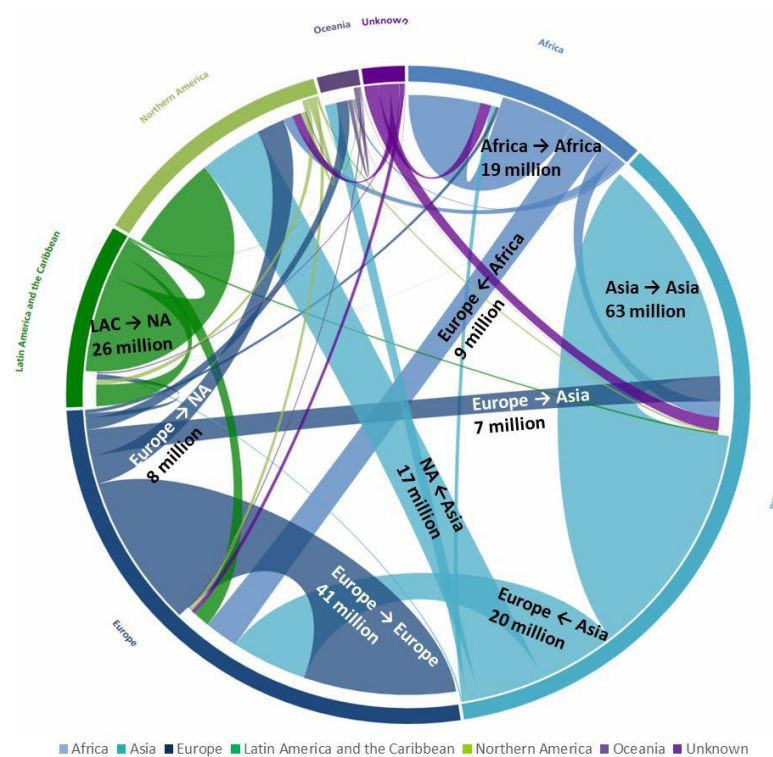


Families: Hidden Majority among Migrants

By Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo
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Did you ever search for the number of families among migrants and refugees? I spent a significant amount of time doing so in preparation for our discussion today – but I met with little success. Then I had an “aha” moment and downloaded the 2017 International Migration Report of the United Nations¹ - surely this would solve my dilemma. I found one reference to “family” in the report and five references to “families”, but none of them offered any insight into how many migrant and refugee

¹http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf

families there are in today's world. As you can see from my opening slide, this international report parsed and divided migrants by way of gender, their regional places of origin and destination, age ranges, educational background, etc., etc., etc., but made no reference to the social reality to which the clear majority of migrants are inextricably connected – their families.



Why should I be so interested in the number of migrant and refugee families ... other than the fact that I was preparing this discussion with this distinguished audience? The answer is simple but telling. In my experience, both in providing direct social and pastoral services to refugees and migrants in many settings throughout the world and in managing a number of faith-based organizations serving hundreds of thousands of people on the move, I never have met a migrant who did

not give evidence of a deep connection to her or his family – the connections were vibrant, palpable, and omnipresent.



Many were accompanied by family members on their journey. Others had been sent by their families to save their own lives, but also to be the hope of future survival and, better yet, of wellbeing, for many other family members. They shared memories – both painful and intimate - with me, for example, the Sri Lankan woman who came to my office last week. She was here in Geneva for this current session of the UN Human Rights Council. She speaks none of the UN’s official languages but she comes in silent but strong witness to the disappearance of her son – a casualty to ethnic hatred and violence. With the help of an interpreter, she told me without the slightest hesitation that it was my duty as a Catholic priest and

Director of a Catholic-inspired organization to help her son, since it was my Church who taught him to stand up for his dignity and rights, and because of that Teaching he had been stolen from his family. I tried to offer comforting words of solidarity, to refer her to Special Rapporteurs or UN Representatives far more powerful and influential than myself – but I quickly realized that only a reunion with her son could bring her solace and hope.



As steadfastly as this mother held on to her conviction that she will find her son, so, too, a Syrian woman served by my organization, rejected the possibility of a new and safe future because of “unfinished business” in her home country. She had escaped to Lebanon, and the International Catholic Migration Commission, at which I am privileged to serve, successfully processed her application for family reunification with her brother in the United States. When the time for travel arrived, this woman

told us she could not leave – we were shocked by this decision – isn't this what she had hoped for? Yes, indeed, she responded, but then she shared with us that her daughter had been killed when a bomb struck their home in Syria. The church cemetery, where her daughter should have been buried, already had been destroyed. She therefore placed her daughter in another cemetery, but she was committed to return home once the war came to an end, and to rebuild the cemetery of her local church, so she could finally lay her daughter to rest in holy ground.



Today, because of modern epidemics of xenophobia, racism, and populist movements, families of migrants and refugees are being vilified and ridiculed as terrorists, thieves, and bearers of infection. When parents make the desperate decision to send their children as unaccompanied

migrants, they are criticized as irresponsible, when, in fact, they do so as a last resort to save these children from starvation, or gang violence, from systemic rape, or from conscription by extremist groups. When other parents flee with their children, in some countries where they seek refuge, authorities forcibly separate the family unit and thus transform a hope of safety into a nightmare of even greater insecurity trauma, and fear.



The scientific literature is full of evidence that families are the stabilizing factors for the successful integration among refugees and

migrants and for the contributions and values that they share with the societies that welcome them, or that they can carry back to their home countries, when they can safely do so. I encountered strong and passionate confirmation of that scientific literature when I visited our Resettlement Support Centre in Turkey, I sat in on a Cultural Education class for the child refugees who soon would be moving to the United States with their parents. They shared some fanciful young dreams about what their new homes would be like – but also every one of the drawings, prepared by them, contained not only self-portraits but every single member of their families. I had diligently sought permission from their parents to have my photo taken with their children, and that was readily given. However, as I stood among the children, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the parents had left their own classroom to take part in this photo with the ICMC Secretary General!



I believe that Pope Francis offers us the key to converting families from a hidden or ignored majority among refugees and migrants to a valued and respected pillar in societies that are willing to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate them:

*"Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chess-board of humanity. They are children, women and men 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."*²

² Pope Francis, Message for the 100th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html