



In Memoriam: Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 'a Voice Calling Out...'

"Francis has made it his job to call out this shameful lack of collective purpose, the consequences of which are visible in border camps where hundreds of thousands languish in degradation after being trafficked across seas and deserts."¹

1. Introduction

In the sermon at Pope Francis' funeral, Cardinal Re made mention of the Mass which Pope Francis celebrated on the USA/Mexico border in 2016, during his pastoral visit to Mexico. On the flight back to Rome he was asked about the border wall which Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump was pledging to build. The Pope said: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel."² In 2017 the Pope returned to this point: "In the social and civil context as well, I appeal not to create walls but to build bridges [...] To not respond to evil with evil. To defeat evil with good, the offense with forgiveness. A Christian would never say 'you will pay for that.' Never."³

The emphasis on bridge building underlines a key understanding of Pope Francis' theological principles, namely that of inclusivity. No one should be excluded. In the Catholic Social Teaching tradition inclusivity is based on the primacy of the dignity of every person, which is inviolable. Francis has taken a minimalist understanding of dignity – based on an understanding of so-called normalcy – and extended it to include those who do not fit the norm. The academic Leo Guardado notes in this regard how Francis' emphasis on including the marginalised in fact reverses what has become a normative position. "Anyone who does not fall within the accepted norms of physical, mental and social well-being is at risk of marginalization and exclusion."⁴ This is an important hallmark of Francis' thinking around migration, as a result of which the definitions of those who should find

entry into host countries has been expanded.

2. Migration: A Reawakening of Conscience

Throughout his twelve year ministry as Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis made the outreach to displaced communities his special concern. Indeed, as has been copiously noted over the past weeks, his very first trip outside Rome after his installation was to the migrant island of Lampedusa, where he spoke about the globalisation of indifference towards vulnerable communities, calling the deaths of migrants at sea "a disgrace."⁵ He also called for "a 'reawakening of consciences' to counter the 'indifference' shown to migrants. 'We have lost a sense of brotherly responsibility, we have forgotten how to cry for migrants lost at sea.' He denounced the traffickers who exploited migrants and took great risks with their lives."⁶

It was also at Lampedusa that he prayed a prayer that provided an important clue as to his understanding of the roots of the plight of displaced persons: "O Lord, we ask forgiveness for those who, with their laws and decisions, have created situations that have led to these tragedies." In this he underlined the fact that political, economic, social, environmental choices that some human beings have made, have serious consequences for others. He thus cast the blame for the tragedies on actual people, highlighting their cynical indifference towards those who bear the consequences.⁷ Here we had an early clue to his emphasis on the human wrongs which push migration and the fact that this is a key contribution to the debate on policies that show an increasing tendency towards narrowing eligible categories.

In citing the Cain and Abel story he set up his core understanding of the tension that pervades the migrant and refugee reality, especially as it comes up against local people in the host countries. The indifference of Cain towards Abel is born fundamentally out of a fear that 'the other will dispose of me unless I dispose of them'.⁸ The Pope recognises that the heart of the Biblical story is also the core cause behind the exclusivist, xenophobic, and nationalist narratives that abound today across the globe.

Ten years later, in Marseilles, he would express this view more strongly, speaking about 'the fanaticism of indifference'.⁹ So it became increasingly clear that Pope Francis saw the failure to act justly towards the displaced community as a manifestation of the sin of indifference. It became a key hermeneutic through which he critiqued the dominant narratives of migration, which feed off indifference. Indifference in the migration world is more than just an attitude of resignation or 'could not care less.' It also refers to the concept of social control, as manifested in actions such as outsourcing border control, refusing entry in times of humanitarian crisis, placing detention centres far out of sight, and the growing practice of detaining and deporting undocumented migrants, all in an attempt to keep foreign nationals out of the public mind and thereby to placate the anxieties and fears of citizens. Interestingly, this shares several overlaps with the secular category of securitisation.

