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Pope Francis greets immigrants as he arrives at the port in Lampedusa, Italy, July 8, 2013. (CNS/Tullio Puglia, pool)



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When Pope Francis visited Lampedusa in July 2013, few people had ever heard of the tiny Italian island. Ten years later, however, it has become synonymous with his papacy.

While the visit itself lasted only half a day, the message the pope preached over just a few hours on the sweltering hot morning of July 8, 2013, set a tone for his young pontificate when he blasted what he called a "culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people."

On an altar made of a painted boat, the pope celebrated a penitential Mass to mourn migrants lost at sea in search of a better future, lamenting that the world had neglected their plight. That year alone, some 8,000 migrants and asylum seekers had arrived at Lampedusa — an island closer to North Africa than it is to Italy — with at least 500 reported dead or missing the year before.

"In this globalized world, we have fallen into globalized indifference," said Francis. "We have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business!"

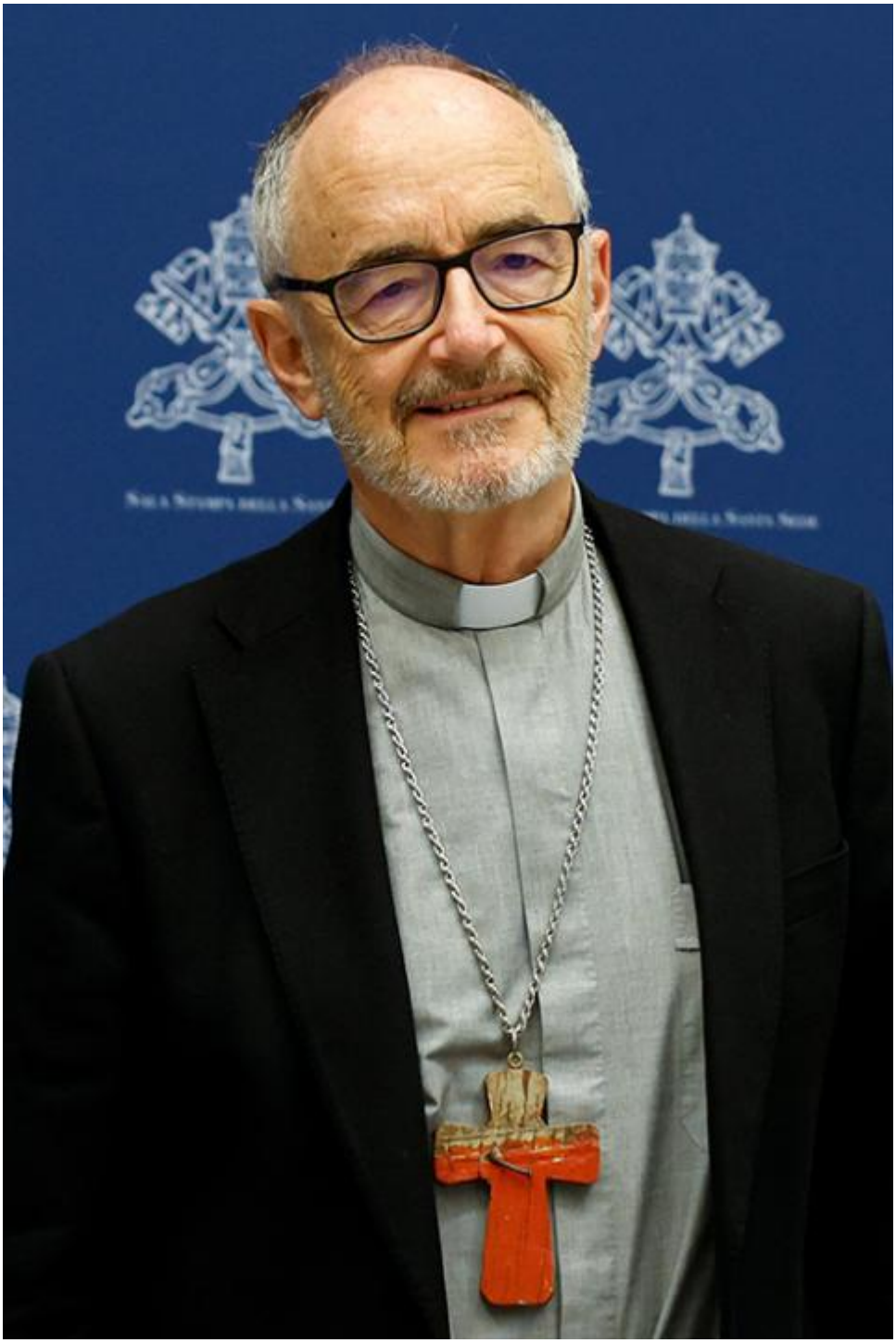


A wreath of flowers thrown by Pope Francis floats in the Mediterranean Sea in the waters off the Italian island of Lampedusa on July 8, 2013. The pope threw the wreath to honor the memory of immigrants who have died trying to cross from Africa to reach a new life in Europe. (CNS/Paul Haring)

But in choosing to use his first trip outside of Rome since his election earlier that year — and the media attention that accompanied such a significant event — to put a spotlight on a situation that had been ignored, Francis was insisting that those who call themselves Christians are obligated to respond.

"Let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty of our world, of our own hearts, and of all those who in anonymity make social and economic decisions which open the door to tragic situations like this," he prayed. "Has anyone wept? Today has anyone wept in our world?"

Ten years later, that consequential visit has become a seminal reference point for Catholic social teaching and call to action for the church and governments alike.



Cardinal Michael Czerny wears a pectoral cross created from the remains of a boat used by migrants attempting to reach Lampedusa. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

"Pope Francis put Lampedusa, the Mediterranean and the vulnerable migrants on the agenda in the most dramatic way imaginable," said Jesuit Cardinal Michael Czerny.

"Not only did he put this issue into the heart of this pontificate but he used it to teach about marginalization, about the many different people — not just migrants — who are rendered invisible and therefore rejected," he told NCR.

