

Xenophobia, Racism and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration

Rome, 18 - 20 September 2018

Organised jointly by the dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (Vatican City), and the World Council of Churches (Geneva) in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Vatican City)

Final message released after the conference:

We profess our faith in the God of Jesus Christ, and we believe that humanity is created and loved by God and that human beings are equal in dignity and are entitled to the same fundamental human rights.

1. In a global context marked by migration within and between countries, we participants in the Conference “Xenophobia, Racism, and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration” gathered in Rome from 18-20 September 2018. Conscious of a rise in xenophobic and racist reactions to refugees and migrants, we have striven to describe, analyze, understand and address the exclusion, marginalization, stigmatization and criminalization of migrants and refugees, and the justifications for these attitudes and discourses which now exist in several different parts of the world, even within the churches.

2. As Christians from different denominations and regions – together with representatives of inter-religious, civil society and inter-governmental partners – the common basis for our reflections is the conviction that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights and equally to be respected and protected, and as a consequence we are called by God to resist evil, to act justly, and pursue peace to transform the world. While we seek and promote dialogue for the resolution of differences on any of the issues raised in this message, this core conviction is fixed and permanent.

3. (a) Migration – the movement of people – is an inherent feature of the human condition. It belongs to the whole history of humanity – past, present and future – and the entire biblical narrative. We are all migrants and sojourners, and we are all members of the one human family.

(b) Recent drivers of forced displacement and migration have included unresolved brutal conflicts and the lingering consequences of global economic

crisis and austerity policies, as well as other root causes such as extreme poverty, food insecurity, lack of opportunity, and insecurity. The advancing impacts of climate change will likely add significantly to the drivers of displacement.

(c) While recognizing the right of refugees to return to their country of origin and live there in dignity and security, we affirm and uphold the institution of asylum for those fleeing from armed conflicts, persecution or natural disaster. We also invoke respect for the rights of all people on the move, regardless of their status.

(d) While migration generally contributes positively to both countries of destination and countries of origin, we recognize that significant challenges are still associated with migration, particularly in the area of protecting the rights of undocumented migrants.

4. Using multidisciplinary insights, lived experiences, and testimonies from different religious traditions to better understand the causes and effects of hate speech against migrants and refugees, and of tensions between countries and between social, cultural, or religious communities in the context of global migration, we have striven to grasp what is at stake in the encounter with other human beings made vulnerable by the experience of war or poverty, and seeking asylum, protection and dignity.

5. (a) The way in which a person made vulnerable by violence or economic precariousness is looked at is, indeed, at the heart of our reflection. Xenophobia, which primarily means “fear of the foreigner,” is expressed by an attitude that excludes and confines the other in their predicament and by forms and structures of indifference and rejection, extending even to the denial of assistance in emergencies and for survival. It is therefore necessary to address the fear of the other and to challenge the exclusion and marginalization of migrants and refugees. This fear can reveal a complex personal or collective relationship with the past, the present or the future, and expresses the anxiety of losing one’s identity, security, possessions and power in confronting the challenges of life and the future.

(b) It is also necessary to acknowledge the fear experienced by someone forced to flee their home and country due to vulnerability caused by armed conflict, destructive national and regional policies, persecution, natural disaster or abject poverty.

6. (a) Race is a social construct which claims to explain and justify the separation between human groups by advancing physical, social, cultural and religious criteria. Racism is the systemic and systematic impact of actions taken against groups of people based on the colour of their skin. It separates people from each other in the name of a false notion of the purity and superiority of a specific community. It is an ideological stance expressed through marginalization, discrimination and exclusion against certain persons, minorities, ethnic groups or communities.

(b) The definition of racial discrimination in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (art. 1.1) highlights “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

(c) Racism creates and maintains the vulnerability of members of certain groups, denying them their rights and their existence, and seeks to justify their oppression. In this sense racism is a sin, in both its personal and systemic expressions, radically incompatible with the Christian faith. It is often present both in countries from which migrants come and to which they go. People of faith must condemn racism because it denies human dignity and the mutual belonging to the one human family, and defaces the image of God in every human being.

7. (a) Populist nationalism is a political strategy that seeks to rely on and promote the fears of individuals and groups in order to assert the need for an authoritarian political power to protect the interests of the dominant social or ethnic group established on a particular territory. It is in the name of this “protection” that populist leaders justify the refusal to offer refuge, to receive and to integrate individuals or groups from other countries or different cultural or religious contexts.

(b) However, to refuse to receive and help those in need is contrary to the example and calling of Jesus Christ. Claiming to protect Christian values or communities by shutting out those who seek safe refuge from violence and suffering is unacceptable, undermines Christian witness in the world, and raises up national boundaries as idols.