3. Seeing the Signs of the Times

It must be noted that Pope Francis ministered in a time when the movement of peoples has been the highest since World War II. It is thus a key sign of the times. As of mid-2024, 122.6 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including 37.9 million refugees, 8 million asylum seekers, and 68.3 million internally displaced people. Additionally, 304 million international migrants lived outside their country of birth.¹¹ It can be persuasively argued that, in focusing on the mobile community at this time of its exponential growth, Francis was theologically and pastorally faithful to the Vatican II injunction to be guided in the Church's mission by a close reading of the signs of the times. *Gaudium et Spes*, the key document on the witness of the Church in the public space, says this in paragraph 4:

"To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics."¹²

Intimately linked to this theological and pastoral perspective are allied paradigm shifts which Francis employed in shaping his approach to the migrant sector. These include the shift from deductive to inductive reasoning, from theory to action, the priority of justice over charity, from general to specific contexts, and the use of Scripture as the primary hermeneutic.¹³ Peoples' lived experience is the starting point, and even a casual reading of the Pope's output shows these approaches very clearly.

It is worth noting that some commentators have echoed an important insight of Francis': "Climate change, the other great challenge facing today's world, has at least drawn from world leaders a pledge to tackle it collectively through the annual UN COP meetings. But on migration, the opposite has happened: countries compete with each other to be the least hospitable in a race to deter newcomers."¹⁴ Against this pitiable background of indifference, as he called it at Lampedusa, the Pope articulates an alternative narrative. He urges a shift in mindset from focusing on border control to understanding the root causes of migration and fostering solidarity and welcome for migrants. He also stresses the importance of education and research to address the complexities of migration, promoting informed decision-making and policies. It is in this sphere, arguably, that the Pope spoke most prophetically. In 2018 he spoke directly to policy makers and advocates for the rights of the displaced communities:

"A just policy is one at the service of the person, of every person involved; a policy that provides for solutions that can ensure security, respect for the rights and dignity of all; a policy concerned for the good of one's own country, while taking into account that of others in an ever more interconnected world."¹⁵

In short, the dimension of tackling the root causes of migration can be summed up thus, as Pope Francis did several times: “We know too that the consolidation of true peace comes through the pursuit of social justice, which is indispensable for correcting the economic imbalances and political unrest that have always had a major role in generating conflicts and threatening the whole of humanity.”¹⁶ Furthermore, “migrants and refugees [have] rights and dignity ‘independent of their legal status’ and host communities should reject ‘all forms of discrimination and xenophobia.’”¹⁷

On the day before he died the Pope returned to plight of migrants and refugees. In his Easter message he said: “How much contempt is stirred up at times towards the vulnerable, the marginalized, and migrants!”¹⁸ It is as if his solidarity with displaced peoples began and ended his papal ministry.

4. The Four Verbs

Pope Francis will also be remembered for the way he captured the complexities of forced migration in four verbs, each of which, when analysed, is a teaching in itself. The verbs are *welcome*, *protection*, *promotion* and *integration*. They also specifically make a third point in Francis’ legacy, which is that he never saw the issue of migration in terms of numbers or statistics, but in terms of real people undergoing very real and vulnerable moments. A short summary of the verbs drawn from various sources helps to reveal the potential for each one to contribute to a humane and just future for vulnerable people.

To *welcome*: this challenge calls on governments to expand the legal avenues that would allow migrants to enter a country legally and start a new life. We must, in short, nurture societies and legal processes that aim as much as possible to include, rather than exclude. This also calls for the political will to implement policies and processes fairly and to ensure that the system works and is streamlined in all spheres, including long queues, poor service, dysfunctional computers, online glitches and an unwelcoming environment. These systems are prone to corruption and therefore a special guard against corrupt activities should be erected.¹⁹ Pope Francis also denounced both the detention of people who enter countries without authorization and ‘collective and arbitrary’

deportations, particularly when migrants’ human rights were threatened in their home countries.²⁰ It is an area where there is a need for much political will.

In the area of *protecting*, Francis stressed in a meeting in 2017 that

“defending their inalienable rights, ensuring their fundamental freedoms and respecting their dignity are duties from which no one can be exempted. Protecting these brothers and sisters is a moral imperative which translates into adopting juridical instruments, both international and national, that must be clear and relevant; implementing just and far reaching political choices; prioritizing constructive processes, which perhaps are slower, over immediate results of consensus; implementing timely and humane programs in the fight against ‘the trafficking of human flesh’; which profits off others’ misfortune; coordinating the efforts of all actors, among which, you may be assured, will always be the Church.”²¹ On another occasion he noted that “the principle of the centrality of the human person obliges us to always prioritize personal safety over national security.”²²

