

Religion Helps Migrants: Roman Catholic Church and the Migrant Crisis During the Pontificate of Pope Francis

Andrzej Szabaciuk, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

Correspondence: andrzejszabaciuk@kul.pl

ABSTRACT

This essay evaluates the standpoint that the Roman Catholic Church has adopted regarding the European migrant crisis. Some countries feel a severe outflow of people due to mass labor migration; others must deal with the challenges as transit states, and others – enormous challenges generated by the influx of economic immigrants and refugees. The most popular theories of migration and public policies very often ignore the ethical component of migration. One of the entities that constantly emphasizes the humanitarian aspect of migration is the Holy See. Popes, beginning with Leo XIII, have repeatedly raised the issue of rights to a dignified life and decent work, and if it is necessary also to migrate in search of a safe shelter and a better life. Pope Francis, like his predecessors, referring to the problem of migration, puts people first. He emphasizes that all migration streams consist of individuals who deserve respect and care because we see in them the face of God. This paper concludes that the Church remains the significant international body impartial amidst the growing European schism on the migrant issue.

KEYWORDS

migration, refugees, Holy See, Pope Francis

The ethical aspect of migration processes is crucial, though it is not always accurately evaluated by researchers. It is worth noting that most migration theories focus on analyzing the migration phenomenon from the point of view of mass economic, sociological, demographic, or historical trends, in which human beings, their tragedies, and personal backgrounds often go off the table. They focus on it from macro perspectives that shape migration processes. Usually, the international scholarship covers humanitarian and ethical aspects of migration processes more minor than the economic or political ones. Migration itself is significantly politicized and securitized.¹

However, researchers have noticed the danger associated with the growing popularity of the discourse that defines migration processes as an existential threat in recent decades. This phenomenon has become particularly clear after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The use of migration by populists and the European far-right to mobilize society and gain popularity is a severe political and social challenge that the European Union is currently facing.² According to J. Hollifield, the liberal paradox of democratic states creates a specific situation in which, to maintain the economic development and competitiveness of a state, nations open to the flow of capital, goods, or services, but at the same time limit the influx of migrants, fearing political consequences of a liberal migration policy.³ Some scholars, referring to the issue of migration and its challenges, emphasized humanitarian values, regarding it to the achievements of Christian *Caritas* or the European enlightenment. Their analysis referred to the protection of human rights, global justice, solidarity, and Kantian ethics.⁴

The key to this approach is that migration is systematically increasing, as shown in the United Nations statistics. Christian ethics is one of the significant paradigms explaining the phenomenon of migration of people from the perspective of a religious person and postulating respect for every human being, regardless of their origin, religion, or level of wealth. It is about respecting fundamental human rights, rejecting the selfish narrative, and promoting a fairer distribution of goods in the age of globalization and new challenges facing the world, such as deepening income disparities, uneven demographic processes, climate change, etc. Christian ethics promote the attitude of openness and evoke the evangelical commitment of each person to support those in need.⁵

The article aims to analyze the importance of the issue of migration during the pontificate of Pope Francis. On the one hand, the study presents the position of Catholic Social Teaching. It should be emphasized that the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on helping people in need, including migrants and refugees, constitutes a coherent whole. To better understand the attitude of Pope Francis, it is necessary to place it in the context of Catholic Social Teaching on migration and the obligation to help migrants and refugees. The pontificate of Pope Francis was chosen as the period of in-depth analysis of the problem due to several important

1 Castles et al. 2014; Massey et al. 2006.

2 Givens et al. 2009, 2–18; Lazaridis, Wadia 2015, 2–16.

3 Hollifield 2004.

4 Juss 2006; Pevnick 2011; Zavediuk 2014.

5 Rajendra 2017.

reasons. First, the pontificate of Pope Francis coincided with a period of significant intensification of migration processes in the European Union, the apogee of so-called Europe's migrant crisis. The second reason is the importance of helping the needy, including migrants and refugees, in the teaching of Pope Francis, which he wanted to emphasize by choosing his name as head of the Catholic Church, referring to St. Francis of Assisi. The pontificate of Pope Francis is outstanding due to some symbolic gestures, including those towards refugees and the poor, through which he attracted the attention of the whole world and gained great popularity.

