

“Mutual Contributions and Benefits: Integrating Migrants in Host Societies”

High-level event on Migration and Integration

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*Spoken word applies!
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Participation and inclusion:

the commitment of the Catholic Church to integration

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I address this meeting of distinguished representatives.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the UN in Geneva, the Permanent Mission of the Order of Malta, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), Caritas Internationalis and the Caritas in Veritate Foundation for having organized this event.

Since our gathering takes place on the side-lines of the 108th Council of the International Organization of Migration (IOM), I would also like to extend my best regards and wishes to the delegates and participants of the IOM council.

I.

In our time, religious and political leaders alike have an increased responsibility to address urging matters of integration. At the UN General Assembly in September 2016 the heads of state and government gave a pledge to develop “national policies relating to integration [...] in conjunction with relevant civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations”.¹ At the same time,

¹ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 September 2016, *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, 39

they initiated an important consultation and negotiation process which aims at the achievement of two global compacts in 2018: one on refugees, the other on safe, orderly and regular migration. The issue of integration is at the heart of many of the questions that will be dealt with in this context. I can assure you that the Catholic Church is more than willing to make significant contributions to these efforts – both at national and global levels.

As controversial as our discussions about the most promising integration policies may be: they should be guided by a clear idea of participation and inclusion. What does that mean?

In his message for the world day of migrants and refugees 2018 Pope Francis calls for “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.”² That is to say, we are summoned to promote the development of every person – irrespective of their specific status.

Such an approach requires a far-reaching change of perception: Migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees should not be regarded as passive suppliants begging for favours. Instead, we should – more often than not – see them as persons who dare a new beginning, who are eager to advance the well-being of themselves, of their families and of the communities they live in.

II.

Most people easily agree on three keys to successful integration: language, education and work. But we have to do more than just paying lip-service to uncontroversial general claims. Judging from the situation in my country I have the impression that there is by and large a sufficient degree of good-will. Yet, when it comes to taking tangible steps, there are often still too many obstacles and hurdles: migrants sink into frustration or even hopelessness because they are not granted access to adequate language and integration courses or to higher

² Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018

education and training programs; because they face grave difficulties with the validation of their educational and professional qualifications; because they are not given a fair chance in the labour market.

One source of problems in this area is the distinction between those who are expected to stay for a longer period of time and those who are anticipated to leave in the foreseeable future. In some instances this distinction may be justified. But whenever it is possible we should strive to overcome it. Those who return home after a while can utilize the skills and experience gained in our country for the benefit of their societies. In this manner, measures which were originally meant to enhance integration in our country can also have a favourable effect on the development of other countries. What matters is that every person is given a real opportunity to advance and use their skills and competencies, whether they live in a society temporarily or permanently.

This is not simply a question of prudence but also of principle. By engaging in meaningful activities we make use of our God-given abilities and even take part in the work of creation. As Pope John Paul II expressed in his encyclical *Laborem exercens*: “Man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator”³. Catholic social teaching thus makes us sensitive to the wider anthropological dimension: If we truly recognize every person’s dignity, we cannot force them to live in passivity and without their families.

III.

The genuine empowerment of migrants is a decisive step towards successful integration. There is, however, more to the idea of participation and inclusion. What is essential is some sense of belonging, a consciousness of being part of a community. Both among the local population and among migrants a shared responsibility for the common good needs to evolve. Such a joint commitment

³ Pope John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 25

must go beyond the basic requirement of law-abidance. It has to be driven by mutual recognition and mutual esteem.

The host society can certainly expect migrants to respect its values and to appreciate its heritage – but this should not be a one-way road. Rather, members of the host society on their part ought to receive migrants with sincere appreciation. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis characterizes such an attitude as “a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis.”⁴ To this end, a mutual readiness to become acquainted with so far unknown perspectives, experiences and customs is necessary. Just like the success of integration processes is the fruit of two-sided efforts, there is also a mutual momentum in the failure of integration. That is to say, in many cases failed integration cannot solely be attributed to a lack of willingness on the side of migrants. Rather, the host society as well needs to ask itself whether it is making sufficient efforts to value foreigners – sometimes in spite of differences, sometimes because of them.

