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Pope says immigrants not pawns on global chessboard

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The Francis Chronicles

Rome — At a time when ferment over immigration reform is reaching a boil in the United States, Pope Francis on Tuesday called on countries not to raise "insurmountable barriers" to new arrivals and to overcome the "prejudices and presuppositions" that often dominate debates over immigration policy.

The pope's words came in a message for the Vatican's next "World Day of Migrants and Refugees," set for Jan. 19.

The message was presented Tuesday in a Vatican press conference by Italian Cardinal Antonio Maria Vegliò, a veteran diplomat who currently serves as president of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees and who gave a thumbs-up to the efforts of the U.S. bishops to back immigration reform.

"Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity," Francis wrote in his brief message. Reprising a now-familiar theme, the pope said mistreatment of migrants is part of what he's often denounced as a "throw-away culture."

Francis called for serious efforts to address poverty, which he said often drives people to migrate, and for international cooperation to tackle problems that individual countries can't address on their own.

Francis also suggested that public discussion about migrants is often driven by "suspicion and hostility."

"There is a fear that society will become less secure, that identity and culture will be lost, that competition for jobs will become stiffer and even that criminal activity will increase," the pope said.

Francis called on the media to report not only isolated cases of misconduct but also "the honesty, rectitude

and goodness of the majority."

Tuesday's message builds on Francis' growing record on immigration issues, most powerfully expressed in his July 8 visit to the southern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, a major point of arrival for migrants from Africa and the Middle East seeking entry into Europe.

On that outing, Francis tossed a wreath into the sea to commemorate the roughly 20,000 people who have died trying to make the sea crossing, and met with migrants currently housed in an internment center on the island.

In his speech that day, Francis denounced what he called the "globalization of indifference" to migrants.

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On Sept. 10, Francis also visited a refugee center in Rome operated by the Jesuit order, where more than 21,000 people passed through last year from regions such as Afghanistan, Egypt, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Francis met with a Syrian family and a man from Sudan on that outing, which followed a phone the new pope made to the refugee center in early April promising a visit.

"Lots of people who have 'international protection' written on their travel visas are forced to live in painful situations, sometimes degrading, without the possibility of starting a dignified life and thinking about a new future," the pope said that day.

Francis called the whole church to a spirit of service, accompaniment, and defense of immigrants.

"It's important for the entire church that welcoming the poor and promoting justice not be entrusted only to 'specialists,' but that it be given attention in all of pastoral life, in the formation of future priests and religious, in the normal activities of parishes, and in movements and other church groups," Francis said.

Vegliò told the press conference Tuesday that treating migrants as part of a "throw-away culture," he said, "is neither human nor Christian."

Now over 75, Vegliò has served as president of the Council for Migrants and Refugees since 2009, and is widely believed to be nearing the end of his term.

In the United States, the pope's new statement is likely to be read in the context of the national debate over immigration reform. The conference announced in early September that Masses and other events would be held across the country through October to promote immigration reform.

"Right now, our immigration system is broken," said Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, himself a Mexican immigrant to the country and now chair of the bishops' Committee on Migration.

"As a result, families are being broken apart and millions of people, including children, are being hurt," Gomez said. "We need immigration reform to help our nation live up to its beautiful promise of equality and dignity for all people."

In response to a question from NCR, Vegliò said Tuesday that the Vatican is "favorable" to those efforts by the U.S. bishops.

"It's logical that bishops in the United States, where the problem of immigration is very real, are holding up the thinking of the church and speaking out on it," he said.

"The Holy See is favorable to anything that can contribute to resolving this very serious problem," Vegliò said.

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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