As a result, practically all the leading opinion-forming media globally commented on the Pope's gestures and deeds. His teaching is the subject of scientific analysis or a reference point for several research papers. Among research publications analyzing the teaching of Pope Francis on migration and assistance to refugees, there is the monograph edited by A. J. Lyon, C. A. Gustafson, P. C. Manuel¹, and the articles by P. Guzik² and J. Y. Tan.³

In this research, I show the importance of Christian ethics, and more specifically of Catholic Social Teaching, in addressing the problem of migrants and refugees during the pontificate of Pope Francis. I also analyzed the key papal documents, sermons, apostolic letters, and public statements to find keywords that help us reframe the migration discourse in Pope Francis' teaching.

Roman Catholic Social Teaching and Migration

The teaching of most Christian churches on the problem of migrants and refugees is based on the premises of the Holy Bible. In both the New and the Old Testaments, one can find examples describing the tragedy of people fleeing persecution and oppression. Examples are the Israelites' escape from Egypt and then wandering for 40 years in the desert; Jesus and Mary's escape to Egypt, where they could not find a safe place, described in the Gospel of St. Matthew: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me."⁴ It clearly shows that the duty of every Christian towards a stranger in need, including immigrants seeking a haven, is at the very center of Christian teaching, which translates into the attitude of individual Christian communities.

Drawing from evangelical sources, the Roman Catholic Church has stood up for victims. For this reason, the problem of moving in search of decent conditions to work and live has been present since the beginning of Catholic Social Teaching. In the encyclical of Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum* (1891), referring to the dramatic effects of the industrial revolution from the point of view of the living conditions of millions of people, especially workers, the right to work to support the family was presented as one of the fundamental human rights. His successors paid much attention to workers and immigrants, helping the needy, imprisoned, and wounded. Such activity was displayed by Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII.⁵

1 Lyon et al. 2018.

2 Guzik 2018.

3 Tan 2019.

4 Matthew, Chapter 25, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), accessed December 1, 2021, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/matthew/25>.

5 Marchetto 1989, 5–7.

In the apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia Nazarethana* (1952), Pius XII raised the problem of pastoral care over immigrant families. He emphasized that migrants have the right to live with dignity and work and that migration itself should be treated as a natural phenomenon observed on earth from its beginnings. The encyclical of John XXIII *Pacem in Terris* (1963) emphasized the human right to a dignified life, work in the place of birth, which should be made possible for them, and, if necessary, to go abroad. Lack of citizenship or restriction of other rights “does not deprive him of membership in the human family, nor of citizenship in that universal society, the common, worldwide fellowship of men.”

John Paul II continued the direction set in previous decades. As the “Pilgrim Pope,” he visited the farthest corners of the globe and repeatedly called for the protection of those excluded and discriminated against. In the encyclical *Redemptor Homini* (1979), he emphasized the ideas he developed during his scientific career, arguing that man is “the primary and fundamental way to the Church.” Referring to the issue of migrants, he adhered to this principle. He repeatedly stressed that one ought to perceive people in the first place, and political, social, and economic factors cannot be put before the good of man. The dignity of every person should be placed before everything else.

These problems especially concern people forced to leave their residence because of their political and religious beliefs, political violence, natural or man-made disasters. John Paul II was one of the first to raise the problem of people leaving their homes due to climate change. He spoke out against their discrimination, adding that while any migration involves separation, suffering, and longing for a native home, it could generate several positive phenomena, bringing new values and cultures to the host society.¹

Benedict XVI, like his predecessors, treated the right to migration as one of the fundamental human rights. He also emphasized that the right to free movement should accompany efforts to allow people to live in dignity on their land. In the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Benedict XVI emphasizes the links between poverty, unemployment, and decent working conditions. He unequivocally argues that any responsible development should also include a social aspect, focusing on creating appropriate working and living conditions, and providing children with the education that of a proper level.

It is worth noting that Benedict XVI treats migration processes as a phenomenon inextricably linked with socio-economic processes on a global scale. Migration is directly connected with the problem of over-exploitation of natural resources and growing wealth inequality in individual regions. In his opinion, it is necessary to develop standard forward-looking policies of international cooperation, including

“Close collaboration between the migrants’ countries of origin and their countries of destination; it should be accompanied by adequate international norms able to coordinate different legislative systems to safeguard the needs

1 Makowski 2016, 100–105.

and rights of individual migrants and their families, and at the same time, those of the host countries. No country can be expected to address today's problems of migration by itself."