Czerny, who in 2016 was tapped by Francis as one of two undersecretaries of the Vatican office for migrants and refugees — a department that reported directly to the pope — said that the 10-year anniversary of the pope's Lampedusa visit presents "a really sad paradox."

"Ordinary people, good people, Christians, believers of other traditions, nonbelieving citizens have responded with creativity and generosity and made the welcome, protection, promotion and integration of migrants as part of their daily lives," he said.

"On the other hand, the governments responsible for the Mediterranean — all the shores, not just the European ones, but also the North African and Middle Eastern ones — these governments have succumbed to other pressures, other priorities, other false values and they're not, in fact, expressing goodwill of their people," said Czerny.

> 'The cry of the pope in Lampedusa was the beginning of everything. We started after his call for responsibility to consider how to respond.'
>
> —Monica Attias
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Among those "ordinary people" who jumped into action following the pope's visit was Regina Catrambone who, along with her husband, Christopher, founded the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, better known as MOAS, soon after the pope's 2013 visit.

At the time, there was practically no civil society response to the number of migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe. The Catrambones believed they could help. They soon began using their own boats and drone technology to rescue those at risk of drowning at sea. Over time, with additional support, technology and funding, the organization has rescued some 40,000 people

in distress from the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea.

Catrambone credits the pope's Lampedusa visit as the inspiration for their work.



A Syrian migrant child is helped by members of MOAS, Migrant Offshore Aid Station, a Malta-based organization, to board the rescue vessel on the Aegean Sea between the eastern Greek Island of Agathonisi and the Turkish shores, Thursday, March 3, 2016. (AP/Lefteris Pitarakis)

"To know that the chief of our church wanted to direct attention to the most desperate people who are risking their lives and dying in our sea at the doors of Europe, was the best thing the pope could do," she told NCR. "He's the good pastor who leaves the sheep behind to go look for the lost sheep."

She recalled the pope lamenting, during his visit to Lampedusa, the "globalized indifference" toward migrants. "With MOAS," she said, "we wanted to create a globalization of solidarity."

Similarly, following a series of shipwrecks off the coast of Lampedusa and the pope's visit, the Community of Sant'Egidio — a Catholic social service organization based in Rome — created the Humanitarian Corridors program, which vets asylum seekers and works with governments to secure humanitarian visas to help migrants avoid perilous sea crossings.

