Vatican

Francis, the comic strip



An internally displaced Somali woman and her children prepare their meal at a makeshift camp in Mogadishu, Somalia, May 8, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Feisal Omar)

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The sad reality of people displaced within the borders of their own country, a crisis that has been ignored for far too long, is an opportunity for Christians to encounter Jesus, Pope Francis said.

"In each of these people, forced to flee to safety, Jesus is present as he was at the time of Herod. In the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, strangers and prisoners, we are called to see the face of Christ who pleads with us to help," the pope wrote in his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2020.

"If we can recognize him in those faces, we will be the ones to thank him for having been able to meet, love and serve him in them," he said.

The Vatican will mark World Day of Migrants and Refugees Sept. 27 with the theme: "Forced like Jesus Christ to flee."

During a livestreamed news conference May 15, Cardinal Michael Czerny, undersecretary for the Vatican's Migrants and Refugees Section, said that this year's focus on internally displaced persons is a continuation of Francis' teachings that center on "the discarded, the forgotten, the set aside."

The pope's message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees "is an invitation to discover them, to discover that they exist and that they are here among us; in our own country, in our own diocese, in our own parish," the cardinal said.

According to the 2020 Global Report on Internal Displacement, there are an estimated 50.8 million internally displaced persons worldwide. Among them, there are 45.7 million displaced due to conflict and violence and 5.1 million who were forced to move because of disasters.

However, Czerny said, it is yet to be seen "how much the COVID-19 pandemic is a driver of internal displacement."

In his message, the pope said the sufferings endured by internally displaced persons have only been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the light of the tragic events that have marked 2020, I would like this message, although concerned with internally displaced persons, to embrace all those who are experiencing situations of precariousness, abandonment, marginalization and rejection as a result of COVID-19," he wrote.

Recalling the day's theme, the pope said that Jesus, Mary and Joseph experienced the same "tragic fate" of the displaced and refugees, a fate "marked by fear, uncertainty and unease."

Displaced people, he said, "offer us this opportunity to meet the Lord, even though our eyes find it hard to recognize him: his clothing in tatters, his feet dirty, his face disfigured, his body wounded, his tongue unable to speak our language."

Reflecting on the pastoral challenge to "welcome, protect, promote and integrate" migrants, the pope said he wished to expand on those verbs to further explain the church's mission.

The pope said that the precariousness experienced by many today due to the pandemic "is a constant in the lives of displaced people," and "all too often we stop at statistics" and fail to understand the suffering of those on the margins.

"But it is not about statistics, it is about real people!" he said. "If we encounter them, we will get to know more about them. And knowing their stories, we will be able to understand them."

To be close to displaced persons, he continued, means to serve them and not turn them away due to fear and prejudices that "often prevent us from becoming neighbors."

Sharing, an essential element of Christian life, is another important aspect that allows for men and women to "grow together, leaving no one behind," the pope said.

"The pandemic has reminded us how we are all in the same boat," he said. "Realizing that we have the same concerns and fears has shown us once more that no one can be saved alone," he said.

The pope said the coronavirus pandemic also serves as a reminder of the importance of co-responsibility and that in order "to promote those whom we assist, we must involve them and make them agents in their own redemption."

"To preserve our common home and make it conform more and more to God's original plan, we must commit ourselves to ensuring international cooperation, global solidarity and local commitment, leaving no one excluded," the pope said.

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