

# CAFOD Advent Parliamentary Reflection

## Westminster, 13 December 2016

by  
**Rev. Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo, Secretary General**  
**International Catholic Migration Commission**

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Members of Parliament, and other esteemed guests,

I am deeply grateful and honored to have received your invitation to this significant event while we gather, as Catholics, during the sacred time of waiting and hoping for the day when we could re-enact once again the joy and praise of God proclaimed by our ancient forebears in the faith, when they sang the words of the prophet Isaias with a renewed sense of fulfillment and passion:

*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;  
upon his shoulder dominion rests.  
They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,  
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:5)*

How many times have we heard those words proclaimed at Christmas Mass? But have we permitted ourselves to take in their full meaning? Are we aware of Jesus' power to bring about positive change in our own lives and in the entire world if we simply allow this Messiah, whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Day, to fully enter our hearts, our lives, our families, our communities, and our world?

Very often, as we reflect and pray about the magnificent feast of Christmas, we picture the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, as serenely and calmly resting in the manger. Let us not forget that Mary and Joseph sought refuge/asylum in the manger after being rejected by the local population in Bethlehem with the excuse that their quota already had been exhausted for the foreseeable future. A very short time after Jesus' birth, He and his family would be displaced, seeking refuge in Egypt, to escape the efforts of the tyrannical King Herod who wanted to kill the newly born Messiah, the Emanuel (God-with-us), who was sent by His Father to become the Savior of the world.

During his infancy and early childhood, Jesus probably smiled a lot and squirmed with enthusiasm, as he received loving embraces from His mother, Blessed Mary, and his foster father, St. Joseph. But, most likely, he also felt their anxiety for his safety, their questions about whether it would ever be possible to return home. Yet Jesus not only went "home" with his Mary and Joseph; after giving His own life for us, "His friends", He now sits at the right hand of His Father in heaven and invites us to join Him there at the end of our earthly lives.

On Christmas Day, and on every day of our Christian lives, Jesus continues to hold out to us the hope and the promise that, despite our fears and anxieties, our deep and lingering concern about violence, terrorism, and chaos in this world, we can envision and build a world, described as follows by Pope Francis, during his September 2015 visit to United Nations:

*"The common home of all men and women must continue to rise on the foundations of a right understanding of universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life, of every man and every woman, the poor, the elderly, children, the infirm, the unborn, the unemployed, the abandoned, those considered disposable because they are only considered as part of a statistic."<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 15 September 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150925\\_onu-visita.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html)

With specific regard to statistics on large movements of migrants and refugees I hardly need to remind you of the numbers of people on the move in our present-day world. The New York Declaration, or Outcome Document of the UN Summit on Migrants and Refugees, cited the following:

*“In 2015, their number surpassed 244 million, growing at a rate faster than the world’s population. However, there are roughly 65 million forcibly displaced persons, including over 21 million refugees, 3 million asylum seekers and over 40 million internally displaced persons.”<sup>2</sup>*

But, on the other hand, let us not forget tragic portrait portrayed by the UN Secretary General in the preparatory report leading up to this Summit:

*“... rickety boats piled high with people seeking safety; women, men, and children drowning in their attempts to escape violence and poverty; fences going up at borders where people used to cross freely and thousands of girls and boys going missing, many falling prey to criminal groups ... Upon arrival those who survive these perilous trips are often violated. Many asylum seekers and migrants are detained, and their reception is sometimes far from welcoming. Xenophobic and racist rhetoric seems to be not only on the rise, but also becoming more socially and politically accepted.”<sup>3</sup>*

Founded in 1951, the International Catholic Migration Commission, or ICMC, at which I am privileged to serve as Secretary General, was mandated by Pius XII to *“to unite and organize existing Catholic associations and committees, and to promote, reinforce and coordinate their projects and activities in behalf of migrants and refugees.”* (Exsul Familia, 1952). With the prophetic leadership of Pope Francis, we are ever more conscious of the key role that ICMC must play in the Church’s response to the humanitarian emergency of large numbers of refugees and migrants in literally every part of the world.

Through our humanitarian assistance programs, especially in Syria and other conflict-torn areas in the Middle East and Asia, ICMC literally provides “daily bread” and a “roof over the head” for refugee and other displaced families whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed by bombs and mortars. We support education and health programs where such services no longer are available under government sponsorship.

Into more than 50 countries, we send legal, social work, and resettlement experts to work closely with UN agencies and governments to assess and make recommendations on the best interest and protection needs of refugees, including whether they could be integrated into their respective countries of asylum. When the latter solution is chosen, ICMC then assists with the processing of resettlement applications for families designated to be settled in the United States of America. In that regard, we work with a network of Church-based and other non-governmental organizations to help refugees re-establish themselves and become independent and self-sustaining once they arrive in their new country.

