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REFUGEES

AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

“Biblical revelation urges us to welcome the stranger; it tells us that in so doing, we open our doors to God, and that in the faces of others we see the face of Christ himself.”

Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2016

From its beginning, America experienced waves of immigration as individuals sought better lives for themselves and their families. Many came as refugees looking for safe haven, escaping persecution or violence in their home countries. From the Puritans seeking freedom to practice their religion in the 1600s, large numbers of Germans, Italians, and Irish escaping hardship and unrest in their home countries during the 1800s, and the unaccompanied minors from Central America in recent years, America has experienced a wide variety of cultures and ethnicities coming to her shores.

After World War II, a growing number of refugees prompted federal action to allow more people to find a new life in the United States. In 1948, the U.S. Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, initially allowing 200,000 additional displaced Europeans to be admitted to the United States. Before its passage, President Harry Truman urged Congress to pass legislation that would allow America to “do its share in caring for homeless and suffering refugees of all faiths.” He wrote that he believed accepting and welcoming these individuals would “add to the strength and energy of the Nation.”

Welcoming individuals and families from differing cultures has brought strength and energy to the country. The beauty of the United States is its ability to bring together people of different backgrounds. These transitions have not always been smooth and at times have aroused fear in certain populations, yet new individuals and groups continue to come, encouraged by the place

religious freedom and tolerance hold in the country’s fiber.

Now in 2016, men, women, and children continue to flee war-torn countries and politically difficult parts of the world, leaving their homes, livelihoods, and, at times, other family members and friends behind. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the worldwide number of displaced persons has recently been at the highest level ever recorded; at the end of 2014, 59.5 million people experienced displacement, compared to 51.2 million in 2013 and 37.5 million a decade ago.¹ Images have filled television screens, newspapers, and internet articles, showing the growing refugee crisis that is stretching across the Middle East and Europe. At the same time, rising acts of violence and terror around the world have contributed to a climate of fear and distrust that has also entered into America’s political debate.

The Catholic Church teaches that discussions and actions regarding immigrants, migrants, and refugees must revolve around the human person and the dignity that each person deserves. When Pope Francis spoke before the U.S. Congress in September 2015, he recognized the magnitude of the refugee crisis while also encouraging all to see the human faces of the refugees and those who have been displaced.

This **focus** examines federal policies and Church teaching regarding refugees and migration, and provides an overview of the actions of the Catholic Church to assist refugees at home and abroad. ■

TERMS TO KNOW

Asylum-Seekers

Individuals who are seeking refugee status but whose claims have not yet been definitively evaluated.

Migrants

Individuals who choose to move in order to improve future prospects for themselves and their families.

Internally Displaced People

Individuals who have fled for reasons similar to refugees but who legally remain under the protection of their own government.

Statelessness

The condition of someone who is not considered a national by any country, often because of discrimination against certain groups, redrawing of borders, or gaps in nationality law.

Temporary Protected Status

The designation of a foreign country or area of a foreign country due to conditions that temporarily prevent the country's nationals from returning safely, or where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately. Countries that currently have TPS status are El Salvador, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Liberia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.² ■



WHO ARE REFUGEES?

“Our world is facing a refugee crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Second World War...we must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation.”

Pope Francis, Address to U.S. Congress, 2015

According to the United Nations, a refugee is an individual who has fled his or her home country and cannot return “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”³

These individuals have faced threats or experiences of violence and torture. According to the U.S. Department of State, the vast majority of the nearly 20 million refugees in the world today receive support in the country to which they fled, but a smaller number are resettled elsewhere. Refugees are not, however, those who have left their home country for the purpose of seeking a more prosperous life, otherwise known as economic migrants.

In recent years, large numbers of refugees have emerged from the most difficult areas of the Middle East, including Syria and Iraq, due to violent conflicts and ongoing threats of terrorism. As of June 2015, the UNHCR had a record of 4,194,554 Syrian refugees. Many have applied for asylum in Europe or have traveled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, and other parts of North Africa to find safety. The number of registered Iraqi refugees has reached 377,747.⁴ The United States has accepted a portion of these individuals from both countries for resettlement, including 1,883 from Syria and 73,484 from Iraq between October 2010 and September 2015.⁵ ■

HOW DOES THE REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS WORK?

