Welcoming Refugees and Migrants: 
Catholic Narratives and the Challenge of Inclusion

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Abstract

Faith communities play important roles in welcoming and including migrants into their new home societies, both globally and in the United States. This paper calls on the Roman Catholic faith community in the United States to draw on both its history as an immigrant community and its normative resources to strengthen its role in welcoming refugees and migrants and including them in ongoing U.S. social life. It shows that through its history U.S. Catholicism created a large network not only of parishes but also of schools, health care facilities, and social service agencies to help integrate its immigrant members into U.S. social life. Today, however, survey data suggest that a significant number of white Catholics have forgotten much of their own history as refugees and immigrants. Thus, efforts to strengthen Catholic contributions to the integration of immigrants in the U.S. should both widely disseminate the normative values that have made church leaders like Pope Francis strong advocates on behalf of refugees and migrants, and seek to reactivate the Catholic community’s memory of its own refugee and migrant history. Reawakening this memory will give greater vitality to the normative commitment to welcome and integrate newcomers.
I. The Importance of Faith-Based Support

Religious communities play an important role in the efforts to assist to refugees, other displaced people, and migrants today, both globally and in the United States. The story of the contributions made by faith communities and their agencies in assisting the displaced and others on the move has not always received the attention it deserves in policy-oriented and academic studies of migration. In very recent years, however, this appears to be changing. In the world of action and policy, for example, the 2012 Annual Dialogue sponsored by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was devoted to faith and the protection of the displaced. The dialogue affirmed the importance of partnerships between the High Commissioner's office and faith-based agencies. It called for the enhancement of what the report called “faith literacy” among UNHCR staff, implying that appreciation of the role of faith-based efforts could be improved.¹ The consultation led to the writing of a further document titled “Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders,” which declared that “The call to ‘welcome the stranger,’ through protection and hospitality, and to honor the stranger or those of other faiths with respect and equality, is deeply rooted in all major religions.”²

On the academic side, the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford organized a workshop on the issue of “faith-based humanitarianism in contexts of forced migration.” The conference generated a special issue of the Journal of Refugee Studies on this theme. In addition, several helpful books on the role of faith based responses to humanitarian crises and
refugees have been published recently. These include Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein’s *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism* and Peter Stamatov’s *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism: Religion, Empire, and Advocacy.* These and other recent initiatives led Jeff Crisp, an experienced expert in the refugee field, recently to ask whether faith-based action might be an emerging “hot topic” in the study of refugee response.

While the growing recognition of the role played by religiously affiliated agencies in response to the displaced and other migrants is encouraging to those in the religious community, the need for such an increase in the attention given to faith-based action is rather surprising. Faith-based agencies have long been important actors in assisting and resettling displaced people. This is evident not only from the role of religion in the rise of the humanitarian movement but also from the extent of the work faith-based humanitarian organizations continue to do today. The annual budgets of both secular and religiously affiliated humanitarian agencies is a rough indicator of the scope of their work. Consider these numbers. The 2016 operating budget of the secular Oxfam International Confederation was slightly over one billion dollars ($1,195 million), while that of the religiously linked WorldVision International was nearly twice as large at a bit over two billion dollars ($2,153 million). Similarly, the secular Médecins sans Frontières had a budget slightly over one billion dollars ($1,173 million) while the US branch of Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, was just under a billion ($970 million). Were the figures available for the entire Caritas Internationalis network, they would be substantially larger than for any secular relief and assistance organization.