For many years, ICMC has played a strong role in coordinating the international activities jointly undertaken by civil society in promoting a more effective, well-planned, transparent, and sustainable response to large movements of refugees and migrants in all parts of the world. We accompany and hear the pleas of refugees and migrants on a direct and daily basis. Our voices, and, most especially the voices of refugees and migrants themselves, must be considered as essential components in any policy development related to their future.

Two specific initiatives of civil society networking might be of particular interest to the participants in today’s event; they are: MADE (Migration and Development Civil Society

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<sup>2</sup> *Outcome Document of the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants*, United Nations General Assembly, document A/70/L.61, September 2016.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly *In safety and dignity: addressing large movements of refugees and migrants*. Report of the Secretary General, A/70/59, 21 April 2016.

Network) and SHARE (the network of cities, regions and local actors, including NGOs, churches, and other faith-based organizations) committed to offer protection and welcome for refugees resettled in Europe). From its very beginning, the SHARE program counted the City of Sheffield, England, as a key stakeholder and a model for other local communities.

All these services may sound rather technical and “bureaucratic”. Thus, I would like to present some faces and life situations of the people whom we serve. Surely these migrants have hopes and dreams that are quite similar to those of migrants whose futures you may be determining in your policy debates within the U.K. Parliament.

My first story in this regard: ICMC assisted a young Syrian man who escaped his home country because his life was threatened. He applied for and was accepted for resettlement in the USA. His departure was scheduled on the day of the terrorist attack on the Istanbul airport, where he already had arrived and was following the check-in process. He escaped from the shattered airport building without being hurt- but then he faced a dilemma – where could he go? – officially he was to have departed from Turkey on that day – he had no right to return to a refugee shelter – the only place he could consider a type of “home” was the office of ICMC’s Refugee Processing Centre in Istanbul – so he walked more than 10 kilometers from the airport to our office. The staff arranged for him to stay in a hotel and paid for his meals; they visited him and encouraged him speak about the trauma of finding himself once again in such vulnerability - even outside his war-torn home country. He now has arrived in the USA and slowly is working through the psychological trauma to which he was subjected – but we at ICMC are grateful that we could serve as his “home” and his “family” on that fateful day of the terrorist bombing in Istanbul.

Now for my concluding reflection: I recently visited the ICMC Refugee Service Centre in Istanbul, Turkey; our staff there are deeply engaged in assisting families to apply for resettlement in the United States. These refugees cannot not return home, and their current host country is unable to offer them permanent residence, employment, and long-term safety. During my visit, I spent time with a group of children who were receiving instruction on life in America. As most children, they were enthusiastic and curious – they grinned from ear-to-ear and spoke of what they planned to do in their new homes. Each had colored a map of the USA, placed their destination states in a special color and spoke with confidence that they were headed to better and happier lives.

But behind their smiling faces, I noticed pain and trauma in their eyes. They had witnessed terrible atrocities; several had lost their loved ones. I am sure that they were experiencing much anxiety and concern about how safe they would be as they boarded an airplane heading for parts of the world that would be very unfamiliar to them. What impressed me most about these children, however, was their sense of hope – they could imagine a better life for themselves and their families despite the many challenges they had experienced so early in life. They, like the Child Jesus, could still imagine the world described by the prophet Isaiah, where *“... the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat. The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them (Is. 11:6).”*

Let us conclude with an Advent Prayer:

O God, the Almighty One, on that first Christmas night, you broke the borders between heaven and earth and entered our world. Through the coming of the baby Jesus, born in the manger, you revealed your Loving Plan to guide us, carefully and patiently, back to the Eternal Truth that You had shared with our first parents, Adam and Eve, before they turned against you in pride and in sin.

Dear Jesus, you are the very Word of God, introduced to us by your Beloved Disciple John, as “a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower.”

No longer are we condemned to wander in darkness or the desert in search of You, O God, for you have no intention of leaving us alone and disoriented. You gave us your only Son to

atone for our sins by sacrificing His own life, to rise from the dead so that we too could have life forever, and to nourish us during our time here on this earth through the miraculous gift of the Holy Eucharist.

We are sadly mistaken if we think that we could approach the Christmas crib as disinterested bystanders that we could “put away” Christmas after the last gifts have been exchanged and the crèche and tree have been dismantled. For us, Christmas is the beginning – not the end – of a journey, of developing an ever-deepening relationship with that Babe in the manger who grew into our brother Jesus and invited us to follow Him.

O Jesus, during these sacred days of the Christmas feast, we remember the Divine Love and Grace that you brought into the world. Just as you did, help us to share our love, our solidarity, our generosity with all our neighbors, both near and far, but, most especially those who are the poorest and most marginalized, those migrant families who are knocking on the doors of our countries, cities, and villages.

We make this prayer through our Emmanuel, God-with-us, who lives and reigns with you, Almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. AMEN.