

Archbishop Urges Nations to Open Borders

Says Church "Is Present" With Refugees, Displaced

ROME, JUNE 20, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Over the past 60 years, since the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was formed, a change has taken place with regard to the international community's stance toward displaced persons, says the president of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers.

According to Archbishop Antonio Maria Vegliò, "there is a hardening attitude of countries so that it seems that refugees are the problem and not the reasons why they have to flee."

The archbishop made this reflection in an interview with Vatican Radio on World Refugee Day, during which he affirmed that the Church "is present with refugees and the internally displaced."

The world day, which is observed every year on June 20, coincides this year with the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the UNHCR and the adoption of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees.

Archbishop Vegliò noted the many ways that the Church is involved in serving refugees, ranging from the presence of priests and nuns in refugee camps, to bishops establishing a parish among the displaced.

He mentioned in particular the International Catholic Migration Commission, who have "become specialists in the resettlement of refugees to third countries. More than one million people have been resettled. In addition, they are involved in different socioeconomic projects, like micro-credits."

Caritas, added Archbishop Vegliò, "is assisting in many different ways, from emergency aid to directly involved in managing refugee camps. They also got involved in counseling of traumatic refugees, and the reintegration of child soldiers."

The archbishop also spoke of two challenges in particular that concern the Church: the invisible presence of refugees in large cities, and children who grow up in refugee camps.

"An increasing number of refugees, at present half of them, settle down in cities," he explained. "One of the questions is how to reach them as they have become invisible in the crowds of others, especially in slum areas."

Regarding children who grow up in refugee camps, the prelate lamented that "many do not know any other reality, since they were born in the camps."

He gave the examples of camps in Thailand, "where about 150,000 people are living for 20 years in such situations," and also in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where some 1.7 million persons continue to live.

Archbishop Vegliò made a plea to developed nations to do more to welcome refugees in their countries, stating that it's "a tragedy that people have to flee on not seaworthy and overloaded boats, and that they should lose their life."

"Closing borders is not the answer," he added. "Countries should guarantee the rights of the refugees and act according to the spirit of the 1951 Convention, to assist those in need, to welcome them, and treat them on the same level as citizens."

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