Within the United States itself, the role of faith-based organizations in resettling refugees is also significant. Six of the nine agencies that the US government relies on to resettle displaced people within the United States are faith based: Church World Service, Episcopal Migration
Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services, and World Relief. From 1987 to 2016, slightly more that 1 million refugees were resettled in the U.S. Among these, the Catholic community’s Migration and Refugee Services resettled approximately thirty percent of the overall total. This amounts to more refugees than have been resettled by any nation other than the United States itself. The work of this national Catholic agency is carried out through over 100 diocesan offices across the country. In addition, in recent decades, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services have welcomed more than 500,000 refugees and migrants, the Evangelical organization World Relief has resettled more than 250,000 refugees, and the oldest resettlement organization in the world, HIAS (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), has helped more than 4.5 million people escape persecution since its founding. HIAS it continues its active resettlement work today. The more recently founded Islamic Relief USA has worked to provide humanitarian aid for refugees over its 25 years existence—from Bosnian refugees in Europe, to Kosovars settling in the United States in the late 1990s, to Syrians in numerous countries today. The global and U.S. roles of faith-based agencies support Michael Barnett’s observation that “It is impossible to study humanitarianism without being impressed by the importance of religion.”

II. The Story of U.S. Catholic Work for Inclusion

Why is this so? A sketch of several important aspects of the Catholic response to refugees and migrants may lead to a better understanding of the role faith communities can play. The first aspect is historical and the second normative. After these sketches, several of the
challenges the Catholic community faces today will be noted, followed by suggestions about how response to the needs of migrants and refugees, particularly by the Catholic community, might be strengthened in the U.S. today.

Historically, the Catholic community of the United States, like all groups of U.S. citizens except Native Americans, has been an immigrant community from the first days of its presence in this country. Also like other immigrant groups, many Catholics came to the United States because of political or religious persecution in their countries of origin. Thus, a significant number of Catholic migrants to the U.S. were refugees by today’s standards. Catholicism is somewhat distinctive; however, in the way it created major institutions in many sectors of social life to help meet the needs of newly arrived migrants and refugees. When Catholic immigrants arrived in the United States, they were often regarded as threats to the more or less established Protestant presence in U.S. politics and culture. In response to this situation, the U.S. Catholic church created institutions in many domains of life to provide support for recently arrived members who faced prejudice and opposition from those who had been in the country longer.

These institutions included parishes, of course, many of which used the home languages of the new arrivals. The pastors of these parishes were often immigrants themselves. The Catholic community generated numerous new communities of religious sisters to carry out ministries to the new immigrants, in the parishes, in schools, in assistance to those who were poor, and in the provision of health care.

The U.S. Catholic community also created schools to meet the educational needs of their recently members. These schools played important roles in helping the immigrants adapt to their new society and to succeed within it. What began as a school here and a school there rapidly evolved into a vast educational network. This network included elementary and secondary
schools as well as colleges and eventually universities. The pressure to create this educational system arose from the church’s desire to educate newly arrived Catholic immigrants in their own faith, to be sure. It was also the result of the fact that Catholics were not often not welcomed with respect in the growing U.S. public school system. This led to the creation of a network of primary and secondary schools where today 150,000 educators serve 1.9 million students.\textsuperscript{10} On the level of higher education, it generated the creation of what today has become a network of 200 Catholic colleges and universities serving just under a million students.\textsuperscript{11} This educational network initially arose from the effort to respond to the needs of migrants. It played a highly effective role in helping integrate newcomers into U.S. society, both on the level of culture and economically as well.

Similar institutional initiatives to meet the needs of Catholic immigrants also occurred in health care. The founding of hospitals by the Catholic community was, of course, a response to the Christian call to provide care for the sick and the dying, just as it was in other faith communities that initiated health care facilities and continue to support them today. In the Catholic community, however, the scope of the church’s efforts in health care was also due to the recognition that as migrants and refugees, Catholic newcomers would need special assistance if they were to receive the health care they needed in their new land. The result of this effort was the Catholic community’s creation of a health-care network that today includes 600 hospitals and 1,600 long-term care facilities in all 50 states, making it the largest group of nonprofit health care providers in the nation. Today, Catholic hospitals care for one out of every six hospitalized patients in America.\textsuperscript{12} The scope and quality of this network is due, in part, to the Catholic church’s recognition that effective ministry to the needs of its immigrant members required a significant institutional response in the sphere of health care.
Numerous other areas in the life of the Catholic community have been shaped by this immigrant history. As a community of immigrants, the church recognized the needs of its members directly from its own experience. Catholics knew well that immigrants are often not well received in their new countries, that they may face prejudices that impede their integration into their new land, and that they will need pastoral and institutional support if they are to sustain both their faith and their human dignity. Thus, both the experience and the self-interest of the immigrant Catholic community has given it a shape and institutional structure that should enable it to support the integration of new migrants today.

