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A Venezuelan migrant is seen from Piedras Negras, Mexico, Sept. 30, 2023, while walking through the Rio Grande in an attempt to cross into Texas to seek asylum in the United States. (OSV News/Daniel Becerril, Reuters)



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The Catholic Church can draw closer to Jesus by accompanying migrants in their pursuit of a better life, Pope Francis said.

In the faces of migrants, the church "discovers the face of Christ," he wrote, and like St. Veronica who offered a cloth to wipe Jesus' face during his passion, the church "brings relief and hope on the 'Way of the Cross' of migration."

The pope wrote his comments in a letter March 21 to participants at a meeting between bishops, church officials and migrants in Lajas Blancas, Panama, near the Darién Gap jungle crossed by thousands of migrants each day. The meeting took place during a three-day conference organized by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development for bishops from Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama to discuss accompanying migrants.

Migrant brothers and sisters "represent the suffering flesh of Christ" since they are "forced to leave their land, to face the risks and tribulations of a hard road without finding another way out," Francis wrote in his message to the group.

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Bishops and other members of the church who support migrants "are the face of a mother church that walks with her sons and daughters," he wrote.

Francis urged the migrants to "never forget about your human dignity," and encouraged them to "not be afraid to look others in the eye, because you are not discarded, but you form part of the human family and the family of God's children."

"I also am the son of migrants who left in search of a better future," the pope told them, referencing his upbringing in Buenos Aires, Argentina, as the child of Italian immigrants. "There were times when they were left with nothing, even starving, with their hands empty but their hearts full of hope."

The meeting of church officials and migrants took place outside of the Darién Gap jungle that straddles the Panama-Colombia border. Record numbers of migrants have risked their lives to cross the Darién Gap in recent months, subjected to rampant extortion, physical abuse and sexual violence by criminal gangs. More than 500,000 people crossed the gap in 2023, according to data published by the Panamanian government.

In a message to the bishops a day earlier, Francis had written that the church's pastors must break free from indifference in addressing the crisis of forced migration across the Americas and that every migrant challenges Christians to embrace a spirit of hospitality.