

Mass Migration: A European Challenge

European Council of Religious Leaders Brixen Declaration 2016

We, the European Council of Religious Leaders met on 11-13th May 2016 in Brixen, Italy, one of the most sensitive points on the route for migrants from southern to northern Europe.

Religion in Europe remains as strong and relevant as ever, and is a steadying factor in many people's lives today. The role and success of the European Council of Religious Leaders is particularly important, and we are determined as a Council to continue to develop the organisation whilst retaining and drawing on our multi-religious history and traditions.

Europe is currently facing the type and breadth of challenges that have not been seen for a generation: high unemployment, mass migration, the threat of terrorism as an effect of conflicts across the globe, and political and economic problems in many countries.

The significant influx of migrants and refugees into Europe demands a political and humanitarian response. The current situation presents an opportunity for the European community to demonstrate the advantages of regional collaboration, and for religious communities and leaders to show their enormous capacity for compassion, kindness and solidarity. Religious and cultural encounters as a result of migration have happened for as long as people and religions have existed, and served to enrich civilisations and communities, and helped teach us humility, compassion and respect.

However, the mass migration of people across continents also creates significant challenges. Many of the migrants and refugees coming from conflict affected countries may have few material possessions and will need substantial support on arrival in host countries. Many will also have experienced significant trauma, and this will have a profound impact on their psychological well-being. Large numbers of people arriving in communities will put pressure on existing resources and infra-structure in European countries where the social and economic balance is already fragile. Add to this the possibility of inter-religious and sectarian conflict within migrant and local communities and the scale of the challenges become clear.

We firmly believe that religions possess much-needed wisdom, and the spiritual and ethical resources, to help deal with these problems in a loving and constructive way. We see these challenges as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth for all. We implore people of all religions and none across Europe to work together to help all those in need.

The European Council of Religious Leaders present these suggestions and recommendations to our religious communities, and to all those committed at a political and social level to just and sustainable peace in Europe, and throughout the world.

- 1) We are deeply saddened by the suffering of many people due to social, political and financial injustice, and conflicts in many parts of the world. In particular we condemn mass atrocities.
- 2) We unreservedly support freedom of religion and belief for everyone, but also recognise the difficult balance inherent in providing the necessary resources for migrants and refugees to practice their religion, whilst also respecting the customs and identity of host communities. We recognise that there is no easy solution to this problem, and we will work to improve our understanding of the needs of migrants and refugees.
- 3) We believe those that fear the consequences of mass migration should not be labelled xenophobic or bigoted, and their fears should be listened to, respected and addressed. We should also be willing to remind migrants of their responsibilities of respecting and adhering to the laws and traditions of host countries.
- 4) We are in admiration of the many religious communities and others already feeding, clothing, supporting and nurturing vulnerable and desperate migrants and refugees. We want to express our utmost appreciation for the kind and tremendous efforts of individuals, civil society, and faith based organisations carrying out this important work.
- 5) We are conscious that in some conflicts religion is being implicated in violence, but it would be unjust to see it as the only or principal cause. We commit ourselves to promoting mutual understanding and respect between all faiths.
- 6) We appeal to the United Nations, European institutions and public authorities to assist refugees to the best of their ability. We are determined to be more active in promoting peace and influencing policies across Europe, and commit to assisting respective political leaders, and the media, to be more positive and proactive in their approach to migration.
- 7) We recognise the need for psychological support which migrants and refugees may require. We urge religious groups to draw on their vast spiritual and religious reserves to ensure that those who have suffered from traumatic experiences feel safe and respected in the host communities.

Strengthened and sustained by our faith, prayer and religious values, we want to bear witness to our solidarity and concrete commitment to action even in this traumatic situation. We support all efforts to establish legal channels to assist migrants and asylum seekers.

At the same time we encourage the human community to strive for the attainable goal of creating the conditions where people are not compelled to leave their countries. We advocate the abolition of war, respect of fundamental human rights and a fair economic system throughout the world. Rooted in a culture of solidarity, and together with all people

of goodwill whether religious or secular, we feel a great responsibility to the young and abandoned minors in particular. We want to offer them a home environment where they are able to develop their precious potential for the future.

Finally we are aware that inter-cultural and inter-religious cooperation requires patience; it is an unavoidable and fruitful way towards a common good. We remind ourselves of the universal rule: do for others what we would like them to do for us.