEACHING

7. In the Old Testament, we find that the stranger can appear in various guises: the foreigner, the stranger who is passing through, the temporary resident with no specific rights, and finally the outsider who settles in Israel. The history of Israel itself is a long story of a people who experiences both voluntary and forced migrations, who



Iraqi Yazidi refugees at the Newroz refugee camp in Syria.
November 28, 2014.

can recall that “a wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien” (Deuteronomy 26.5). But then that immigrant became a slave! When the Israelites fled from slavery under Pharaoh and embarked upon their exodus from Egypt, they experienced the kind of situation encountered by many refugees today.

8. Even the child Jesus himself was a refugee when his family fled the persecution of King Herod (Matthew 2.13-14). In the early Church, welcoming the migrant took on new meaning. First of all, the presence of refugees reminds us of our own situation in this world, where we are aliens and exiles (1 Peter 2.11). Most importantly, we must recall that Christ came to save all humanity, and that in him God, who excludes no one,

breaks down the ethnic, social, and cultural barriers that separate and that build walls and lead to violence. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37), Jesus teaches us a paradoxical truth: the stranger is actually our neighbour. Finally, in the text of the Last Judgment, Christ not only invites us to welcome the weak and the dispossessed, he even identifies himself with the smallest, the fragile, and those left behind by society, among whom, in particular, are our contemporary refugees: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25.35).

I make an appeal to parishes, religious communities, monasteries and shrines throughout Europe, that they express the Gospel in a concrete way and host a refugee family. A concrete gesture in preparation for the Holy Year of Mercy. May every parish, every religious community, every monastery, every shrine of Europe welcome one family, beginning with my Diocese of Rome.

I address my brother bishops of Europe, true pastors, that in their dioceses they endorse my appeal, remembering that Mercy is the second name of Love: *‘What you have done for the least of my brothers, that you have done for me’* (cf. Mt 25:46).

– Pope Francis, Angelus Address, September 6, 2015

III. WELCOMING AND PROTECTING REFUGEES

Safuan and Dalia fled Iraq in 2014. "When we arrived [in the Kurdish-controlled city of Erbil] it was total chaos. Like so many, we slept outside for many nights. We knew then that our lives here were over. We sold what we had and left for Jordan to become refugees. Dalia gave birth to our new baby there. We named her Mariana because the Virgin Mary saved us. The birth of Mariana changed our attitude. We know now that God has chosen a different path for her and thus for us. We aren't sure yet what God's plan is for our family, but it only can get better from now on and we will follow His will."

As Safuan tells his story, he emphasizes that his family was inspired by the Holy Family, who also experienced hardship. Mary and Joseph left their homeland after the birth of Jesus to escape Herod, and they lived as refugees in Egypt. Thanks to others, they were able to endure the difficult road ahead until they found a new home.

– From Carl Hétu, Director of CNEWA Canada, "We are one human family," 2015.

9. The laws for the protection of refugees are different from most international laws and treaties, in that they do not directly serve the economic interests of the host country, but those of the refugees themselves. They are based on certain principles of charity, justice, and solidarity, with the host country accepting responsibility to come to the aid of persons without gaining anything in return.

10. For the Church, which "goes forward together with humanity,"⁹ the human person is the "primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission ... the way traced out by Christ himself."¹⁰ And Pope Benedict XVI forcefully reminds us that "Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance."¹¹

11. On November 30, 2014, before leaving Turkey, Pope Francis met some young refugees and said to them, "Refugees, such as yourselves, often find themselves deprived, sometimes for long periods, of basic needs such as a dignified home, healthcare, education and work. They have had to abandon not only their material possessions, but above all their freedom, closeness to family, their homeland and cultural traditions. The degrading conditions in which so many refugees are forced to live are intolerable! For this reason, we must do everything possible to eradicate the causes of this situation."



Pope Francis meets with refugees during his trip to Turkey in 2014.

9 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 40.

10 Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 53.

11 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 62.



Photo: © UN Photos. All rights reserved.

Vietnamese refugees living in their boats at the Government Dockyard in Kowloon, Hong Kong. August 1, 1979.