(c) We call on all Christians and all those who support fundamental human rights to reject such populist initiatives incompatible with Gospel values. This should inspire political life and public discourse, and inform fundamental choices especially at the time of elections.

(d) We also call on all media platforms to refrain from disseminating divisive and dehumanizing ideas and initiatives, and commit to engaging media for the promotion of positive messages

8. (a) In this reflection and dialogue, we observe the importance of narrative and memory, at personal, community and institutional levels. The scriptural foundations that bring us together in this conference remind us that the experience of migration is a constant theme in the Abrahamic traditions. The biblical narrative is one of people on the move. And they discover, in their journey, that God accompanies them. The duty of hospitality, common to all the sons and daughters of Abraham, is evoked in the reception of the "strangers" by Sarah and Abraham (Genesis 18, 1 - 16), in the teaching of the prophets, and by Jesus himself who identifies with the stranger (Matthew 25:35-40) and calls all believers to welcome the stranger as an act of love inspired by faith.

(b) We recognize that the concerns of many individuals and communities who feel threatened by migrants – whether for security, economic or cultural identity reasons – have to be acknowledged and examined. We wish to be in genuine dialogue with all those who hold such concerns. But based upon the principles of our Christian faith and the example of Jesus Christ, we seek to raise a narrative of love and of hope, against the populist narrative of hate and of fear.

9. The churches and all Christians have the mission to proclaim that every human being is worthy of respect and protection. The churches are also called to live out, on a daily basis, the welcome of the stranger but also the protection and the mutual encouragement to all – each in the diversity of their origins and history - to participate according to their own talents in the building of a society that seeks peaceful well-being in equality and rejecting all discrimination. Churches are constantly called to be places where we experience and learn respect for diversity and where we rejoice in the encounter and the mutual enrichment. This is particularly important in the context of pastoral care, preaching and solidarity initiatives, within the churches, and with special attention to initiatives for and with young people.

10. We are called to accompany and hold accountable those who exercise power and participate directly in decisions that affect the future of the human community, at national and international levels. The advice that all believers can offer may be inspired by the “golden rule,” common to different traditions, according to which one should “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). This “golden rule” is reflected in fundamental human rights, which are conditions to be achieved for others as well as for ourselves, and call for the construction of social cohesion. Only an inclusive approach that considers all dimensions of the human being and calls for the participation of each and every one in society can effectively fight against discrimination and exclusion.

11. We encourage further efforts by the United Nations and its member states to “eliminate all forms of discrimination, condemn and counter expressions, acts and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, violence, xenophobia and related intolerance against all migrants” in the context of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (Objective 17), and to “combat all forms of discrimination and promote peaceful coexistence between refugee and host communities” in the context of the Global Compact on Refugees (para 84), which explicitly recognise “the power and positive impact of civil society, faith-based organizations, and the media” (ibid) – both to be formally adopted by the end of the year. These two Global Compacts, having been drafted with the active participation of churches, civil society, academia, the private sector, and governments, provide useful, human rights-based global policy frameworks that should be used by all stakeholders in fighting xenophobia and racism against migrants and refugees.

12. Churches are important actors in civil society and political life, and we urge them to participate, in close cooperation with inter-religious and other partners, in political, economic and social affairs, in caring for the planet “our common home”, and in caring for those who are suffering, by building social protection networks, through advocacy and by proposing legal and ethical principles (such as the Holy See’s 20 action points for the Global Compacts). Good cooperation between faith communities, civil society actors, academics, economic and political actors is essential in the fight against xenophobia and racism.

13. (a) We participants in the Conference “Xenophobia, Racism, and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration” appeal to all believers who

affirm, in their own tradition, the dignity of the human person and solidarity among peoples, so that all instances of violations of fundamental human rights, xenophobia and racism, are steadfastly countered by education (including human rights education), the democratic process, dialogue between religions, law and love.

(b) We commit ourselves to work together for the transformation of unjust structures and systems which perpetuate themselves on the grounds of stability and security, and which create cultures and conditions which exclude others and deny the equal dignity and rights of all.

(c) We look for the churches to exercise leadership in raising critical consciousness among Christians of the complicity of some theologies in xenophobia and racism, for a radical disengagement from such theologies, and for the church to fully assume its role as conscience-keeper in this context.

(d) We express our solidarity with churches suffering under persecution or occupation.

(e) Churches are called to be places of memory, hope and love. In the name of Jesus, who shared the experience of the migrant and the refugee and offered the Word of hope to the excluded and the suffering, we commit even more strongly to the promotion of a culture of encounter and dialogue, recognizing God in the faces of migrants. For stronger than the way of death is the way of life and love.

Rome, 19 September 2018