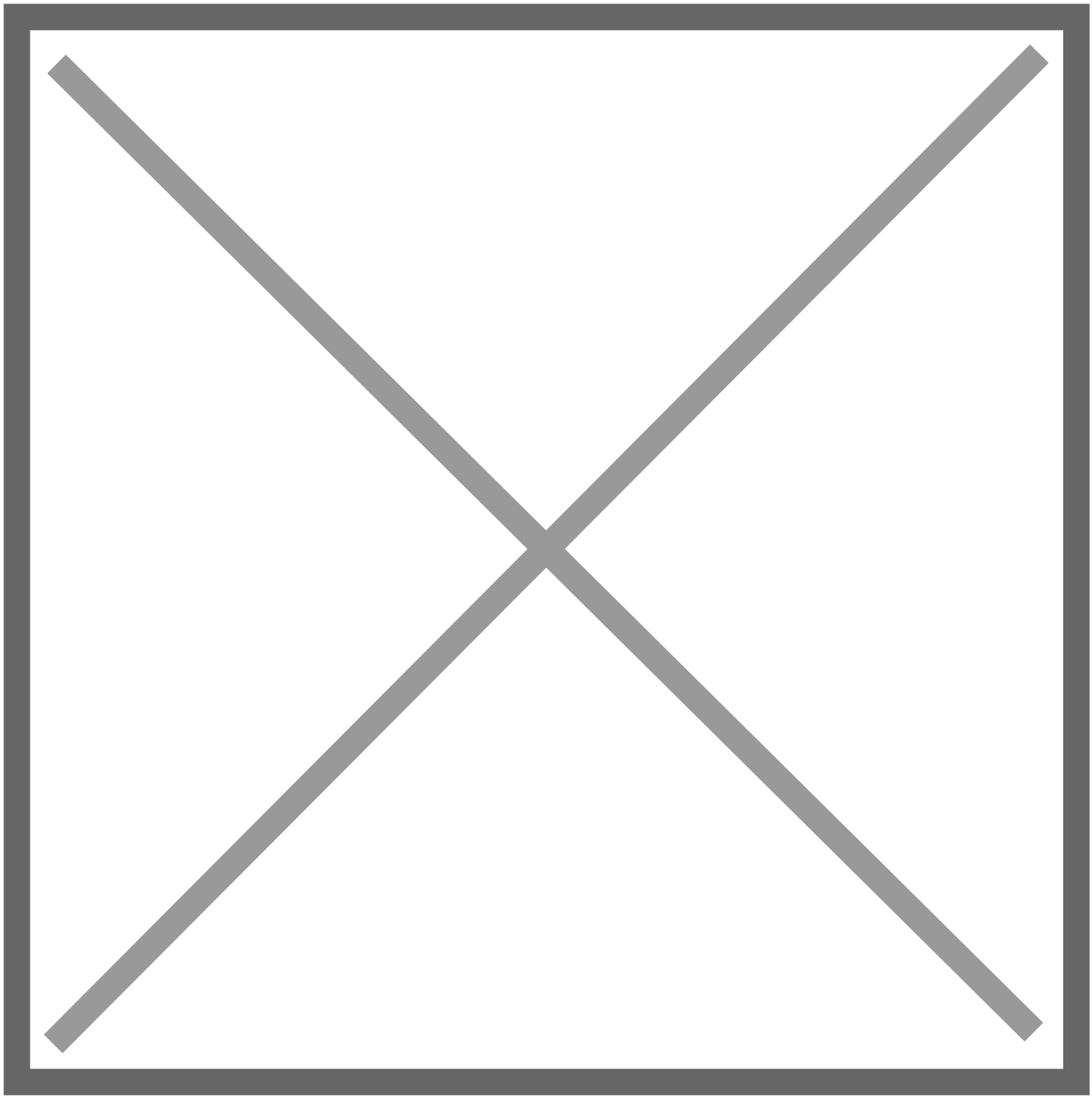
Vatican
Francis, the comic strip



Pope Francis leads an audience with activists raising awareness about the plight of unaccompanied refugee minors, at the Vatican Sept. 10, 2021. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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When pilgrims pass through Rome along their long trek, they do not always get to meet Pope Francis much less get an "undersized" handshake.

But "Little Amal," an 11-foot puppet who is on a 5,000-mile pilgrimage from the Syrian border through eight countries to the United Kingdom, got to offer the pope her enormous hand, which he welcomed by grasping one finger.

Supported by her puppet masters and surrounded by hundreds of kids in the Vatican's San Damaso Courtyard of the Apostolic Palace, Little Amal arrived in Rome Sept. 10 after leaving the Syrian-Turkish border July 27. She was due to reach Manchester in early November.

Little Amal represents an unaccompanied 9-year-old Syrian refugee girl who is looking for her mother and hoping to start a new life.

"Will the world let her?" "How will you welcome Amal?" are some of the questions being asked of those who encounter her, according to organizers who want to highlight the vulnerability and the potential of displaced children and unaccompanied minors fleeing war or hardship.

According to the project's web site, WalkWithAmal.org, she is 11 feet tall "because we want the world to grow big enough to greet her. We want her to inspire us to think big and to act bigger," said Amir Nizar Zuabi, the artistic director of this unique

outdoor "public art project" called "The Walk" and starring Amal, whose name means "hope."

Everywhere Little Amal goes, hundreds of communities and individual artists welcome her with organized projects, festivals and cultural performances of music, theater and dance. The aim is to tell the stories of those who are often marginalized, feared or pitied and help promote dialogue and collaboration, according to the website.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, undersecretary for migrants and refugees at the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, welcomed Little Amal in St. Peter's Square, together with representatives of the Diocese of Rome, Rome's Caritas, volunteers and kids, who came together to make a kite.

In his greeting, the cardinal said the Bible says, "Do not forget hospitality; some, practicing it, have welcomed angels without knowing it."

"It is up to us to welcome and protect (migrants and refugees) as the first essential steps toward promoting their integral human development, which is the kind of future we all want," he said.

Then, to see the pope, Little Amal joined hundreds of kids who are part of the national Caritas Italy project "APRI," which, since it began in 2020, has welcomed and integrated more than 600 migrants and refugees into local communities.

Little Amal will cross the same waterways and cities countless other migrants travel, carrying the message, "Do not forget about us," and galvanizing support for safer passage and integration for refugees.

Made by the Handspring Puppet Company, Little Amal was crafted from molded from natural cane and carbon fiber by dozens of artists, and she needs four puppeteers to help her come to life, including animating her eyes and face.

People can follow her journey on Facebook and Instagram at walkwithamal, and Twitter @walkwithamal.

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