The first program was launched in 2016 for Syrian and Iraqi refugees from Lebanon and has since been expanded to Ethiopia, Greece, Cyprus, Afghanistan and Libya. Refugees are then provided language classes, education and housing through various partner organizations.



Refugees hold a banner reading "Humanitarian Corridors" in Italian and Greek upon their arrival at Fiumicino airport, Wednesday, Dec. 4, 2019. Thirty-three refugees coming from Afghanistan, Cameroon and Togo arrived in Rome from the Greek island of Lesbos, thanks to Sant'Egidio's "Humanitarian Corridors" project. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

To date, Sant'Egidio estimates more than 6,000 lives have been saved through the program.

"These individuals have been destroyed and their lives have to be reconstructed," said Monica Attias, coordinator of the Humanitarian Corridors program for Afghanistan.

"The cry of the pope in Lampedusa was the beginning of everything," she told NCR. "We started after his call for responsibility to consider how to respond."

Today, Attias observed, there is a need and a desire to scale up the program as the loss of lives in the central and eastern Mediterranean is getting worse. While the governments of Belgium and France have added their support to the program — and negotiations in Germany and Spain are underway — she said more goodwill is needed.



Msgr. Robert Vitillo speaks during a high-level side event Sept. 19, 2016, at the United Nations on the role of religious organizations in responding to the refugee and migration crisis. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Msgr. Robert Vitillo, secretary general of the International Catholic Migration Commission, recalled that it was the pope's Lampedusa visit that not only gave hope but new dynamism to the Catholic Church's advocacy efforts on migration.

Vitillo pointed especially to the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees and Global Compact for Migration, which was endorsed by the United Nations with more than 150 countries voting in favor of its call to have fair, just and regular migration policies.

Ahead of the compact negotiations, the Vatican's then-newly-created office for migrants and refugees convened a gathering of bishops' conferences and church advocacy groups and drafted 20 action points that they would like to see included in the compacts.

"It was remarkable how much of that language was included," Vitillo recalled. "The pope's leadership in this really bore fruit as we were negotiating compacts."

Unfortunately, he noted, "many countries have not implemented these compacts and are falling back on allowing people fleeing their home countries from being able to safely seek asylum in other countries."

Czerny, who now leads the Vatican's Dicastery for Integral Human Development, also lamented that too many governments have sought to weaponize the experience of migrants and refugees.

"They're fomenting xenophobia for short-term political gain and this is very, very sad," he said. "Hopefully, on this 10th anniversary, this can start to be reversed."

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Czerny, who wears a pectoral cross created from the remains of a boat used by migrants attempting to reach Lampedusa, says that the message of Lampedusa is "to open our eyes, our heart, and also our hands."

"I feel that Lampedusa — the word, the symbol, the memory — became the way of expressing many of the dimensions that the Holy Father was trying to highlight by his visit and by his subsequent magisterium and his words and deeds," he added.

Vitillo recalled that the Catholic Church has long stood on the side of migrants, noting that the organization he runs, the International Catholic Migration Commission, was created by Pope Pius XII to help resettle refugees after the Second World War.

This papacy has gone even further, with Francis himself, in 2016, leading by example by personally bringing migrants to Italy after visiting a refugee camp in

Lesbos, Greece, in what has been described as an unprecedented humanitarian gesture.



Syrian refugees travel on Pope Francis' flight from the Greek island of Lesbos to Rome April 16, 2016. The pope concluded his one-day visit to Greece by bringing 12 Syrian refugees aboard his flight to Italy. (CNS/Courtesy of Antonio Spadaro, SJ)

"When you see a pope resettling refugees and ensuring their welcome, protection and integration through his own initiative, this brings great hope," said Vitillo.

According to Vitillo, this 10-year anniversary of the pope's visit to Lampedusa — which falls in the shadow of yet another Mediterranean shipwreck off the coast of Greece where hundreds of migrants lost their lives — is a time for countries to remember the commitments they gave made when it comes to respecting, protecting and welcoming migrants and refugees.

"This is an occasion to loudly and firmly reconfirm, as the pope has repeatedly said, that we cannot continue to have the Mediterranean ocean — or the deserts and the mountains in so many parts of the world — become cemeteries," he said.

"The message of Lampedusa is more needed now than ever before," Vitillo added. "And marking this anniversary has to be more than just a memorial of the pope's visit there."

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