



Pope Francis's Preferential Option for Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers

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Abstract

Pope Francis's consistent advocacy for the human dignity and rights of migrants in his official pronouncements and actions reveals a pope who not only cares deeply about the existential challenges that migrants face but also articulates solutions to address these challenges. He unequivocally expresses a preferential option for, and commitment to, accompanying migrants in empathy and solidarity. He addresses issues of poverty, economic marginalization, environmental degradation, and racial, political, and religious tensions that drive migration today. For him, migration is a missional issue that undergirds the church's mission to bring the Good News to everyone, migrants included.

Keywords

Pope Francis, migrants, migration, refugees, asylum seekers, migration theology

Pope Francis made headlines on the issue of migrants and migration when he issued his latest apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et exsultate* (2018): “Pope Francis Puts Caring for Migrants and Opposing Abortion on Equal Footing” and “Pope Francis's New Major Document: Caring for Migrants and the Poor Is Just As Important As Preventing Abortion.”¹ Indeed, Pope Francis consistently insists on a preferential option for migrants, beginning on July 8, 2013, with his first official trip as pope beyond Rome in a high-profile visit to the immigrant reception center on Lampedusa, an island off southern Italy,² followed by his washing the feet of migrants during the foot-washing ritual of Maundy Thursday in 2016,³ and in his official pronouncements and documents

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where he draws attention to the humanitarian plight of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. This focus should not surprise anyone, for Pope Francis is not merely the first non-European pope since the Syrian Pope Gregory III (731–41), the first pope from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first pope from the Americas. He is also the Argentine-born son of Italian immigrants to Argentina who learned firsthand about the experience of migrants.⁴

Lampedusa and *Evangelii gaudium*

Pope Francis's first major statement on migrants and refugees was his homily during Mass in his visit to the immigration reception center in Lampedusa nearly four months into his pontificate, where he condemned the "globalization of indifference" that has led to the monumental failure to respond to the humanitarian crisis of migrants. He criticized the lack of empathy for, and solidarity with, migrants and refugees: "We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion—'suffering with' others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!"⁵ Four months later, he reinforced his earlier remarks at Lampedusa in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), highlighting among other things the dilemma of victims of human trafficking (§§75, 211), as well as refugees and migrants (§§210, 253), and exhorting "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" (§210). He pleads that "Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition" (§253).

Laudato si'

In his second encyclical, *Laudato si'* (2015), Pope Francis includes references to migrants, decrying in particular the widespread indifference to environmental refugees: "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; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever" (§25).

He comments that it is inconsistent to express concern for environmental degradation while remaining indifferent to the humans who are affected by environmental degradation and forced to uproot and move, insisting that "concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society" (§91). He calls for new "stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions," to, among other things, "guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration" (§175). He points to the need for reforming politics in order to introduce much-needed real change: "A strategy for real change calls for rethinking processes in their entirety, for it is not enough to include a few superficial

ecological considerations while failing to question the logic which underlies present-day culture. A healthy politics needs to be able to take up this challenge” (§197).

Amoris laetitia

A year after promulgating *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis references the plight of migrant and refugee families in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016), drawing a parallel with the Holy Family—Jesus, Mary, Joseph, who fled to Egypt to escape Herod, “an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless” (§30). He reiterates one of the conclusions of the 2015 Synod on the Family, namely, that “migration is another sign of the times to be faced and understood in terms of its negative effects on family life” (§46). While he acknowledges that migration could be a “genuine enrichment for both families that migrate and countries that welcome them,” he notes that “forced migration of families, resulting from situations of war, persecution, poverty and injustice, and marked by the vicissitudes of a journey that often puts lives at risk, traumatizes people and destabilizes families” (§46). He calls for pastoral programs to address the needs of families who migrate and family members who remain behind, which will tackle the challenges of human trafficking, women, unaccompanied minors, and the persecutions of Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities that drive them to flee their homelands, stressing that “dedication and concern shown to migrants” is “a sign of the Spirit” that serves as “a test of our commitment to show mercy in welcoming others and to help the vulnerable to be fully a part of our communities” (§47).

