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People evacuated from Afghanistan step off a bus as they arrive at a processing center Aug. 23 in Chantilly, after arriving on a flight at Dulles International Airport. (AP/Andrew Harnik)



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During his visit to Hungary, Pope Francis urged that country to "extend its arms toward everyone." This was a not-so-subtle challenge to Hungary's Viktor Orban, the far-right autocrat, and other nativist Europeans who want to keep refugees and immigrants out of Europe. Needless to say, it is also a challenge to Americans who would like to pretend this is not our concern.

The pope made the request during his Sept. 12 visit to Hungary and repeated the message on the following days while visiting Slovakia.

While the anti-immigrant frenzy is disrupting Europe, Francis stands almost alone as politicians either join the frenzy or run for cover.

This is Francis at his prophetic best. He is standing up for the marginalized who have been bloodied by war, starved by famine and displaced by persecution. Nor is he speaking out only for his own flock — most of these refugees and immigrants are non-Christians.

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According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, there were 82.4 million refugees at the end of 2020. This is double the number in 2010 and does not even include the 55 million who are internally displaced in their own countries.

Most of the refugees come from countries torn apart by civil wars, like Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Sudan, the Central African Republic and Eritrea. These countries also have large numbers of internally displaced people as do Ethiopia, Mozambique and Burkina Faso.

These man-made catastrophes are worsened by climate change, as floods and droughts threaten the embattled regions.

The country with the most refugees is Turkey, which has been inundated with those fleeing Syria. Other countries with large refugee populations include Colombia (from Venezuela), Germany, Pakistan and Uganda.

Solving the refugee crisis should not center on building walls and fences or turning back boats of refugees in the Mediterranean. The international community, with U.S. leadership, needs to deal with the roots of the crisis in the conflicts that make the refugees' countries unlivable.



Pope Francis meets with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. (RNS/Vatican Media)

Rather than sending troops and weapons, which make matters worse, what is needed is an army of diplomats and nongovernmental organizations trained in conflict resolution and peacemaking. Killing people, especially through "collateral damage," simply recruits more people for the conflicts.

True peace also requires justice. A just society, Francis said during his trip, is one that allows "each person to receive the bread of employment, so that none will feel marginalized or constrained to leave family and homeland in search of a better life."

If even a small percentage of the trillions of dollars spent on arms were dedicated instead to fostering peace and justice, the world would be a safer place with fewer refugees.

Reducing conflicts and fostering development is the long-term solution to the refugee crisis, but we also need short-term solutions to care for existing refugees.

The process for clearing Afghans who worked with Americans, for example as translators, has been abysmally slow, often taking three years. If American military officers or other government supervisors who were on the ground in Afghanistan vouch for someone, they should be fast-tracked through the process as long as they are not in a terrorist database.

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Second, the United States needs to increase the number of refugees allowed into our country. Currently, the quota is 62,500, up from 15,000 under President Donald Trump. The number should be at least raised to 85,000, what it was in 2016. The president can do this on his own authority.

What he cannot do without Congress is allocate money to assist the religious and other NGOs, like the bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, who help refugees resettle and become productive citizens. Congress needs to pass the $6.4 billion requested by the president for resettling 95,000 Afghan refugees.

Third, the United States and the European Union need to help countries like Turkey and Colombia that are bearing the heaviest burden of harboring refugees from their neighbors.

The cross of Christ "raises and extends its arms towards everyone," Francis said in Hungary, where anti-immigrant feelings run high. It is our Christian duty to be welcoming.

"All of us are frail and in need of others," Francis said in Slovakia. "None can stand apart, either as individuals or as a nation." This is what is meant by solidarity.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Hungary and Slovakia** feature series. View the full series.