

Pope's challenge is not just for Europe



How many Catholics in other countries will open their doors to refugees?

A favorite pastime among Catholics is to declare what the pope should do. Lately, I've heard from a couple of people who thought Pope Francis should speak out about certain domestic situations in their countries.

They seemed to think that priests have some sort of special access to the pope that we can use to get word to him. We do not. In fact, many priests (happily, I am not among them) have a hard time reaching their own bishop, let alone the bishop of Rome.

My callers appeared satisfied with my explanation that speaking out on domestic issues is the responsibility of the local Church leadership, and that the odds are that the pope is not even aware of the matters that upset those who contacted me.

Besides, we are busily and hopefully trying to move away from a centralized model of Church life where everything depended upon Rome and nothing worthwhile could happen unless someone in Rome (often enough, some low-level bureaucratic functionary in the curia) approved. Since the default setting for low-level (and even high-level) bureaucratic functionaries is "Change nothing!" that meant that common-sense changes, let alone Gospel-demanded ones, had little chance of implementation.

Why would we want to re-centralize by wanting and waiting for the pope to act?

Pope Francis has spoken on the sort of issue we should expect a pope to respond to, the tragic exodus of refugees from Syria. In fact, he has gone beyond speaking out. He has called for and demonstrated action.

The world is used to hearing popes issue declarations of how heartbroken they are over situations of injustice and violence, and calling for peace. Though their sentiments are sincere, they say what just about anyone else says and with about as much effect, even though sycophantic clergy might rhapsodize over the pope's "inspiring message".

Pope Francis has broken that precedent with his call for the Catholic Church in Europe to actually do something practical on behalf of the refugees, housing them in the parishes and religious houses of Europe.

"May every parish, every religious community, every monastery, every shrine in Europe host a family, starting with my diocese of Rome," Francis said. In line with that, the two parish churches in the Vatican will each host a refugee family. (I never knew that there were any parish churches in Vatican City, let alone two. Do they have Sunday school or bingo?)

I wonder if a certain retired bishop who occupies a whole newly renovated convent in the Vatican might offer housing to some latter-day Holy Family fleeing persecution in the Middle East.

By one estimate, if the Catholics of Europe follow the pope's lead, some 200,000 refugees could find shelter. And that is without counting the effect of Catholics who might respond to Francis' call and example by opening their homes as well as their institutions. It is also likely that other Churches and individual Christians of Europe will respond in the same way, giving one hint of what a newly imaged role for the papacy as a worldwide voice of Christianity might look like.

Providing practical and personal care for homeless refugees would also do more than talk and song about a "New Evangelization" can ever do to show the essence of Christianity that has been obscured and often forgotten in Europe and even in the Church.

A local response

So much for Europe. But what of those of us who do not live on that continent? Should we be content to be spectators or even cheerleaders for what our European sisters and brothers do?

There are some 60 million refugees in the world today, and the number is growing. Whether it be people in Latin America fleeing violence and poverty, or persecuted Rohingya Muslims bounced from pillar to post in Asia, or families fleeing environmental disaster and warfare in Africa, there is no continent except Antarctica that is not being challenged to respond to refugees with more than emotions and words.

Caritas, the international Catholic relief network and second only to the Red Cross in its size, reach and resources, will surely increase its efforts to raise funds and provide programs for refugees, including those being newly settled in Europe.

But what more, especially in Asia, might we Catholics do in response to the pope's example?

Certainly the migrant workers throughout Asia from such countries as Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand are refugees from unemployment, poverty and lack of opportunity in their homelands. Many of them are victims of trafficking and other injustices. How does the Church in, say, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan or Japan respond in deeds to their needs and hopes?

And what of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, the FABC? Once upon a time, it was a leading voice in the worldwide Catholic Church. Lately, however, it has degenerated into an agency for organizing meetings seemingly for the sake of organizing meetings.

I do not have a direct line to the pope, but as a Catholic in Asia, I hope I can at least call upon the FABC to convene a special plenary meeting to bring together Asia's bishops and other Church leaders to examine the situation of migrants and refugees on our continent and then develop creative and practical ways to respond as a Church.

That might be the best way to show support for what Pope Francis is doing in, to and for Europe.

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