

Fr. Michael Sparough, SJ Homily: World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Gospel: John 1:35-42

John was standing with two of his disciples,
and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said,
"Behold, the Lamb of God."
The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus.
Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them,
"What are you looking for?"
They said to him, "Rabbi" — which translated means Teacher —,
"where are you staying?"
He said to them, "Come, and you will see."
So they went and saw where Jesus was staying,
and they stayed with him that day.
It was about four in the afternoon.
Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter,
was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus.
He first found his own brother Simon and told him,
"We have found the Messiah" — which is translated Christ —.
Then he brought him to Jesus.
Jesus looked at him and said,
"You are Simon the son of John;
you will be called Cephas" — which is translated Peter.

Homily: *World Day of Migrants and Refugees*

In 1914 Pius X established this commemoration Feast Day of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. War, violence and persecution have uprooted more men and women around the world at this point, than at any time since the end of World War II. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates globally that there are 65.6 million people who were forcibly displaced at the end of 2016. 65.6 million people forcibly displaced from their homes.

That was 300,000 more than the previous year. Just to put that in perspective, on average 20 people are driven from their homes every minute, or one person every 3 seconds. The United Nations has said that it wants to establish a world agreement on immigration. Their goal is to establish a legal framework for protecting those who have been forced to abandon their homes. Almost 5 years into his papacy, Pope Francis has stressed again, and again and again that an essential mission of being a Christian is to welcome the vulnerable and marginalized people.

His remarks today in Rome, in his homily, where he invited refugees and immigrants from around Italy at the Vatican as he celebrated this Mass comes at a time of great political tension in Europe and the United States over the political debate on the fate refugees. Increasingly the sentiment in Europe and here in the United States is one of erecting physical and legal barriers to immigrants. It's in that context that I share with you Pope Francis' homily:

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POPE FRANCIS: This year I wanted to celebrate the World Day of Migrants and Refugees with a Mass that invites and welcomes you especially who are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Some of you have recently arrived in Italy, others are long-time residents and work here, and still others make up the so-called “second-generation”.

For everyone in this assembly, the Word of God has resonated and today invites us to deepen the special call that the Lord addresses to each one of us.

As he did with Samuel (cf 1 Sm 3:3b-10,19), he calls us by name and asks us to honour the fact that each of us has been created a unique and unrepeatable being, each different from the others and each with a singular role in the history of the world.

In the Gospel, the disciples of John ask Jesus, “Where do you live?”, implying that the reply to this question would determine their judgment upon the master from Nazareth.

The response of Jesus, “Come and see!” opens up to a personal encounter which requires sufficient time to welcome, to know and to acknowledge the other.

In the Message for this year’s World Day of Migrants and Refugees I have written, “Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age (Mt 25).”

And for the stranger, the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker and the displaced person, every door in a new land is also an opportunity encounter Jesus.

His invitation “Come & see!” is addressed today to all of us, to local communities & to new arrivals.

It is an invitation to overcome our fears so as to encounter the other, to welcome, to know and to acknowledge him or her.

It is an invitation which offers the opportunity to draw near to the other and see where and how he or she lives.

In today’s world, for new arrivals to welcome, to know and to acknowledge means to know and respect the laws, the culture and the traditions of the countries that take them in. It even includes understanding their fears and apprehensions for the future.

For local communities to welcome, to know and to acknowledge newcomers means to open themselves without prejudices to their rich diversity, to understand the hopes and potential of the newly arrived as well as their fears and vulnerabilities.

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True encounter with the other does not end with welcome, but involves us all in the three further actions which I spelled out in the Message for this Day: to protect, to promote & to integrate.

In the true encounter with the neighbour, are we capable of recognizing Jesus Christ who is asking to be welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated?

As the Gospel parable of the final judgment teaches us: the Lord was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, a stranger and in prison -- by some he was helped & by others not (Mt 25).

This true encounter with Christ is our source of salvation, a salvation which should be announced and brought to all, as the apostle Andrew shows us.

After revealing to his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah” (Jn 1:41), Andrew brings him to Jesus so that Simon can have the same experience of encounter.

It is not easy to enter into another culture, to put oneself in the shoes of people so different from us, to understand their thoughts & their experiences. As a result we often refuse to encounter the other and raise barriers to defend ourselves.

Local communities are sometimes afraid that the newly arrived will disturb the established order, will ‘steal’ something they have long laboured to build up.

And the newly arrived also have fears: they are afraid of confrontation, judgment, discrimination, failure.

These fears are legitimate, based on doubts that are fully comprehensible from a human point of view. Having doubts and fears is not a sin.

The sin is to allow these fears to determine our responses, to limit our choices, to compromise respect and generosity, to feed hostility and rejection.

The sin is to refuse to encounter the other, the different, the neighbour, when this is in fact a privileged opportunity to encounter the Lord.

From this encounter with Jesus present in the poor, the rejected, the refugee, the asylum seeker, flows our prayer of today.

It is a reciprocal prayer: migrants and refugees pray for local communities, and local communities pray for the newly arrived and for migrants who have been here longer.

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To the maternal intercession of Mary Most Holy we entrust the hopes of all the world's migrants and refugees and the aspirations of the communities which welcome them.

In this way, responding to the supreme commandment of charity and love of neighbour, may we all learn to love the other, the stranger, as ourselves.

Delivered this day in Rome by Pope Francis.

I've shared with you an icon picture of our Lady of the Way. It's a contemporary painting based on a much more ancient painting that hangs in the Mother church of the Jesuits. That painting is called Madonna Della Strada, Latin for Our Lady of the Way. It was a favorite of St. Ignatius and as I said, it hangs in the Mother church which is right around the corner from the Jesuit Refugee services. The Jesuit response to this crisis of immigration and refugees that was started by a former Superior General of the Jesuits, Pedro Arrupe, SJ.

A local Cincinnati artist who is a friend of mine, Holly Schapker, has painted this contemporary reinterpretation of the painting of Madonna Della Strada. She simply entitles it, Our Lady of the Way. She sent me a text this very morning. I woke up this morning and was checking my email, and I got an email from Holly saying that our Province, the Midwest Province has just purchased this painting and it's going to hang in our Provincial offices here in Chicago.

I love this particular painting because if you look into the details of the painting you'll see figures in the robes of Mary and Jesus. People from different cultures, people from different time periods. Peoples of all walks of life and different ethnicities. You'll notice that they are all hallowed. Those that respond to God's call in every time and every age and every culture, bedeck the beautiful gowns. They become part of the halo of Mary, part of the halo of Jesus. Part of the gowns in Holly's beautiful reinterpretation of this painting.

Last month, reflecting on Holly's painting, I penned these words:

Our Lady of the Way

You present us with your son,
The one sure way to peace,
As serenely you survey our world
Beset by scandal... bigotry... deceit.

He raises His hand in blessing,
Holding before us the Book of Life.

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This little child alone will lead us
From living hell to ending strife.

For if He is, indeed, the Christ,
And you, His gift to us, our Mother,
Then that alien stranger is no other
Than my own sister or my brother.

Must we echo: "No room in the inn" ?
Why can't we learn from history?
God's little ones still flee for their lives.
Their faces shrouded in mystery.

We need new eyes this new year
To behold Christ's works of art,
To see us all as He sees us -
Garments of love adorning His heart.

He weaves a fabric from all humanity -
Blacks, Reds, Yellows, Whites, & Browns.
For all who dare bare His face
Bedeck your holy, living gowns.

Amen. Amen.