Like John Paul II, Benedict XVI also emphasized that migration can significantly contribute to the broadly understood development of the host country and countries of origin through money transfers.

The Roman Catholic Church's approach to the refugee problem is firmly rooted in the teachings of Christ. Thereby it emphasizes the central importance of the human being in the population movement. No matter how large a population they cover, migration processes always consist of individual people, their tragedies, and life choices. The Church upholds the dignity of the human persons, their fundamental rights treated as human rights, and the basic social unit – a family. From the Church's standpoint, the right to free movement, decent work for a fair wage, and proper living conditions are among the elementary issues that a national government should secure.¹

Pope Francis and the Problem of Migrants

The issue of migration ignites public debate in contemporary Europe, where Roman Catholic Church also participates. Observing the waning influence of Christianity on the social sphere, some conservative European thinkers are concerned about the future of Europe, which, in their opinion, may cut itself off from its roots, giving way to Islam.²

Concern for preserving the Christian identity of Europe is close to the Roman Catholic Church. These fears were present in the reflections of Pope John Paul II. He hoped that the enlargement of the European Union to the East could benefit the secularized western part of the Continent. He saw a similar chance for spiritual development in the rapprochement with Eastern Christianity, emphasizing the importance of the spiritual heritage of "the second lung of Europe."³ Similar concerns were shared by Pope Francis, who attributed a unique role to Europe and European culture in the history of the world. The problem, however, is that Europe, which until now was a "mother," has now turned into a "grandmother," losing its vitality. The rejuvenation of the Old Continent is impossible in isolation from its cultural roots since Europe gained strength in cultural exchange with other cultures, managing to preserve its identity thanks to both the Christian foundations and the secular model of relations between the state and the Church.

Bearing this in mind, one may conclude that the problem of modern Europe is not refugees or economic migrants, but the identity crisis of the Old Continent. By losing their identity, European countries are also losing the ability to integrate refugees/immigrants into the hosting society.

The topic of helping immigrants and refugees has been close to Pope Francis from the beginning of his pontificate. He has often appealed to the world conscience

1 Guzik 2018, 109–111.

2 Fallaci 2006; Phillips 2007.

3 John Paul II 2005.

to stop the drama that has been taking place in the Mediterranean. After the Arab Spring in 2011, desperate attempts to enter Europe from the countries of the Middle East and North Africa claimed thousands of lives. According to the calculations of the International Organization for Migration, over 22,700 refugees died or were lost in the Mediterranean in 2013–2021.¹ To draw the world's attention to the drama taking place in this region, in July 2013, Pope Francis went to the Italian island of Lampedusa, where he prayed at the "boat graveyard," where the remains of migrant ships pile up and appealed for solidarity with the people in need. He emphasized that one cannot be indifferent to a human tragedy and strongly criticized "globalization of indifference."²

The topic of helping refugees occupies a special place in the teaching of Pope Francis. He recalls in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) the dramatic situation of victims of human trafficking and exhorts "all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis." Elsewhere he adds: "Christians should embrace with affection and respect Muslim immigrants to our countries in the same way that we hope and ask to be received and respected in countries of Islamic tradition."

On the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2014, he emphasized that on the one hand, mass migrations are a sign of our times. On the other hand, they "often reveal failures and shortcomings on the part of States and the international community." As he noted, it is particularly disturbing when migration is "not only involuntary but actually set in motion by various forms of human trafficking and enslavement." Joint actions at the international level are necessary to combat this phenomenon through cooperation based on solidarity and compassion. Often the cause of migration is violence, marginalization, discrimination, exploitation, and restrictive approaches to fundamental freedoms of either individuals or social groups. As he emphasizes, running away from extreme poverty and violence is combined with hope for a better life or is an attempt to save lives. For this reason, it is also necessary to change the attitude of the host society because "Migrants and Refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved."³

In his message on The World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2015, Pope Francis emphasized that the Church operates across borders and stands as the "Mother to all." From the Church's standpoint, no one is useless, disposable, or out of place. A Christian must take care of migrants in need to support them through prayer and charity work. It is imperative to recognize Christ in every migrant, internally displaced person, and refugee and share what we have with those in need. In addition, in the opinion of Pope Francis, contemporary multicultural society encourages the Church to make new commitments to solidarity, community, and evangelization. More and more common

1 "Missing Migrants," International Organization of Migration, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

2 "Visit to Lampedusa, Homily of Holy Father Francis," Vatican, 8 July 2013, accessed September 10, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html.