To be sure, such an attitude of “generous openness” must not be confused with naiveté or relativism. The respect of the dignity of every human being, the right to life and physical integrity, the equality of men and women, freedom of religion and freedom of expression – these are some of the core values which are not up for negotiation but which are the very prerequisites for an inclusive society. Nor should “generous openness” be taken to imply the denial of one’s own cultural and religious roots: When Europeans receive migrants from other parts of the world there is no reason to understate the strong imprint which Christianity has had – and still has – on the identity of our continent.

However, one needs to resist the tendency of turning positive identities into negative identities: At times, the recourse to human rights or to Christianity or

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 210

to other elements constitutive of our societies is simply misused as an instrument of exclusion. This happens when the values we rightfully cherish are not brought to life in an inviting and inspiring manner but are treated as rigid demarcation lines: ‘This is us and that is you – and between us there is an insurmountable trench.’ Such discourses of separation are typically the symptom of a deep uncertainty about one’s own identity and belonging. Whenever tendencies of segregation occur, be they mental or material, the “Church is called to be at the service of a difficult dialogue”⁵, to quote from Pope Francis.

IV.

The challenge we are facing is, as a matter of fact, integration in a wide-ranging sense. Participation and inclusion are of concern not only for newly arriving immigrants but also for citizens and long-time residents. In our European societies a significant number of people do not experience themselves as valued members of a community and do not feel empowered to contribute to the common good.

It is against this background that the German bishops gave a clear assurance in their *Guidelines for the Church’s commitment to refugees*: “The Church defends the interests of all disadvantaged people. The Church’s commitment to the many people who are marginalized within our society is to be continued with unreduced energy.”⁶ The Church’s manifold activities in the field of migration must be regarded as part and parcel of a comprehensive commitment to the well-being of society. We have to oppose any tendencies of playing off one marginalized group against another.

People in need should feel assured that the Church is at their side, regardless of their origin and background. But the challenge is even more vexing: Those who feel threatened by migration and those who engage in a discourse of separation

⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 74

⁶ German bishops’ conference, *Guidelines for the German Catholic Church’s commitment to refugees*, p. 7

are not always and necessarily the ones who have really been left behind. In some instances, we can detect a worrying attitude among the established and well-to-do: an inclination to defend one's own cultural and economic privileges at the cost of nurturing prejudices against migrants and disparaging people in search of protection. I think it is no exaggeration to perceive in such a hardening of hearts the signs of an ethical and even spiritual drought. This language of exclusion has always in history been - and is also today - dangerous for a common future of our societies.

V.

When sentiments of a shared humanity are lacking, the Church must not remain silent. As Pope Francis reminds us, our Christian commitment is driven by a deeper spiritual motivation: "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."⁷ We live up to this call not only through words but also through concrete action.

The numerous Christians all over the world who are committed to the needs of migrants and refugees testify to a living "culture of acceptance and solidarity". In Germany more than 100,000 Catholic volunteers and approximately 6,000 employees of Catholic organisations are active in this field. The commitment of Church initiatives and civil society groups is not intended to replace government efforts. But many a times such grass-root activities succeed in something that cannot be mandated by law: They create spaces of encounter where people experience personal care and affection.

One particularly interesting approach in this regard is the strengthening of practical interreligious cooperation. In 2016 the German bishops' conference contributed to launching a nationwide program which fosters the cooperation of

⁷ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 101st World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2015

Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. The underlying idea is that members of local synagogues, church parishes and mosques join forces in giving aid to refugees and in promoting integration. Such models of cooperation face, without a doubt, challenges and difficulties; but they are worth every effort.

VI.

Experience teaches us that true solidarity requires empathy: Those who have never been forced to leave their homeland are called to see the world through the eyes of the other. And such a change of perspective must not result in fatalism or indifference but has to give rise to a willingness to promote the inclusion of those on the margins. As Catholics, we belong to a Church of all languages and peoples. We are convinced that the definition of the common good of a given society may never be detached from the common good of the entire human family.⁸ In order to promote this objective – even in anxious times – international cooperation and international exchange are more necessary than ever before. And in this sense we as Christians want to be part of the solution not part of the problem.

Thank you very much for your attention.

⁸ Cf. Pope John XIII, *Pacem in terris*