Gaudete et exsultate

In *Gaudete et exsultate*, Pope Francis condemns what he terms “harmful ideological error” in “those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist,” or “they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend” (§101). Specifically, he criticizes those who regard the situation of migrants as a “lesser” or “secondary issue” compared to the “grave bioethical questions,” insisting that “a politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children,” because “this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger we welcome him (cf. *Mt 25:35*)” (§102). He bluntly states:

A similar approach is found in the Old Testament: “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt” (*Ex 22:21*). “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (*Lev 19:33–34*). This is not a notion invented by some Pope,

or a momentary fad. In today's world too, we are called to follow the path of spiritual wisdom proposed by the prophet Isaiah to show what is pleasing to God. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn" (58:7–8). (§103)

Pope Francis's messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees

In five yearly messages, Pope Francis has consistently and progressively brought world attention to bear on the current treatment of migrants and refugees.⁶

2014: "Migrants and Refugees: Towards a Better World." Besides his encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, and homilies, Pope Francis's annual messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees reveal his detailed vision and plan of action for addressing the plight of migrants and refugees. In his 2014 message he seeks to address the "rejection, discrimination, trafficking and exploitation, suffering and death" (3) experienced by many migrants, especially involuntary migrants and victims of human trafficking. As he bluntly states:

Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more. The sheer number of people migrating from one continent to another, or shifting places within their own countries and geographical areas, is striking. Contemporary movements of migration represent the largest movement of individuals, if not of peoples, in history. As the Church accompanies migrants and refugees on their journey, she seeks to understand the causes of migration, but she also works to overcome its negative effects, and to maximize its positive influence on the communities of origin, transit and destination. (6)

In response to this crisis, Pope Francis speaks of the need for migration to be "approached and managed in a new, equitable and effective manner" marked by "international cooperation and a spirit of profound solidarity and compassion," the "broad adoption of policies and rules aimed at protecting and promoting the human person" (8). He asserts that "a better world will come about only if attention is first paid to individuals; if human promotion is integral, taking account of every dimension of the person, including the spiritual; if no one is neglected, including the poor, the sick, prisoners, the needy and the stranger" (5).

Pope Francis is unequivocal on the need for a "conversion of attitudes" that must include "the elimination of prejudices and presuppositions in the approach to migration" because frequently "the arrival of migrants, displaced persons, asylum-seekers and refugees gives rise to suspicion and hostility" (10). He highlights the Holy Family's flight to seek refuge in Egypt (Matt. 2:13–14) on what it means to leave a homeland and become refugees because of persecutions and threats. To build a better world, he refers to "the deepest foundation of the dignity of the human person, which must

always be respected and safeguarded” because all human beings, migrants included, are “created in God’s own image and likeness (cf. *Gen 1:26–27*)” (12). He is adamant that in the “better world”:

migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved. They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy, a more united country, a more fraternal world and a more open and evangelical Christian community. Migration can offer possibilities for a new evangelization, open vistas for the growth of a new humanity foreshadowed in the paschal mystery: a humanity for which every foreign country is a homeland and every homeland is a foreign country. (12)

2015: “*Church without Frontiers, Mother to All.*” In his 2015 message Pope Francis reiterates that we see Jesus in “the poorest and most abandoned,” especially “migrants and refugees,” whom we need to “welcome without distinction or limits,” spreading throughout the world “a culture of acceptance and solidarity, in which no one is seen as useless, out of place or disposable” (1–3). He condemns all prejudice, suspicion, and hostility, even among Christians, to the arrival of migrants, insisting that such “suspicion and prejudice conflict with the biblical commandment of welcoming with respect and solidarity the stranger in need” (4). As he reminds us, “Jesus Christ is always waiting to be recognized in migrants and refugees, in displaced persons and in exiles, and through them he calls us to share our resources, and occasionally to give up something of our acquired riches” (6). He calls for a response to “the globalization of migration with the globalization of charity and cooperation, in such a way as to make the conditions of migrants more humane” (10). He asserts that “solidarity with migrants and refugees must be accompanied by the courage and creativity necessary to develop, on a world-wide level, a more just and equitable financial and economic order, as well as an increasing commitment to peace, the indispensable condition for all authentic progress” (11).

2016: “*Migrants and Refugees Challenge Us: The Response of the Gospel of Mercy.*” In his 2016 message Pope Francis makes the point that migrants “are our brothers and sisters in search of a better life, far away from poverty, hunger, exploitation and the unjust distribution of the planet’s resources which are meant to be equitably shared by all” (4). He also stresses “the need to assist the countries which migrants and refugees leave,” focusing proactively on “solidarity, cooperation, international interdependence and the equitable distribution of the earth’s goods,” especially “in areas where migration movements begin, to eliminate those imbalances which lead people, individually or collectively, to abandon their own natural and cultural environment,” so as “to avert, if possible at the earliest stages, the flight of refugees and departures as a result of poverty, violence and persecution” (11). He repeats the biblical injunction to “welcome the stranger” and asserts that the church should embrace and embody “mercy,” which “nourishes and strengthens solidarity towards others as a necessary response to God’s gracious love,” leading to mutual giving to, and receiving from, migrants in a spirit of hospitality (7, 9).