III. Normative Commitments

Before turning to some of the reasons why this history is not as well remembered and acted upon as is desirable, it will be useful to sketch some of the normative grounds within the Catholic religious tradition that in the past have called the church to respond to the needs of migrants and that should continue to do so today. Of course, virtually all religious communities have theological and ethical traditions that call them to assist migrants. For example, both Judaism and Christianity hold that all persons are brothers and sisters in a single human family no matter what their nationality or ethnicity. Every person has been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), possessing a dignity and worth that reaches across the borders between nation states. Respect is due not only to one’s co-citizens but also to migrants and refugees. Indeed, each of great monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam traces its origins back to the Patriarch Abraham, who was himself a migrant from the home of his kinsfolk to the land of Canaan. The identity of Jews is shaped by the story of the Exodus—a
migration from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land of God’s promise. The New Testament portrays Jesus as the leader of a new Israel, who just after his birth had to flee persecution with Mary and Joseph, becoming a refugee in Egypt. Muslims measure time from Muhammad’s *hijra*, or migration, from Mecca to Medina, the founding event of the Muslim community. The founding of each of these major faiths has migration across borders as one of its key elements. Thus, each tradition possesses normative reasons for coming to the aid of people in crisis and for helping resettle those on the move. It is true, of course, that religious communities sadly sometimes contribute to the conflicts that drive people from their homes. Nevertheless, the core normative values of these religious traditions, when properly interpreted, call their followers to work to prevent such conflicts. If conflict occurs, they are called to protect and assist those who are affected.\(^{13}\)

In addition to these normative perspectives drawn from the Bible, the Roman Catholic tradition relies on reason and natural law thinking to provide secular warrants for its approach. Roman Catholic social ethics draws on an understanding of justice that can address the plight of the displaced in religiously pluralistic contexts. This understanding of justice insists that treating people with their dignity as members of the human community requires supporting their active participation as agents in society.\(^{14}\) Conversely, the injustices that lead to humanitarian emergencies frequently take the form of exclusion—denying people the active engagement in society they need to live with dignity. The United States Catholic bishops stressed the close link between justice and active social inclusion when they insisted that “Basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons.” Put negatively, "The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race."\(^{15}\) Pope Francis calls
this "marginalization"—exclusion from social life and from being able to share in the common
good of the human community. He argues forcefully that justice requires that we say “thou shalt
not” to such exclusion.  

Exclusion from active participation in social life society is a harm often faced by refugees
and other migrants. Forced migrants are prevented from sharing in the common good of their
home societies and, in the worst cases, even excluded from the common good the larger human
family. Precisely because they have no community to call home, refugees and other forcibly
displaced people lack the social and community support needed to attain the minimal
requirements of human dignity. To force people to live this way cuts them off from elemental
conditions of human well-being. It is one of the most basic forms of injustice, for being forced
to flee tells the displaced that, in effect, they simply do not count as human beings.  Forced
displacement, therefore is by its very nature a denial of human rights. Migrants who have moved
more voluntarily sometimes face such exclusion in their new lands as well. They too often face
xenophobic forms of cultural, ethnic, or religious prejudice. They often need support and help to
achieve the integration they will need to live in their new society with dignity.

Thus, a normative vision of active participation in community as a prerequisite of human
dignity is at the heart of the Catholic community’s response to refugees and migrants. The
norms of the Catholic tradition call for the creation of agencies that serve those displaced by
emergencies, for assistance in resettling forced migrants, and for efforts to help newly arrived
immigrants become at home in their new lands.

