Vatican



Pope Francis gestures as he looks at artwork presented by a journalist on his flight from Rome to Malta April 2, 2022. The pope was beginning a two-day trip to the Mediterranean archipelago. (Paul Haring/CNS)



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Valletta, Malta — April 3, 2022

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Pope Francis wrapped up his two-day trip to the Mediterranean island of Malta on April 3 by telling the deeply Christian country that once welcomed the Apostle Paul to recover today that same spirit of hospitality by welcoming new arrivals from Africa and the Middle East.

"Those same people we see on crowded boats or adrift in the sea, on our televisions or in the newspapers, could be any one of us, or our sons or daughters," the pope said while meeting some 200 migrants from Libya, Nigeria, Senegal and Ukraine, among other countries, here in Malta.

"Since the day I visited Lampedusa, I have not forgotten you," the pope said, recalling his very first papal trip outside of Rome in 2013. There, he blasted the "globalization of indifference" toward the plight of migrants and refugees and cemented migration as one of the signature issues of his papacy.

"You are always in my heart and in my prayers," Francis said on Sunday.

The pope's remarks came at a Maltese refugee welcome center on a trip bookended by face-to-face encounters from those still reeling from having to flee their homelands.

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Prior to leaving the Vatican on Saturday, April 2, the pope met with refugees who had recently arrived in Rome after fleeing the war in Ukraine. In Malta, on Sunday, April 3, the pope heard first-hand testimonials from both a Libyan and Nigerian who had been rescued at sea.

As the pope made his way into the welcome center, crowds of onlookers gathered to express their support for refugees, including chants of "close the sky over Ukraine" and "protect our children."

"There are people whose asylum claim has been rejected yet still cannot go back to their country of origin as it is still dangerous for them to do so," said Siriman

Colibaly, who is currently living with his wife in Malta after fleeing Libya. "These are not just stories and numbers, but they are us, people in flesh and blood, faces — some with broken dreams, others who have managed to achieve them."

Francis responded by saying that in the same way that many migrants like Colibaly have dreams of safer and more stable lives, that, as pope, he had a dream that migrants would experience greater welcome and kindness throughout the world — a kindness that he said he hopes they would then share with others.

"I believe it is most important that in today's world migrants become witnesses of those human values essential for a dignified and fraternal life," Francis told them. "They are values that you hold in your hearts, values that are part of your root."



People hold the Ukrainian flag as they wait for the start of Pope Francis' celebration of Mass at the Granaries in Floriana, Malta, April 3, 2022. (Paul Haring/CNS)

Throughout the day on Sunday, the pope reflected on the life of the Apostle Paul, who was a refugee in Malta for three months after being shipwrecked on the island. Here, according to the Gospel of Luke, he was met with "extraordinary hospitality"

by the locals who encountered him.

"Shipwreck is something that thousands of men, women and children have experienced in the Mediterranean in recent years. Sadly, for many of them, it ended in tragedy," Francis said during the meeting at the Pope John XXIII Peace Lab, which continues to provide hospitality and shelter for the recent new migrant arrivals to the country, despite the Maltese government's insistence to the European Union that country can longer accept more refugees.

"Yet in these events we see another kind of shipwreck taking place: the shipwreck of civilization, which threatens not only migrants but us all," he continued. "How can we save ourselves from this shipwreck which risks sinking the ship of our civilization? By conducting ourselves with kindness and humanity. By regarding people not merely as statistics."

Before meeting with the migrants, Francis celebrated an outdoor Mass for an estimated 12,000 pilgrims and visited the grotto where St. Paul stayed during his time in Malta about 60 A.D.

"Help us recognize from afar those in need, struggling amidst the waves of the sea," the pope prayed while in the grotto.

In recent years, several thousand new arrivals have been rescued at sea and disembarked in Malta, but, according to Sara Zingariello of Jesuit Refugee Services Malta, there have been no new arrivals in 2022 due to a controversial agreement between Malta and Libya.

In exchange for more funding from Europe, Libya has agreed to ramp up its efforts to stem the flow of those attempting to cross from Africa and Europe. Consequently, an increasing number of refugees are detained at sea and returned to their countries of origin, often with limited legal recourse and with great threat to their personal health and safety.

Zingariello told NCR that she believed the pope's short stay in Malta could serve as a reminder of the country's legacy of hospitality.

"I think this is a message of hope and, then insistence on having our arms and our hearts open," she said. "It should be an opportunity for us as a Maltese society to reflect on this message and to reflect on our own understanding of migration."

While she acknowledged that the issue of migration always brings with it "natural fears and challenges," she believes there is a "way to move forward that respects everyone’s rights."

As the pope bid farewell to the migrants before returning to Rome, that was his message, as well.

"It is my hope that Malta will always treat those who land on its shores, offering them a genuinely 'safe harbor,'" said Francis.

This story appears in the **Pope Francis in Malta** feature series. View the full series.