In order for a refugee to be resettled in the United States, there are a number of checks that must first be completed. The process begins with the United Nations (U.N.), which evaluates the eligibility and vulnerability of each person applying for refugee status. If the U.N. can verify this information, it recommends the best place to resettle the refugee, determining if they have family already in another country or if there are other factors that would make resettlement more likely to be successful. Once the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recommended resettlement in the United States, the average waiting period for a refugee to be approved and received is 18–24 months.

Ensuring the safety and security of the nation accepting the refugee is paramount in the resettlement process. In the United States, a number of laws are specifically in place to ensure that no one can receive asylum or refugee protection if they have:

- Engaged, assisted, or incited the persecution of others,
- Been convicted of a serious crime in the United States,
- Committed a serious nonpolitical crime abroad,
- Engaged in terrorist activity,
- Represented a foreign terrorist organization, or
- Posed a threat to the security of the United States.⁶

Additionally, throughout the refugee resettlement process, the National Counterterrorism Center, the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Defense, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) assess all relevant information and vet refugees.⁷ This process includes the gathering of fingerprints and biographical information, one-on-one interviews, and fact-checking refugee stories. Next, the refugees are required to undergo medical screening, are matched with a sponsor agency who works with the refugee upon their arrival in the United States, and must pass an additional security clearance and review by Customs and Border Protection upon admission to the United States. In the case of applicants from Syria, there is an enhanced review, including additional questions and scrutiny against the terror watch list. ■

WHAT IS CHURCH TEACHING ABOUT REFUGEES?

“The Church stands at the side of all who work to defend each person’s right to live with dignity, first and foremost by exercising the right not to emigrate and to contribute to the development of one’s country of origin. This process should include, from the outset, the need to assist the countries which migrants and refugees leave.”

Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2016

The Catholic Church recognizes that nations have a legitimate interest to enforce their own immigration laws. It is important that countries are able to protect the safety and security of their own people, as long as enforcement of the laws is done in a just and humane way. At the same time, the Church teaches that individuals have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families. While no country should be forced to accept all who wish to migrate or resettle, efforts should be made by the more prosperous nations to welcome the foreigner and those desperately in need, especially persons fleeing persecution and violence in their home countries.⁸

“The average waiting period for a refugee to be approved and received in the United States is 18–24 months.”

The Bible presents many examples, both in the Old and New Testaments, of refugees fleeing oppression. In fact, the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of the Holy Family departing for Egypt, seeking to escape the violence of King Herod. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees themselves, finding protection in a new place until they could safely return home. The Catholic Church must be present to help modern day refugees, improve living conditions, and welcome refugees as they resettle in a new country.

Pope Francis has consistently spoken of the need for people of faith to assist refugees, even calling on all European



supplies, counseling, education, medical assistance, temporary shelter, and translation and legal services.⁹

AT HOME

The United States government relies heavily on its partnerships with outside organizations to help with refugee resettlement. The United States Catholic Church, through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Migration and Refugee Services office, is one of nine U.S. resettlement agencies that assist refugees arriving in the United States. The mission of Migration and Refugee Services is to “serve and advocate for refugees, asylees, migrants, unaccompanied children, and victims of human trafficking,” treating every person with the dignity and respect they deserve. Living out the Gospel of Matthew’s call to *welcome the stranger*, the Catholic Church is present with refugees as they enter the country for the first time, performing services such as:

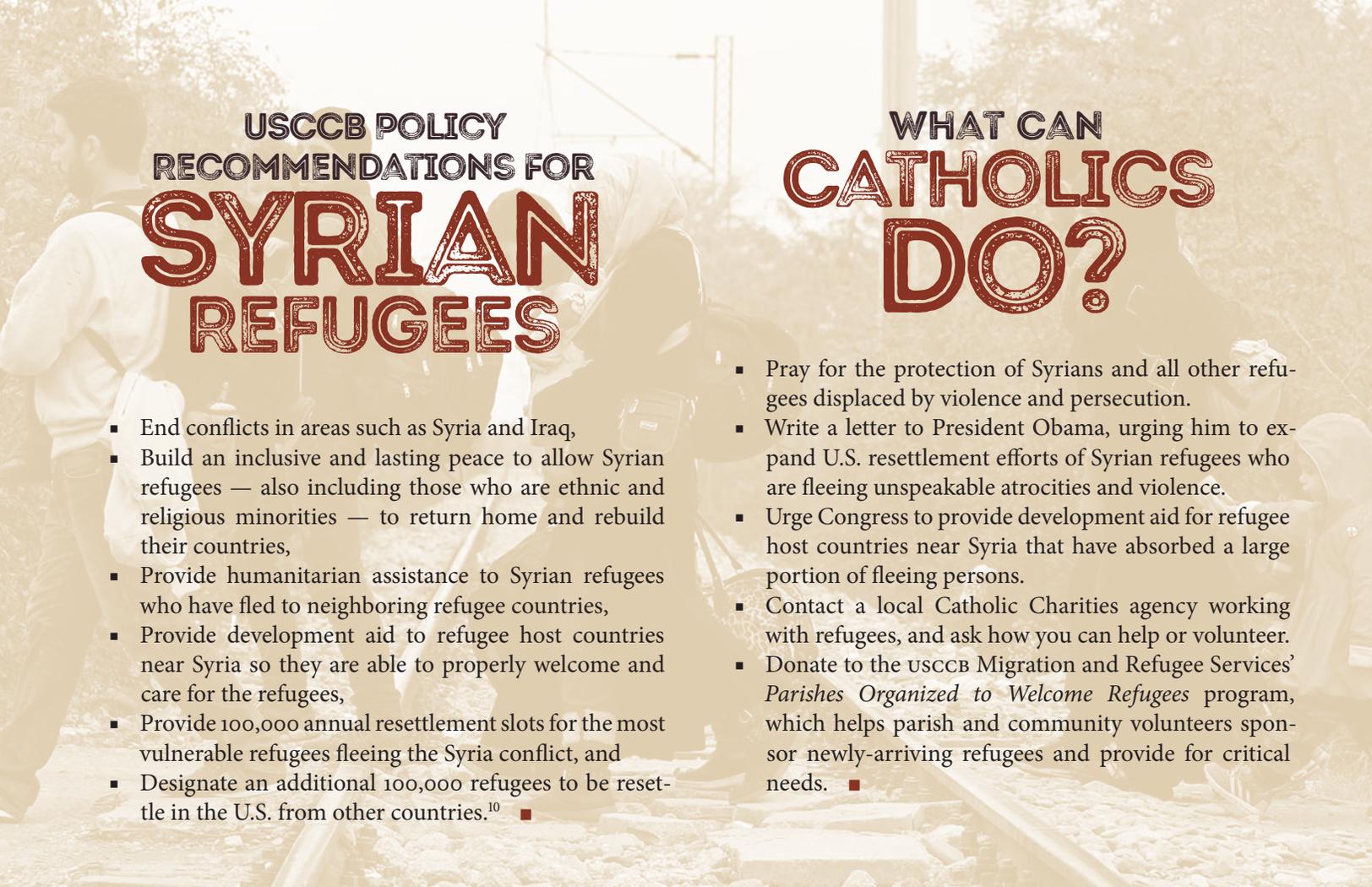
- Picking up refugee clients from the airport,
- Locating safe and affordable housing,
- Providing furniture, basic household items, and food,
- Offering English as a second language classes,
- Enrolling children in school,
- Transporting and assisting refugees for health screenings and medical follow-up,
- Providing extensive cultural orientation and financial literacy,
- Helping refugees apply for necessary documents and programs, and
- Connecting refugees with employment services.

parishes, convents, and religious institutes to host a refugee family. The Vatican is currently hosting a Christian family from Syria and has also provided a mobile clinic and medical volunteers to help refugees at processing centers on the outskirts of Rome. The Church has a long tradition of working with refugees and migrants in need, both overseas and back at home. History well documents the efforts of religious congregations and the Vatican, specifically those of Pope Pius XII, for example, to shelter and provide humanitarian assistance to displaced people, including Roman Jews who fled the Nazi regime.

