

REFLECTIONS FROM PARTICIPATION IN “LIVING AND WITNESSING THE BORDER”

An International Conference on Migration, Borders and Reception

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DAY 4: MONDAY, OCTOBER 2—In Villa Niscemi with Institutions and Journalists, “The Migrant Frontier in the 21st Century”

In Europe, as in the United States, concerns about the rise of numbers of the world’s refugees has resulted sadly in a too-common rise of racism and resistance against them as well. While denominations and congregations consider ways for creative welcome and protection, European governments in recent months have been seeking instead to sign contracts with neighboring nations that “outsource” the work of keeping refugees from being able to access European shores. One such example is the “EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan” that was devised in early 2016; offering up to \$6.6 billion (and the promise of visa-free travel to the EU for Turkish citizens) in exchange for the government’s work to block asylum seekers from departing across the Aegean Sea towards Greece from Turkey. While migrant crossings dropped 80% in that region, it did not mean that the crisis was over.

Rather, much like the results of outsourcing by the US government which pays Mexico to try to keep Central American children from seeking asylum in the U.S., routes of migrants in both Europe and through Mexico have instead just become more dangerous. One “alternative route” in Europe—from North Africa across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy--has continued to expand its numbers of crossers to over 180,000 travelers last year. In response, Italy has focused not just on trying to secure its borders, but on now massively funding Libya to deter and interdict refugees seeking escape and asylum in Europe. Such contracts mask the root causes of refugees, keep challenges of refugees “invisible” to those who could assist, and were reported to us as often resulting in human rights abuses of refugees and greater instability within the governments with whom the contracts have been signed.

Yet churches and civil society groups have instead sought to tackle the challenges of refugees by developing creative pathways and structures of welcome in nations where legal entry options for migrants have been minimal. Any possibility for legal entry helps protect refugees from being subjected to traffickers and violence. Faith partners likewise are working to bring to light the negative human rights consequences of “outsourcing” contracts to deter and interdict refugees beyond EU shores. As conference participants discussed, the roles of our faith communities in response to global migration call us all to be ones committed to “uncover”—to uncover scripture’s prevalent urging to show compassion for sojourners; to uncover the humanity of the faces, experiences and suffering of migrants; to uncover the myths and untruths propagated that scapegoat refugees; and to uncover creative roles and spaces that allow faith partners to stand in solidarity and develop relationships of genuine support for refugees. Such roles recognize that human identity is rooted foundationally in our common creation by God—not in separateness based

upon borders. They recognize migrants as brothers and sisters, and are inspired by our Jesus who early in his life experienced migrant journeys and life as a foreigner, and who broke down walls and who sought to build unity.

Scholars who gathered with conference attendees at the site of the Mayor's offices on Monday provided overviews of historical migration that paint the broad landscape for global migrant challenges today. Historian Valerio Calzolaio reminded, "Before homo sapiens, there were no borders. The elephants had no borders." All humans initially came out of Africa, and spread across the Middle East—and only humans demonstrated the ability to evolve and cross borders. As seas and lands have changed shape, so also where humans have lived has altered, and ethnicities have diversified and mixed. World War I provided a turning point in attitudes of humans toward borders in the Twentieth Century, as the number of formal states quadrupled in decades following. While only 3% of persons migrated at the beginning of the 20th Century, now curiosity and a belief in the right and privilege to migrate has increased the prevalence of migration by choice.

Yet most disturbingly, significant pushes have exacerbated the reality of FORCED migration around the world; producing the world's highest number of refugees and asylum seekers in recent history. Not even officially counted yet in the number of the world's 66 million displaced persons and 22.5 million refugees are those whom Pope Francis calls "climate refugees," who must leave because of human consequences resulting from environmental disasters and climate change. Such concerns are taken into account in the Paris Agreement; necessary as Calzolaio recognizes environmental changes are likely to produce "between 100 million and 1 billion who are forced to flee by 2050." Since the Mediterranean connects three different continents from which migrants are likely to be pushed to flee, such concerns are enormous for Europe as it looks at its frontier of migrants in its future.

Maurizio Ambrosini, Sociologist at the University of Milan, discussed policies of exclusion of migrants as a battleground; outlining the current "multiplication and complexification of borders" in this time, as border discussions are "moving upwards" (of concern to international institutions and policies), "moving downward" (of interest to local authorities) and "moving outward" (related to private companies and employers). Nations around the world, he noted, are engaged in "rebordering" through techniques such as "denaturalization of borders" (i.e. through the deployment of drones and surveillance technologies), through returning to old techniques of wall building—as with the "Great Wall" of China propagated to separate "civilized from barbarians", and through providing support for the "migration industry" of those who help, detain, or prevent those who try to cross borders. EACH one of these techniques is likewise present not only in the European Union—but clearly within the United States, where he emphasized "the border between the U.S. and Mexico is the most militarized of anywhere two countries are not at war in the world."

Further evidence of borders as "battlegrounds" is visible through the rhetoric spread about migrants in Italy versus actual data regarding Italy's migrants. Whereas viewpoints are commonly held that the level of immigration is growing dramatically, immigration truly is remaining stable at about 8.2%. While concepts are widely held that the majority of migrants are asylum seekers, most are actually coming to Italy in order to provide work and to join families. While views are that most migrants are young and single men from Africa and the Middle East, most migrants are actually from European backgrounds, and are largely women and children. And while it is thought that most migrants are of Muslim background, most migrants are in actuality coming from primarily Christian countries. Such discrepancies in myths versus realities of migrants are strikingly similar to those of the U.S., too.