This normative vision is at the heart of the activities of Pope Francis, activities that have
made him perhaps the world’s most visible advocate on behalf of the refugees and migrants
today. Through his writings, speeches, and actions, Pope Francis has been vigorously calling
both the Catholic and larger global communities to welcome those fleeing danger as refugees. Early in his pontificate, Francis traveled to the island of Lampedusa, to which many displaced people have fled across the Mediterranean seeking safety from the conflicts in their home countries. Tragically, many have died en route, when the makeshift boats that they saw as vehicles of hope became vehicles of death. At Lampedusa, Francis challenged Europeans not to allow their consciences to become indifferent to the suffering of these refugees. Indeed the Pope raised the specter that in the globalized world of today, we are in danger of falling into a “globalized indifference,” where too many “have become used to the suffering of others: it doesn’t affect me; it doesn’t concern me; it’s none of my business!”\textsuperscript{18} When he visited the Greek island of Lesbos, to which many displaced Syrians have fled from the conflict in their country, Francis called Europe to “to build bridges” rather than “putting up walls. In the Catholic normative vision articulated by the Pope, national borders are in no way absolute. Borders are subordinate to the respect due to the shared dignity of every person as an image of God. Welcoming the refugee and the migrant is both a Christian duty and a human obligation.

In his World Day of Peace Message in 2018, the pope affirmed four criteria that measure the adequacy of response to refugees and migrants. Refugees and migrants should be received with welcome, expanding legal pathways so they can find new homes where their rights will be secure. They should be protected in their dignity, especially the dignity of those who sometimes face particular dangers, such as women and children. Their full development as human persons should be promoted, for example through access to all levels of education. They should be integrated into their new community in ways that enable them to be active and respected participants in the life of society.\textsuperscript{19} Pope Francis’s special concern for the displaced has been evident from the way he has repeatedly addressed these requirements. It is also particularly
evident from the fact that when he established a new Vatican Office whose responsibilities include overseeing church response to migrants and refugees, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, he placed the section of this office dealing with migration under his own personal direction.²⁰

Pope Francis stressed his concern for migrants and refugees in the U.S. context in his speech to the joint session of the U.S. Congress in 2015. Francis noted that he himself was the son of immigrants and that many in the Congress were also descended from immigrants. He called the members of Congress, and all Americans through them, to welcome those seeking asylum and protection. He challenged the United States not to be “taken aback by their numbers,” but to remember the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Mt 7:12).”²¹ The Pope’s speech was very well received by members of congress, by the larger Catholic community, and by the public at large.

Thus, we can point to several quite positive ways that the Catholic church is assisting migrants and refugees. The church provides concrete forms of assistance to migrants and refugees through parishes, schools, hospitals, social agencies, and a host of other institutions. It helps integrate migrants and refugees into U.S. social and cultural life through church community life and other forms of social support. Teaching and advocacy by church leaders call on the US and its people to welcome migrants and refugees and to develop public policy that treat them with respect and hospitality.

IV. Challenges for the Catholic Community Today
Despite these church contributions, however, not all is well. Recent surveys by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and the Brookings Institution showed that in 2016 42% of all Catholics and 51% of white Catholics strongly favored or favored a border wall with Mexico, while 41% of the entire U.S. population had such a preference. The same survey indicated that 42% of all Catholics and 52% of white Catholics supported a temporary ban on admitting Muslim immigrants to the U.S., while 40% of U.S. population as a whole held such a preference. In a similar way, 44% of all Catholics and 49% of white Catholics favored banning Syrian refugees from entering the U.S., while 44% of the U.S. population as a whole did so. Unsurprisingly, Latino Catholics showed notably lower levels of support for a US/Mexico wall or for bans of Muslim immigrants or Syrian refugees. These data suggest, however, that the Catholic population as a whole holds opinions not very different from the attitudes of the broader U.S. population. White Catholics are, in fact, less likely to express welcoming attitudes to migrants and refugees than is the U.S. population as large. Indeed, the negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees is higher among white Catholics than in any other religious ethnic groups except white evangelicals.