3 "Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees," Vatican, August 5, 2013, accessed September 10, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html.

phenomena of migration call us to “deepen and strengthen the values needed to guarantee peaceful coexistence between persons and cultures.”¹

In the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), Pope Francis raised the problem of environmental refugees who are forced to leave their place of residence due to poverty caused by environmental degradation. The subject of this category of migrants is crucial, and according to Pope Francis, they are not given as adequate protection by international conventions as refugees. To solve this problem, not only is it necessary to help those in need, instead, a common action of the international community is required: “Given this situation, it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments and empowered to impose sanctions.”

During the escalation of so-called Europe's migrant crisis, Pope Francis has repeatedly appealed to the international community to help those in need. On September 6, 2015, during the Sunday Angelus, he appealed to all Catholic communities in Europe: “Before the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing death in conflict and hunger and are on a journey of hope, the Gospel, calls us to be close to the smallest and to those who have been abandoned.” Pope Francis also announced that he had ordered two Vatican parishes to accept one refugee family.

The problem of helping migrants was also reflected in the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), in which Pope Francis compared the experiences of current refugees to the drama of the Holy Family: “An experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless.” He emphasizes that migration may affect not only individuals but also entire families. As he pointed out: “Forced migration of families, resulting from situations of war, persecution, poverty, and injustice, and marked by the vicissitudes of a journey that often puts lives at risk, traumatizes people and destabilizes families.” For this reason, the Church cannot remain indifferent to such persons and should offer them help.

The topic of migration was raised many times by Pope Francis during his visits to Poland on the World Youth Day in Krakow in July 2016. In five of his speeches, he referred to the problem of helping refugees. He also reminded many times that every Christian must strive for peace on earth and help people fleeing hunger and wars. He emphasized that mercy relates to an open heart to other people and the needy, no matter their culture.

When analyzing these statements, it is worth noting that Pope Francis unequivocally emphasized the obligations of a Christian towards those in need; at the same time he did not specify what he meant by openness and providing help. At this time current Polish Prime Minister B. Szydło interpreted these words as a call to increase the involvement of Poles in charity aid in Syria and in camps in Lebanon and Turkey – not as an appeal to accept refugees in Poland. Bishops who gathered at the 375th meeting of the Polish Bishops' Conference in October 2016, appealed to the faithful and politicians to avoid ideologizing and politicizing the issue of helping refugees.

1 “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 101st World Day of Migrants and Refugees,” Vatican, September 3, 2014, accessed September 10, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20140903_world-migrants-day-2015.html.

The concluding statement emphasized that “the issue of refugees in Poland is experienced very emotionally, disproportionate to the scale of the phenomenon.” Bishop K. Zadarko stressed that the Polish Church wanted to join in helping refugees in the “spirit of solidarity and trust.” “Refugees from Ukraine” were also to be covered. Contrary to Law and Justice politicians, the Polish Episcopate understood helping refugees also as accepting people relocated from transit camps in Greece, Italy, and Lebanon. Interestingly, in the context of the spreading Islamophobia in Poland, Bishop K. Zadarko believed that

“The fear of Islam or the already ideologically formulated Islamization of Europe is unjustified. [...] We don't even know what it means, we only know that it will be something macabre, monstrous and everyone will want to destroy us here. I am not so naive as to belittle the images that reach us, but this cannot be the basis for formulating our reaction, for our behavior towards the phenomenon of refugees.”¹

In his message on The World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2019, Pope Francis referred to the fear of immigrants invoked by Bishop K. Zadarko. The fear and anxiety associated with migration often lead to intolerance and, oftentimes, ignorance of racism. Pope Francis gave the example of the parable of the Good Samaritan, stressing that helping migrants, like those in need, is associated with compassion and is part of our humanity. By observing the suffering of others, a Christian should strive to relieve, save, and heal them. As he emphasized, openness to others does not lead to impoverishment but to enrichment because it makes us more humane.²

In apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (2018), he warned against downplaying the problem of suffering migrants and relegating them to the background: “A politician looking for votes might say such a thing is understandable, but not a Christian, for whom the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brothers and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future to their children.” Helping such people is the duty of every Christian because by accepting the needy, we accept Jesus himself.