12. When it comes to welcoming refugees in our own country, our action cannot be limited to simply providing assistance and accompaniment during the long process of selection, but must be aimed at the full inclusion of these newcomers, in a way that respects differences. As Pope Benedict XVI recalled, “[T]he Church and her various agencies ought to avoid offering charitable services alone; they are also called to promote real integration in a society where all are active members and responsible for one another’s welfare, generously offering a creative contribution and rightfully sharing in the same rights and duties.”¹²

[S]uffering, great losses and at times a sense of disorientation before an uncertain future do not destroy the dream of being able to build, with hope and courage, a new life in a new country. Indeed, migrants trust that they will encounter acceptance, solidarity and help, that they will meet people who sympathize with the distress and tragedy experienced by others, recognize the values and resources the latter have to offer, and are open to sharing humanly and materially with the needy and disadvantaged.

– Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2013, “Migration: Pilgrimage of Faith and Hope,” October 12, 2012.

13. Given the vast distances and transportation challenges encountered by refugees attempting to come to Canada, our action has to be twofold: we must certainly welcome them upon their arrival to Canada, but we must also support them while they are still abroad. In fact, the number of in-Canada refugee claimants has fallen dramatically in recent years, probably due to changes to federal immigration law intended to prevent fraud and human trafficking.

14. Yet we must always be vigilant to ensure that our country is doing all it can in the present situation. Whether they are sponsored abroad, or apply for refugee status after arriving in Canada, we need to ensure that refugees are welcomed here if we are not to fail in our obligation to humanitarian solidarity. Canada’s reputation for refugee sponsorship was built on our welcome of the Vietnamese boat people in 1979 and 1980. Today’s crisis requires a humanitarian response of the same scale.

¹² Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2013, “Migration: Pilgrimage of Faith and Hope,” October 12, 2012.

15. Numerous issues will require clarification and improvement from various levels of government and civil society if we are to better welcome refugees to our country and better respect their fundamental rights. These include

- ▶ expanding and accelerating sponsorship procedures;
- ▶ giving greater priority to family reunification;
- ▶ making asylum more accessible;
- ▶ improving appeal procedures in the case of a decision of refusal;
- ▶ finding alternatives to detention, especially for women and children;
- ▶ facilitating access to a broader spectrum of healthcare services.



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A camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) at M'poko Airport in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic. June 19, 2014.

16. Refugees resettled to Canada may be sponsored solely by the federal government (known as government-assisted refugees). However, large numbers of Canada's refugees are sponsored by members of the general public (known as privately sponsored refugees, or, in Quebec, collectively sponsored refugees), often through a recognized institution such as a church or other community organization. The sponsors guarantee financial support and settlement assistance for one year. The state furnishes and subsidizes a number of integration services to help new arrivals, but no such service can offer the kind of encouragement that comes from the love of a group or a welcoming community.



Photo: © Denis Therrien

Four Syrian families, sponsored by parishes in Ottawa, celebrate together in August 2015, several months after arriving in Canada.

Refugees not only tend to suffer from a lack of medical services, but are often victims of incredible psychological trauma. *Caritas Internationalis* collaborates with the Comboni Sisters who run the Italian Hospital in Amman, Jordan, which serves the poorest of the city – in particular, Palestinian and Iraqi refugees.

Rafael Orah, 69, has been treated at the Italian Hospital for his prostate and herniated discs in his back. He is also one of 160 people of all ages benefiting from a psychosocial support program that began last October. It is one of the few initiatives in Jordan addressing the enormous trauma faced by the Iraqi Christians.

“We have really suffered as Christians. Although we are safe here, living is very difficult due to high costs and being in exile,” Mr. Orah says. “We must pray to live the remainder of our lives without injustice or threat. We ask God and those responsible to help us get the stability we need.”

– Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) Canada, Spring 2015 newsletter. Article by Dale Gavlak.

17. It is dismaying that refugees are often obliged to accept minimum-wage jobs regardless of their professional qualifications or experience. Many must also deal with significant trauma resulting from persecution and even torture, and with disorientation resulting from having been uprooted. Furthermore, here in Canada the security of their government-provided health coverage is uncertain and threatened with cuts. These are all reasons why we must make our voices heard – clearly and loudly – to correct injustices and to call for the recognition and full inclusion of refugees into our communities and society. Our solidarity can also be expressed by supporting refugees or displaced persons who are living in camps or shelters. We must provide aid in the camps and lobby for peaceful resolution of conflicts for refugees who want to return to their country of origin.

