Migrants & Refugees

The United Nations estimates there are approximately 281 million migrants in the world[1]. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates there are 110 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, with increasing numbers of people being displaced due to persecution, conflict, and violence, amongst other issues[2]. Of that 110 million, 36.4 million are classed as refugees, and 6.1 million are asylum seekers.

In recent years, we have seen the UK and European media refer to a refugee 'crisis', employing terms such as 'invasion' and 'swarms'. However, 69% of refugees and others in need of international protection are hosted in countries neighbouring their home country – Iran and Türkiye host the largest populations worldwide, with Germany the only European country in the top 5. It is widely acknowledged, and proven by the data, that contrary to what the media reports, a very low percentage of individuals travel onward to Europe and the UK, and those that do often have some connection, such as family with whom they wish to reunite.

"Migrants fleeing from war and hunger, often survivors of desperate journeys, are the object of political battles. It is important to remember that they are not numbers or statistics; they are people.

Our personal and collective histories are marked by migration. Rather than treating migrants like a burden or a problem, we should find solutions based on compassion and respect for their human dignity.

This vision is rooted in the Gospel and prayer and the Church's magisterium reminds us of this."

Fr Frédéric Fornos S.J., International Director of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network, 2024

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"Nationalist or individualistic tendencies should not be allowed to take hold and prevent us seeing humanity as a single family."

Principle 3, Love The Stranger,
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (CBCEW)

Harmful Rhetoric

Media rhetoric around migration has caused much confusion over terms used to identify individuals and their legal status. One such term which some MPs have also employed is that of **'illegal migrant'** - this is a commonly used term by politicians and the British media when referring to individuals seeking asylum. However, it is important to understand that **no human is illegal** – the right to asylum is guaranteed in international law and the UK is bound to uphold it.

Individuals may be considered refugees as a result of their experiences, but formal recognition is required via an asylum application in order for them to receive state protection. Applications for asylum in the UK can only be made from within the territory, hence the arrivals by boat which have dominated media headlines. Given the rhetoric around small boats, it is important to note that under the right to asylum you cannot be penalised for your journey, nor your mode of entry, in consideration of your asylum application – **it is not illegal to claim asylum** and as such it is wrong to label those seeking asylum as illegal as it further undermines their human dignity.

Further, the use of the term **'migrant'** when referring to refugees undermines the protection needs and vulnerabilities of those seeking asylum. 'Migrant' is not a legal status as 'refugee' is, and whilst there is no internationally accepted legal definition of a migrant, many NGOs and agencies understand migrants to be people who have moved from their country of origin to a different country, often for economic purposes.

"No one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means of living a decent and happy life."

Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum (1891)

ASYLUM SEEKER: An asylum seeker is someone who has arrived in a country and claimed asylum. Until they receive a decision on their claim by the country's government, they remain an asylum seeker, or better still , a person seeking asylum.

REFUGEE: A refugee is a person who has claimed asylum in a country (not their country of birth) and whose claim has been accepted, meaning that refugee is a legal status. Those who obtain refugee status are given protections under international laws and conventions and are entitled to financial and other support from their host country.

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"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 (Matthew 25:35-43). The Lord entrusts to the Church's motherly love every person forced to leave their homeland in search of a better future. This solidarity must be concretely expressed at every stage of the migratory experience – from departure through journey to arrival and return. This is a great responsibility, which the Church intends to share with all believers and men and women of good will, who are called to respond to the many challenges of contemporary migration with generosity, promptness, wisdom and foresight, each according to their own abilities. In this regard, I wish to reaffirm that our shared response may be articulated by four verbs: to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate."

Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants & Refugees 2018

Love The Stranger

In 2023, the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (CBCEW) published a document entitled **Love the Stranger,** which presents the Catholic response to refugees and migrants. It emphasises the importance of upholding human dignity and recognises the right to migrate, whilst calling upon States to uphold international obligations and promote the common good. The document offers 24 guiding principles and can be accessed in full online: https://www.cbcew.org.uk/love-the-stranger/

Catholic communities and organisations are aware of the tension recent policies have created across the UK, dividing communities. As we recognise the concerns of our community, we recall Pope Francis' message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2021, in which he explored the theme **'towards an ever wider we'**, warning that it is increasingly under threat from nationalist or individualist tendencies, with the highest price being paid by those viewed as 'the other'. Reinforcing the message of Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis calls on us to counter this prevailing trend by working towards the establishment of a single 'we', encompassing the whole of humanity.

In response to Love the Stranger, CSAN together with its members compiled a call-to-action, encouraging the Catholic community to reflect on Love the Stranger, learn more and advocate for those seeking sanctuary across England & Wales. The call-to-action can be found online: https://www.csan.org.uk/love-the-stranger-call-to-action/

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"Recognising the practical contribution that our Church can make, we support the work of Catholic organisations such as Caritas, the Jesuit Refugee Service, and the St Vincent De Paul Society, as well as parish and diocesan initiatives, in upholding the human dignity of migrants and refugees."

Principle 16, Love the Stranger

How To Get Involved:

REFLECT

Love the Stranger encourages Catholics to consider the situation of refugees and migrants from across the world, their journey to the UK and the welcome they receive in our communities. We encourage you to reflect on Love the Stranger and to share it widely within your community.

LEARN MORE

One of the things we can do to better support refugee and migrant communities is to learn and to understand. We can learn about policies affecting them both internationally and nationally, and the support services available for them across the UK. We can also learn about the reasons for migration to gain a better understanding of why people are forced to flee their country of origin and undertake dangerous journeys to seek refuge in the UK. All of this will help us to better support refugees and migrants in our communities, and we can learn how to do this with the help of specialist organisations. You can find all this information in the CSAN call-to-action: https://www.csan.org.uk/guidance/learn-more/

SPEAK UP

CSAN supports Together With Refugees, a coalition of organisations advocating for a more compassionate approach to refugees. Collectively, we are calling on our Government for a fairer and more humane asylum system that ensures protection for all individuals fleeing war and persecution, allowing them to rebuild their lives through settling in a community. We have a list of campaigns and petitions available on our site:
https://www.csan.org.uk/guidance/campaigns/

ACT

CSAN comprises of 52 member organisations, including independent Catholic charities and diocesan Caritas agencies, many of whom provide support and outreach to asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants. We encourage you to contact your local Caritas agency or CSAN member organisation to learn what they do and how you can get involved:
https://www.csan.org.uk/member/

REFERENCES:

[1]https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/foreword/foreword
[2]https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/
[3]https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2023/how-many-people-do-we-grant-protection-to

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