2017: *“Child Migrants, the Vulnerable and the Voiceless.”* For his 2017 message Pope Francis focuses on the plight of child migrants, especially the unaccompanied child migrants, inviting everyone to offer aid to the child migrants, “who in a three-fold way are defenceless: they are children, they are foreigners, and they have no means to protect themselves” (3). As he explains, “Children are the first among those to pay the heavy toll of emigration, almost always caused by violence, poverty, environmental conditions, as well as the negative aspects of globalization” (4). He reiterates the “unique and inalienable” rights of children, as guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁷ and reminds us: “Among migrants, children constitute the most vulnerable group, because as they face the life ahead of them, they are invisible and voiceless: their precarious situation deprives them of documentation, hiding them from the world’s eyes; the absence of adults to accompany them prevents their voices from being raised and heard. In this way, migrant children easily end up at the lowest levels of human degradation, where illegality and violence destroy the future of too many innocents, while the network of child abuse is difficult to break up” (4–6).

Pope Francis proposes a threefold response to the challenges of child migration. First, he cites Exodus 22:21, Deuteronomy 10:19, and Revelation 7:9 to recognize the phenomenon of migration as a part of salvation history and to see that God’s hand is in migration and that “no one is a stranger in the Christian community.” He also challenges government institutions on how they have treated child migrants: “Each person is precious; persons are more important than things, and the worth of an institution is measured by the way it treats the life and dignity of human beings, particularly when they are vulnerable, as in the case of child migrants” (8).

Second, Pope Francis insists that “we need to work for the integration of children and youngsters who are migrants,” who “depend totally on the adult community,” instead of simply attempting to curb the entrance of child migrants, which only “fosters illegal networks,” or repatriate child migrants back to their countries of origin “without any concern for their ‘best interests’” (13). He is unequivocal that “the right of states to control migratory movement and to protect the common good of the nation must be seen in conjunction with the duty to resolve and regularize the situation of child migrants, fully respecting their dignity and seeking to meet their needs when they are alone, but also the needs of their parents, for the good of the entire family” (14).

Third, Pope Francis pleads for long-term solutions to address the causes that trigger child migration, namely, “wars, human rights violations, corruption, poverty, environmental imbalance and disasters,” which leave “indelible scars” on children (16). Such solutions require “the commitment of the whole international community to eliminate the conflicts and violence that force people to flee,” as well as “adequate programmes for areas struck by the worst injustice and instability, in order that access to authentic development can be guaranteed for all” (17).

2018: *“Welcoming, Protecting, Promoting, and Integrating Migrants and Refugees.”* Pope Francis’s 2018 message represents his most ambitious call for action. He reiterates his continued commitment to migrants, displaced persons, refugees, and victims

of human trafficking, and he proposes a fourfold plan of action to “all believers and men and women of good will” to respond to the challenges of migration: “to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate” (3–4).

First, *welcoming* refers to the need to offer “broader options for migrants and refugees to enter destination countries safely and legally” and to “increase and simplify the process for granting humanitarian visas and for reunifying families.” Pope Francis is insistent that “collective and arbitrary expulsions of migrants and refugees are not suitable solutions, particularly where people are returned to countries which cannot guarantee respect for human dignity and fundamental rights.” He emphasizes “the importance of offering migrants and refugees adequate and dignified initial accommodation” because “the centrality of the human person” and the “fundamental dignity of every human person” oblige us “to always prioritise personal safety over national security” and “to find alternative solutions to detention for those who enter a country without authorisation” (5).