ABROAD

In 1943, the U.S. Catholic Bishops recognized a need to assist survivors in Europe in the aftermath of World War II. To respond to this need, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) was created. Since that time, CRS has expanded its outreach to 101 countries on five continents, collaborating at the local level to work with the most vulnerable and provide services in the areas of healthcare, education, agriculture, peacemaking, and microfinance, among others. More recently, CRS has responded to the growing numbers of refugees and economic migrants from the Middle East through their work abroad. In his 2016 World Day of Migrants and Refugees message, Pope Francis declared that the Church stands with “all who work to defend each person’s right to live with dignity,” helping first and foremost to address conditions within the home country. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, CRS aid workers have assisted approximately 800,000 war-affected Syrians and 88,000 displaced Iraqis. By working with local organizations and infrastructures, CRS has helped to provide families in need with food and living

In the State of Michigan, two Catholic Charities agencies operate refugee resettlement programs. The Refugee Services program at St. Vincent Catholic Charities has served over 20,000 adults and families coming into the Lansing area as refugees since the 1970s. In 2014, the program welcomed approximately 600 new refugees, including large numbers from Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan, and Burma. Emerging from refugee services provided by the Archdiocese of Detroit during the Vietnam-era, Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan operates an Immigration and Refugee Service office that has benefited thousands. Since the 1970s, over 16,000 refugees have been helped by the Catholic faithful in the Archdiocese. Many recent cases have been Iraqi families. Within this program, staff assist refugees as they seek to become adjusted to their new communities, especially by processing lawful resident status and ultimately naturalization. The program also offers limited low-cost immigration legal advice or representation. ■



USCCB POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

- End conflicts in areas such as Syria and Iraq,
- Build an inclusive and lasting peace to allow Syrian refugees — also including those who are ethnic and religious minorities — to return home and rebuild their countries,
- Provide humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees who have fled to neighboring refugee countries,
- Provide development aid to refugee host countries near Syria so they are able to properly welcome and care for the refugees,
- Provide 100,000 annual resettlement slots for the most vulnerable refugees fleeing the Syria conflict, and
- Designate an additional 100,000 refugees to be resettle in the U.S. from other countries.¹⁰ ■

WHAT CAN CATHOLICS DO?

- Pray for the protection of Syrians and all other refugees displaced by violence and persecution.
- Write a letter to President Obama, urging him to expand U.S. resettlement efforts of Syrian refugees who are fleeing unspeakable atrocities and violence.
- Urge Congress to provide development aid for refugee host countries near Syria that have absorbed a large portion of fleeing persons.
- Contact a local Catholic Charities agency working with refugees, and ask how you can help or volunteer.
- Donate to the usccb Migration and Refugee Services' *Parishes Organized to Welcome Refugees* program, which helps parish and community volunteers sponsor newly-arriving refugees and provide for critical needs. ■



PRAYER FOR MIGRANT FAMILIES

Good and gracious God, we thank you for the gift of families. We are grateful for all of the joy and love that they bring into our lives, and we ask that you provide special protection for all families, particularly those who face hardships as they move in search of a better life. Show mercy to those who travel in danger, and lead them to a place of safety and peace. Comfort those who are alone and afraid because their families have been torn apart by violence and injustice. As we reflect upon the difficult journey that the Holy Family faced as refugees in Egypt, help us to remember the suffering of all migrant families. Through the intercession of Mary our Mother, and St. Joseph the Worker, her spouse, we pray that all migrants may be reunited with their loved ones and find the meaningful work they seek. Open our hearts so that we may provide hospitality for all who come in search of refuge. Give us the courage to welcome every stranger as Christ in our midst. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.¹¹ ■

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5. "Refugee Admissions Statistics — FY11–FY15," U.S. Department of State, <http://goo.gl/6EFXYz>
6. "Bars and Security Screening in the Asylum and Refugee Process," Human Rights First, <http://goo.gl/alpmKt>
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8. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2241
9. Syrian Refugee Crisis and CRS in Iraq, Catholic Relief Services, <http://goo.gl/uhb0i9> and <http://goo.gl/CY79HI>
10. "Syrian Refugee Crisis," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://goo.gl/iSqvqz>
11. "Prayer for Migrant Families," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://goo.gl/sjozTS>

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