This is quite surprising given the fact that the ancestors these white Catholics were all migrants and were in many cases refugees. Further, the Pope and bishops have been appealing to the Catholic population to welcome the stranger and advocating for public policies supportive of immigrants. The Catholic church’s vast institutional network of parishes, schools, health care and social service agencies were developed to serve migrants, so one would expect these institutions to continue to express Catholic norms today and to help shape the value commitments of members of the Catholic community in distinctive ways. Indeed, recent research by the Center for Migration Studies in collaboration with several Catholic migration-
oriented institutions has shown that Catholic institutions are today carrying out important ministries that aid in the integration of immigrants and refugees. These services include religious education, pastoral services, youth ministry, pastoral counseling, education, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, naturalization services, legal services, counseling, and interpretation/translation services. A large number of these Catholic institutions are also educating their broader faith community about issues affecting immigrants. Eighty seven percent of social and charitable entities carry out educational programs focused on the needs of migrants and refugees, and fifty five percent of parishes and schools do so as well. 23

Despite these important contributions, however, the Catholic Immigrant Integration Surveys conducted by the Center for Migration Studies and several other Catholic agencies highlighted two distressing concerns. First, many of those surveyed in Catholic social and charitable agencies (twenty-eight percent) saw racism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and preference for restrictive immigration policies as the biggest obstacle for immigrant integration. Though the survey does not make this explicit, it is likely that a significant part of this anti-immigrant sentiment was detected in the Catholic community itself. The second most frequently named obstacle to integration of migrants was institutional and organizational: lack of adequate funding, capacity, commitment, and preparedness to receive newly arriving groups.

These obstacles suggest that despite its long history as a community of immigrants and contrary to the efforts of church leadership to energize support for new arrivals to this country, the church’s ministry is falling short of the goals it is pursuing. This shortfall seems especially severe among white Catholics. It would be a mistake, of course, to conclude that the church’s educational, ministerial, and advocacy efforts are not having positive effects, for what Catholic attitudes would be in the absence of these efforts is not known. Nevertheless, that fact that
PRRI/Brookings data suggest a white Catholic is likely to hold the same attitudes toward migrants and refugees as does the statistically average American suggests that more effective ministry, education, and advocacy are needed. This is also implied by the fact that many in Catholic ministries see the values held by local communities and the insufficient support for the institutions that aid migrants as important obstacles to genuine integration of migrants.

What, then, can be done to strengthen that Catholic community’s contribution to the integration of migrants and refugees? Several possible steps appear likely to help, though developing an adequate response will require further research.

First, enabling Catholic parishes, schools, hospitals, and social service agencies to continue doing what they are doing for migrants and refugees but to do it better and more effectively will be important. These institutions have a rich history of successfully aiding and integrating refugees and migrants into U.S. society. Helping them remember their history and how much of their earlier work arose in response to the needs of refugees and migrants will encourage them to continue such work and to strengthen it today. Improved response by these institutions will also require recruiting to leadership positions larger numbers of recent immigrants and from the second and third generation immigrant communities. If Catholic parishes, schools, hospitals, and social service agencies are to serve immigrants better, having leaders from immigrant communities will be important. Recent surveys have indicated that 75% of those who access Catholic social service agencies are migrants, while only 33% of the paid staff of these agencies and 22% of their leaders are immigrants. There is a similar gap in parish life, where 39% of those who regularly attend mass are migrants, but only about 20% of parish leaders and paid staff are immigrants. This does not bode well for the likely influence these church agencies will have in assisting immigrants to integrate into their new society.
Second, the attention provided by church agencies to migrant youth seems to need particular attention, for it seems to be falling short of what is needed in a notable way. Roughly two thirds of younger, millennial generation Catholics who attend mass regularly are Hispanic.\textsuperscript{25} Church programs to meet their distinctive educational and social need to be strengthened. Regrettably, the schools that have traditionally provided much of the Catholic community’s support for immigrant youth are considerably fewer in number today than in the past. Developing alternative parish and educational programs for immigrant Catholic youth will be important. Changing such trends will require both effective leadership and, of course, increased funding.