Second, *protecting* points to “a series of steps intended to defend the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, independent of their legal status,” including “offering reliable and verified information before departure, and in providing safety from illegal recruitment practices” before they depart their country of origin, and “guaranteeing them adequate consular assistance, the right to personally retain their identity documents at all times, fair access to justice, the possibility of opening a personal bank account, and a minimum sufficient to live on,” as well as “freedom of movement, work opportunities, and access to means of communication” when they arrive in their country of migration (6). With regard to child migrants, Pope Francis states:

The *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* provides a universal legal basis for the protection of underage migrants. They must be spared any form of detention related to migratory status, and must be guaranteed regular access to primary and secondary education. Equally, when they come of age they must be guaranteed the right to remain and to enjoy the possibility of continuing their studies. Temporary custody or foster programmes should be provided for unaccompanied minors and minors separated from their families. The universal right to a nationality should be recognised and duly certified for all children at birth. (6)

Third, *promoting* means “a determined effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees—as well as the communities which welcome them—are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity intended by the Creator,” including the “freedom of religious belief and practice,” the promotion of “the social and professional inclusion of migrants and refugees, guaranteeing for all—including those seeking asylum—the possibility of employment, language instruction and active citizenship, together with sufficient information provided in their mother tongue,” as well as the prevention of exploitation of underage migrant labor. Pope Francis argues for the need to preserve the integrity of the family, promote family reunifications, and give greater assistance to migrants with disabilities. He suggests that wealthier nations should financially assist “developing countries which receive a significant influx of migrants and refugees” (7).

Fourth, *integrating* focuses on the “opportunities for intercultural enrichment brought about by the presence of migrants and refugees.” For Pope Francis, integration is “not an assimilation that leads migrants to suppress or to forget their own cultural identity”; rather, “contact with others leads to discovering their ‘secret,’ to being open to them in order to welcome their valid aspects and thus contribute to knowing each one better.” In particular, he speaks of fostering “a culture of encounter in every way possible—by increasing opportunities for intercultural exchange, documenting and disseminating best practices of integration, and developing programmes to prepare local communities for integration processes.” He acknowledges that while this can be a lengthy process, nonetheless it “aims to shape societies and cultures, making them more and more a reflection of the multi-faceted gifts of God to human beings”; the process “can be accelerated by granting citizenship free of financial or linguistic requirements, and by offering the possibility of special legalisation to migrants who can claim a long period of residence in the country of arrival” (8).

Conclusion

In his official pronouncements Pope Francis has gone further than his predecessors in his consistent advocacy for the human dignity and rights of migrants. His Messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees reveal a pope who not only cares deeply about the existential challenges that migrants and refugees face but also articulates solutions to address these challenges. This can be seen especially in the 2018 message, with its fourfold call to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees. His trenchant critique in *Gaudete et exsultate* of those who seek to relativize the plight of migrants as a mere pastoral issue speaks volumes of his commitment to, and solidarity with, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. More important, his advocacy for the human dignity and rights of migrants goes beyond words to actions, as exemplified by his 2013 visit to Lampedusa and his washing the feet of migrants in 2016.

Clearly, migration is a global and transnational phenomenon that shows no signs of abating. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers often encounter discrimination, exploitation, persecution, and human rights abuses. Pope Francis unequivocally testifies to his commitment to accompanying these needy human beings in empathy and solidarity—a preferential option for this beleaguered group of people. He addresses issues of poverty, economic marginalization, environmental degradation, and racial, political, and religious tensions that drive migration in all its forms. For Pope Francis, migration is a missional issue—it goes to the very core of the church’s mission to bring the Good News to everyone without exception and to uphold and defend the divinely bestowed human dignity of everyone, migrants included.

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Notes

1. Respectively, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, both on April 9, 2018.
2. For news reports on Pope Francis's visit to Lampedusa, see the following, all dated July 8, 2013: "Pope Francis Decries 'Globalization of Indifference,'" *Religion News Service*; "Pope Attacks 'Globalization of Indifference' in Lampedusa Visit," *The Guardian*; "Pope Francis Visits Italy's Migrant Island of Lampedusa," *BBC News*; and "Pope Offers Mass on Island Beacon for Refugees," *New York Times*.
3. "Pope Francis Washes the Feet of Muslim Migrants, Says We Are 'Children of the Same God,'" *Washington Post*, March 25, 2016.
4. "Biography of the Holy Father Francis," <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/biography/documents/papa-francesco-biografia-bergoglio.html>.
5. "Visit to Lampedusa: Holy Mass in the 'Arena' Sports Camp," July 8, 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.
6. For the texts of these five messages in multiple languages, see <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration.index.html>. These documents have been released each year in late summer, with the annual World Day of Migrants and Refugees being celebrated in mid-January of the following year. In the text below, numbers in parentheses indicate the (unnumbered) paragraphs in the respective documents.
7. For the full text of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, see www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.

Author biography



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