An article in *America* magazine describes the third verb, *promotion*, in the following way:

“Promoting essentially means a determined effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees – as well as the communities which welcome them – are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity intended by the creator. This means providing for freedom of religious practice, employment opportunities, language instruction, a path to citizenship, labour regulation for underage migrants and opportunities for family reunifications, which Pope Francis explicitly says includes grandparents, grandchildren and siblings. The pope also asked that the global community assist emerging countries and communities that receive greater numbers of migrants and refugees.”²³

As for *integration*, the Pope clarified that this refers neither to assimilation nor incorporation, but to a two-way process, rooted essentially in the joint recognition of the other’s cultural richness: “It is not the superimposing of one

culture over another, nor mutual isolation, with the insidious and dangerous risk of creating ghettos. [C]onjugating these four verbs, in the first person singular and in the first person plural, Francis stated, 'is today a responsibility, a duty we have towards our brothers and sisters who, for various reasons, have been forced to leave their homeland', a duty namely of three types, he explained, of justice, civility and solidarity".²⁴

5. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, much will still be written about Pope Francis' legacy in the world of displaced persons – his insistence on not allowing a tsunami of indifference to hide their suffering or for the attendant injustices of the displaced communities to be demonised; his focus on the root causes of the migration phenomenon; and (again) his determination that the injustices that cause so much migration to take priority over debates on border controls. Writing of that legacy, the Archdiocese of Chicago recalled the

Pope's words at the canonisation of St Giovanni Battista Scalabrini in 2022: "Refusing to care for migrants 'is revolting, it's sinful, it's criminal.'"²⁵ That forceful moral language, sometimes blunt and always unapologetic, was a hallmark of Pope Francis' pontificate and cemented his legacy as a champion of migrants.²⁶

During his general audience on August 28, 2024, Pope Francis declared that actively preventing migrants from reaching their destinations, especially those who are fleeing persecution or violence, is a grave sin. He also emphasized the moral imperative to rescue migrants in danger, particularly those crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and described efforts to block rescue operations as "gestures of hate". He urged the world to heed the cries of migrants dying in the seas and deserts, and to provide safe and regular pathways for migration.²⁷

We owe it to Pope Francis to take up the challenge and robustly and enthusiastically put into action the profound legacy he has left us.

Peter-John Pearson
Director
pearson@iafrica.com

¹ <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/migrants-francis-pope-ivereigh-refugees-catholic-samaritan>

² <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/18/politics/pope-francis-trump-christian-wall>

³ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/pope-repeats-bridges-not-walls-trump-travel-ban>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/wftrssh3>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23224010>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23224010>

⁷ <https://cafod.org.uk/news/campaigning-news/five-lessons-from-pope-francis-on-migration>

⁸ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200708_omelia-anniversariovisita-lampedusa.html

⁹ <https://apnews.com/article/vatican-pope-france-migration-marseille-963f5fb5a0abd5ca92f198991436b0b8>

¹¹ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/>

¹² https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

¹³ <https://tinyurl.com/5628y88c>

¹⁴ <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/migrants-francis-pope-ivereigh-refugees-catholic-samaritan>

¹⁵ <https://jrs.net/en/news/pope-francis-and-his-ten-year-journey-with-displaced-people/>

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/ye9c4dd8>

¹⁷ <https://tinyurl.com/ye9c4dd8>

- ¹⁸ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250420-urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html>
- ¹⁹ <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/learn/catholic-teaching/responding-to-refugees-and-migrants-twenty-action-points/>
- ²⁰ <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/08/21/pope-francis-offers-4-points-guide-worlds-response-refugees>
- ²¹ https://zenit.org/2017/02/21/pope-on-migration-welcome-protect-promote-integrate/#google_vignette
- ²² <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/08/21/pope-francis-offers-4-points-guide-worlds-response-refugees>
- ²³ <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/08/21/pope-francis-offers-4-points-guide-worlds-response-refugees>
- ²⁴ <https://zenit.org/2017/02/21/pope-on-migration-welcome-protect-promote-integrate/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.chicagocatholic.com/vatican/-/article/2025/04/24/pope-a-son-of-immigrants-leaves-legacy-of-migrant-advocacy#>
- ²⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/yrphpt6t>
- ²⁷ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2024/documents/20240828-udienza-generale.html>

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