IV. THE CHURCH: SPEAKING AND ACTING ON BEHALF OF REFUGEES

18. For anyone attentive to human solidarity, and especially for any Christian, concern for the living conditions of our fellow human beings, particularly those who are in need, should become a way of life and a habit of thought, a practice of active compassion rooted in justice. Our faith calls us to let ourselves be moved – even disturbed – by

our sisters and brothers who are refugees. They await our listening ears, our open hearts, and our outstretched arms to receive them. Welcoming those whose lives are marked by hardship, poverty, and uncertainty is not only a moral duty, it is a constitutive act of the Church’s life.

To successfully resettle a persecuted Iraqi family of four who cowered in Syria for seven years was an uplifting experience for us. The generosity of our parishioners made this possible. After one year of sponsorship, they are on their own and contributing to Canada.

– St. Isaac Jogues Parish Refugee Resettlement Committee, Pickering, Ontario

In December 2013, Saint-Sauveur Melkite Catholic Cathedral in Montreal began sponsoring Syrian refugees. Since then, the parish has completed 55 sponsorships composed of 150 Syrian refugees. Twenty-five people arrived between the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015.

“We are expecting to receive another 17 people in late September 2015 and we’re hoping that the rest of the refugees will be coming soon. This experience has been very rewarding for the whole community.”

– Fr. Bernard Bassett, Saint-Sauveur Cathedral,
Montreal

19. Every year, the Catholic Church in Canada – along with other communities – sponsors many refugees, thanks to generous people who are committed to helping them. Some of these volunteers and workers have been actively involved in this work since the time of the Vietnamese boat people. We should be grateful to these people who offered refuge to those who had lost hope. We should also thank all those involved in refugee sponsorship who, over the years, have shown so much leadership and initiative: every action counts and every voice is important. Yet today, unfortunately, most Catholic parishes in Canada are not involved in refugee sponsorship, for no other reason than that they are unaware that they can make a

difference and have not yet been challenged to do so. This pastoral letter is a challenge to Catholics in Canada to learn about the situation today, to pray for those affected, and to mobilize themselves in order to make the greatest difference possible.



Representatives from
St. Martin de Porres Parish in Ottawa
greet a sponsored refugee family at the airport in February 2015.

Photo: © Denis Therrien

A Challenge to Canadians

Over the past five years, Canada has resettled roughly 13,000 refugees per year. If churches, community organizations, religious groups, and the federal government were to actively work together, this number could be drastically increased. Given the enormous surge in refugees worldwide, shouldn't Canada receive more of them?

20. As Bishops, we hope that Catholics will make their voices heard more and more clearly on the issue of refugees, for we must be advocates for the voiceless and provide safety to the vulnerable. It is imperative that this Catholic voice be heard by the Canadian government. Yet, at the same time, we must take responsibility for our own actions and do our part. Political lobbying becomes meaningless if we are not prepared to give of ourselves and make sacrifices. We therefore call on Catholics everywhere to organize together and sponsor refugees, to the extent that they are able. If there is currently no Catholic structure in place to do this, perhaps now is the time to establish one. Pope Francis has called on all European parishes, religious communities, and shrines to welcome a refugee family. Should our Canadian parishes do any less?

21. Finally, we would like to propose some concrete actions that Canadian Catholics can take.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Call on the federal government to expand the acceptance of refugees to Canada, to correct any flaws in our immigration law when they become apparent, and to accelerate and facilitate the private sponsorship of refugees by groups like parishes.
- Provide moral and spiritual support to those in refugee camps by remaining informed of their situations and praying for them accordingly.
- Support Development and Peace (which is part of the International *Caritas Internationalis* network), CNEWA, Aid to the Church in Need, Jesuit Refugee Service, and other national and international aid organizations, which need our moral and financial support.
- Where possible, create a diocesan service to make the needs of refugees better known, and to coordinate and facilitate sponsorship. This service could collaborate ecumenically with other Christian communities where possible.
- Mark the World Day for Migrants and Refugees on the Sunday after Epiphany.
- Where possible, establish a pastoral ministry for migrants and displaced persons to increase awareness of the situation of the world's refugees and to propose projects that express a greater solidarity and true compassion for our suffering brothers and sisters.
- Provide pastors and pastoral workers with more ongoing formation regarding the reality and the needs of refugees.



Refugees wait for water at a camp in Dadaab, Somalia. August 6, 2011.

Photo: © hikrcni/Shutterstock.com



Photo: © Oleg Doroshenko / Dreamstime.com

A Syrian refugee family on a street in Istanbul. August 3, 2015.

**Finally, let us all pray that our hands
and our hearts may unite with our
voices in actions that will give a loving
welcome to refugees in our country
and in our Christian communities.**

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