Third, the Catholic community could deepen and strengthen its educational programs on refugee and migration issues among its members in the pew, especially among those in the white community. This, of course, should include highlighting the challenge of the migration issue today and the great need of the 68 million forcibly displaced persons in our world. It seems possible, however, that heavy emphasis on the magnitude of the 68 million forcibly displaced could be demoralizing and suggest that the problem is simply too large to be dealt with. A more effective approach will likely be to stress the fact that the ancestors of almost all U.S. Catholics were themselves immigrants or refugees and they and their descendants have achieved a lot in their new country. The success of so many Catholics today shows that migrants and refugees can become successful. In the same vein, highlighting the facts about the important contributions made by migrants and refugees to American society today will be important. For example, efforts to increase Catholic support for refugees should stress that refugees make important contributions to American society. The median income of refugees in this country is that same as the income of those born in the U.S., their employment rate is higher that of
indigenous persons, and, on average, they have higher skill levels that do those born in the United States. Stressing the positive history of achievement by newcomers is more likely to inspire support than is stressing how big the problem is.

Fourth, the current crisis of leadership in the Catholic community due to the clerical sex abuse catastrophe is surely contributing to the divergence between the positions of the U.S. bishops and the Pope on migrants and stances of the people in the pew on the other. The sex abuse crisis is not the main source of the shortfall in Catholic responses to the needs of migrants and refugees today, for this crisis is a recent development. However, lay Catholics are unlikely to take seriously the positions advocated by the bishops and the Pope until it is clear that church leadership is fully accountable for the abuse that has occurred. It is also likely that increased lay participation in church leadership, especially by persons from immigrant backgrounds, will itself strengthen church response to the needs of migrants and refugees.

These are but a few suggestions for how faith communities, especially the Catholic community, could respond more adequately to the challenge of welcoming migrants and refugees to the United States today. Communities of faith, including the Catholic community, have a positive history of effective response to the needs of migrants, and they continue to make important contributions today. The needs, however, are great, and these needs call for better response. A few suggestions have been made here on how to strengthen what the Catholic community is doing. How to improve the Catholic response, however, surely needs further research. One can hope that the suggestions made here will encourage some of the needed further reflection.
Notes


5 The author has assembled the figures cited here from the annual reports of the agencies involved.


resettling-refugees/499421/; HIAS, “Who We Are” and “What We Do,” on HIAS webpage, at https://www.hias.org/.

8 Islamic Relief USA, “What We Do, Aid for Refugees,” online at: http://irusa.org/refugee-crisis/


10 See National Catholic Educational Association website under “About Us,” at https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/About_Us/NCEA/About/About_Us.aspx?hkey=5470d2fe-6f67-4aae-8b5b-4385a9a39082

11 See Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities website, under: ”About Catholic Higher Ed,” at: https://www.accunet.org/About-Catholic-Higher-Education

12 Catholic Health Association of the United States, Catholic Health Association of the United States: A Passionate Voice for Compassionate Care, 2, online at: https://www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/cha-corporate-brochure-2018.pdf?sfvrsn=0


14 For a understanding of justice, human dignity, and participation that is both similar to that adopted here and relevant to humanitarian action in a religiously pluralistic or secular context, see Larissa Fast, “Unpacking the Principle of Humanity: Tensions and Implications,” International Review of the Red Cross 97, no. 897/898 (2016), 111–131.


17 This is made explicit by the U.S. Bishops when they define human rights “the minimum conditions for life in community.” See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, at no. 79.


24 Kerwin and Barron, “Building Structures of Solidarity and Instruments of Justice,” 42.

25 Kerwin and Barron, “Building Structures of Solidarity and Instruments of Justice,” 42.