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Pope Francis and a priest wearing white stand in front of metal statue of a mass of people. A

Pope Francis shares a moment of silence with members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the end of a prayer for migrants and refugees in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Oct. 19, 2023. The service took place around "Angels Unawares," a sculpture by Canadian Timothy Schmalz, depicting a boat with 140 figures of migrants from various historical periods and various nations. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

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Taking to heart the lesson of the parable of the good Samaritan is the key to assisting the millions of migrants and refugees forced to travel far from their homelands and often exploited along the way, Pope Francis said.

"The road leading from Jerusalem to Jericho was not a safe route, just as today the many migration routes that traverse deserts, forests, rivers and seas are not safe," the pope said Oct. 19 as he led members of the synod on synodality in praying for migrants and refugees.

"How many of our brothers and sisters find themselves today in the same condition as the traveler in the parable?" the pope asked. "How many are robbed, stripped and beaten along the way?"

The evening prayer service took place around "Angels Unawares," a sculpture by Canadian Timothy Schmalz, that has stood in St. Peter's Square since 2019. The bronze boat is filled with 140 figures depicting migrants from various historical periods and various nations.

The prayer service "will effectively symbolize walking together with the some of the most vulnerable people on our planet, namely, those who are fleeing, those who are forced to be on the move, those whom we call migrants and refugees," said Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

Staff from the dicastery, a refugee from Cameroon and a refugee from Ukraine read the prayers at the service.

In his reflection, Francis called for the reform of immigration policies to increase regular, legal channels for migration, recognizing national economic and demographic policies, but always putting "the most vulnerable at the center."

And, he said, those policies should recognize the benefits migrants bring to their new homelands, including "the growth of more inclusive, more beautiful and more peaceful societies."

"All of us must strive to make the road safer, so that today's travelers do not fall victim to bandits," the pope said. And "we need to multiply our efforts to combat the criminal networks that exploit the hopes and dreams of migrants."

Migrants and refugees often "leave their homes deceived by unscrupulous traffickers. They are then sold like commodities. They are kidnapped, imprisoned, exploited and enslaved," he said. "They are humiliated, tortured and raped. Many of them die without ever reaching their destination."

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"The migration routes of our time are filled with men and women who are wounded and left half-dead, our brothers and sisters whose pain cries out before God," Francis

said.

Although the pope did not mention specific situations, he made references easily compared to the situation of people who had to leave Ukraine because of the Russian invasion or are leaving northern Gaza after the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's retaliation.

Often, he said, the people on the move are "fleeing war and terrorism, as we are witnessing, sadly, in these days."

Czerny told Catholic News Service that while migrants and refugees may not be making headlines in media coverage of the synod, "in fact, the synod embraces all those realities in our daily lives, which we need to accompany -- or to use the synod word -- walk with."

That is why, he said, after a long day of work in the synod hall, members walked into St. Peter's Square and to the statue, a monument to "vulnerable people on the move, people in flight, of all ages, of all places, and of all times. So that's us, all of us."

Synod members, he said, will pray for people they know, for situations in their own countries and for "the vulnerable people in urgent situations that we know about, like the U.S.-Mexican border or the Mediterranean, or many other places where, unfortunately, people are forced to flee from danger into enormous insecurity."

Personally, he said, he prays for "whatever is the situation or many situations that I hear about in the course of my work, and each of them would break your heart and they come from all over the world."

Migration was a major topic at the synod briefing earlier in the day with Czerny, Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, Archbishop Dabula Anthony Mpako of Pretoria, South Africa, and Maronite Missionary Fr. Khalil Alwan, the Lebanon-based secretary-general of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East.

Flores, whose diocese is on the border with Mexico, said his people are not wealthy, but they are generous.

And, he said, in receiving, welcoming and assisting the families who cross the border, generally with the permission of the United States government, Catholics work with other Christian churches as well as the Muslim and Jewish communities.

There also is constant communication and coordination with the bishop of Matamoros, Mexico, across the river, who also is hosting and ministering to migrants coming from South and Central America.

Francis told those at the prayer service that while it is easy to look the other way -- or walk on the other side of the road as characters in the parable did -- the Gospel calls Christians "to be neighbors to all the wayfarers of our time, to save their lives, to heal their wounds and to soothe their pain."

"For many, tragically, it is too late, and we are left only to weep over their graves, if they even have a grave," he said. "Yet the Lord knows the face of each of them, and he does not forget it."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.