In his speech on The World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2021, the Pope stressed the need to create a more inclusive world to rebuild the human family, create a fairer and more peaceful future, making sure that no one is left behind. A “colorful” future will be achieved through greater diversity and cultural exchange in the Pope’s opinion. To achieve this, it is necessary to tear down the walls and divisions that separate us, and in their place, build bridges and promote a Culture of Encounter that rejects the exclusion and isolation of “strangers.”³

1 “Komunikat z 374. Zebrania Plenarnego Konferencji Episkopatu Polski (Communication from the 374th Plenary Meeting of the Polish Bishops’ Conference),” accessed December 1, 2021, https://archiwum-ordynariat.wp.mil.pl/plik/file/2016-10-05%20Komunikat_z_374_zebrania_plenarnego KEP.pdf.

2 “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees,” Vatican, 30 April 2019, accessed September 10, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_world-migrants-day-2019.html.

3 “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 107th World Day of Migrants and Refugees,” Vatican, 3 May 2021, accessed September 15, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20210503_world-migrants-day-2021.html.

Conclusion

In this essay, I sought to present a general standpoint that the Roman Catholic Church has adopted regarding helping refugees fleeing the Middle East. Considering the seriousness of the situation, the Roman Catholic Church cannot stand aside and passively observe the growing xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment. Concern for peace, protection of human rights, and appeals to help those in need form the basic premise of the Holy See and Pope Francis teaching. The Roman Catholic Church tries to take an active part in the public debate and set an example through the impartial support of people in need in the Middle East and, locally, in individual European states.

Pope Francis calls to be open to violence, exploitation, environmental degradation, and climate change victims. He stands against xenophobic and anti-immigrant attitudes, asks for concrete support and genuine commitment to help. He reminds that a Christian cannot be passive in the face of other people's misfortune and, as the Samaritan referred to in the Holy Scriptures, should help those in need, even in the face of prejudice, aversion, or fear.

From the point of view of Pope Francis' teaching, it is crucial to emphasize the subjective nature of migration. Migration should be perceived through the prism of the man participating in it, created in the image of God; the man who flees from violence or poverty. The very decision to leave requires tremendous courage and determination, but it is also associated with suffering and separation from the family. Fear of a stranger/migrant can lead to discrimination and exclusion. Such attitudes cannot be tolerated. To build a peaceful and just future, it is necessary to open society to greater diversity and cultural exchange.

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Author

Andrzej Szabaciuk,

Assistant professor, Institute of Political Science and Administration,

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

Al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland.

e-mail: andrzejszabaciuk@kul.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-3413-7454

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Религия помогает мигрантам: Римско-католическая церковь и миграционный кризис во время понтификата Папы Франциска

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данном эссе оценивается позиция, которую заняла Римско-католическая церковь в отношении европейского миграционного кризиса. Наиболее популярные теории, в которых оценивается феномен миграции, игнорируют этическую составляющую данной проблемы. В эссе делается вывод, что Церковь – это международный орган, который остается беспристрастным на фоне растущего раскола в Европе по вопросу принятия и ассимиляции мигрантов, а также тем, кто систематически подчеркивает гуманитарный аспект проблемы миграции. Папы, начиная со Льва XIII, неоднократно поднимали вопрос о правах на достойную жизнь и достойную работу, а также о миграции как неотъемлемой части жизни человека в поисках безопасного крова и лучшей жизни. Папа Франциск, как и его предшественники, обращаясь к проблеме миграции, ставит на первое место именно трагизм фигуры человека. Он подчеркивает, что все миграционные потоки состоят из людей, которые заслуживают уважения и заботы, и церковь видит в них лицо Бога.

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Сведения об авторе

Анджей Шабациук,

Доцент, Институт политологии и управления,
Люблинский католический университет имени Иоанна Павла II.
Ал. Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland.

e-mail: andrzejszabaciuk@kul.pl

ORCID: 0000-0003-3413-7454

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