Creating a safe haven for all: Refugees and human dignity

Europe is at a crossroads: Will it show leadership based on its commitment to the values of human rights and solidarity, or will it choose to exclude refugees from access to dignified and safe life, giving way to nationalist and populist agendas? The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions ("Justice and Peace Europe") is calling upon the European institutions, EU Member States and other European countries to take responsibility in granting refugees access to asylum and a decent standard of living.

Justice and Peace Europe has serious concerns regarding the current public debate and some decisions taken in European countries and by European institutions on the issue of refugees. The arrival of refugees is used by several political parties to fuel other political agendas in many parts of Europe i.e. anti-EU and xenophobic campaigns. This results in a heavily polarised debate, throwing suspicion on refugees and creating a division in our communities. Within this rhetoric the humanity of refugees as well as our own humanity is increasingly being forgotten.

Terrorist attacks in Europe have been connected with the arrival of refugees. There is a fear of extremism and radicalism being brought to Europe from the countries of origin. Security challenges in Europe are real and will increase if more terrorist attacks take place in Europe. However, equating refugees with terrorists only plays into the terrorist agenda of hatred and disillusionment. Extremism and radicalisation existing in their own country are actually the motives for refugees to flee their homes. They deserve our support. Protecting the fundamental freedoms and physical security of European citizens and refugees alike are therefore two sides of the same coin.

For Justice and Peace Europe, it is crucial to voice the fundamental values of human rights, solidarity and hospitality. With regards to refugees, the work of Justice and Peace Europe is founded on three fundamental principles: the centrality of the human person, solidarity and hospitality. First, each and every human being has an unalienable right to be respected in his and her life, dignity and social life. Secondly, every human person is part of one and the same human family regardless of nationality, cultural origin or religious tradition. This interdependence calls for a concrete solidarity between peoples and states. Thirdly, hospitality links the centrality of the person with the principle of solidarity. A hospitable and welcoming community serves the integral development of each person and the community as a whole. These principles are closely interwoven with international human rights instruments in which the unique value of every single human being is emphasised. Refugees depend on the solidarity and hospitality of other communities to secure them their human rights as unique persons.

Reflecting on the humanitarian situation of refugees all over the world, Justice and Peace Europe advocates an integral approach, both in analysis and in action. Persistent violence and warfare, global inequality, political oppression and violations of human rights, and the negative effects of climate change are just a few of the root causes of people having to flee their homes in search of safety and human dignity. Addressing these root causes requires investing in a sustainable world economy, trade and global solidarity with fundamental human rights and social equality at their core.

However, instead of approaching the situation from a human rights perspective, too many politicians and ordinary people in Europe tend to see refugees as a threat to the European community and its security. This line of thought principally neglects part of Europe's own historical experience in

regards to (forced) migration and foregoes the examples of migration being a driver for new ideas and opportunities. Treating refugees as a threat can have serious practical consequences for Europe as a normative actor: policy decisions infringe upon the human rights of refugees, most notably the right to life, the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement. In some cases it has added to, instead of solved, the humanitarian crisis many refugees in Jordan, Turkey, Libya, and in European countries such as Greece, find themselves in.

Justice and Peace Europe advocates for a change in the approach to the reception, application process for asylum and the integration of refugees. Justice and Peace Europe wants to prioritise human rights as part of an inclusive response, in combination with appropriate security measures. It means re-evaluating the balance between freedom and security. This requires that European countries and institutions foster a shared vision and definition of the fundamental human rights values and re-identify with their principles of solidarity, human dignity and diversity.

We call upon all the European institutions, EU Member States and other European countries to:

- **Approach the issue of refugees from a holistic analysis**: reduce the 'push-factors' for refugees. In other words, address the root causes of violence and human rights violations, by implementing, amongst others, economic, development, trade, foreign and security policies that are rooted in (social) human rights and social justice. This carries with it both positive and negative obligations. On the one hand, for example, it means refraining from making deals with countries with questionable human rights track records for the mere purpose of preventing refugees from arriving in Europe. On the other hand, it requires Europe to show solidarity with countries already hosting a relatively high number of refugees.

- **Open possibilities for safe passage to Europe**: save lives and decrease human suffering by investing in legal ways to travel to Europe, so that people may exercise their right to request asylum. Resettlement efforts and broadening family reunification, humanitarian visas and work/student visa options should be intensified. We find that linking safe passage with readmission agreements with third countries is a worrying development, impeding refugees' right to access asylum in a safe way.

- **Create a European asylum system that embeds solidarity between European countries**: to establish just burden-sharing, the Dublin Regulation needs to be extended to include an automatic relocation system. Simultaneously, what is required is a simplification and stricter adherence to its rules, in order to make the system work on a practical level. Further harmonisation of asylum processes should have the human rights of the refugee as its priority, since ambiguity and unequal opportunities throughout Europe lead to problems for both the refugee and European countries. This harmonisation process has to be consistent with the founding principles of the European Union and its fundamental freedoms.

- **Invest in local solidarity instead of feeding polarisation**: European politicians should take as an example the people who have come together all over Europe to organise a wide range of solidarity initiatives for and with refugees. It is not to say that these people do not have fears and concerns but they choose to work from the principles of human rights and solidarity, and are both effective and inspiring.

Borders and security threats dominate many people's thinking. Collectively, we often fail to see the humanity in others, and fail in our responsibilities towards them. Refugees are crossing boundaries in search of safety, but we all need to cross boundaries if we are to build a safe haven together where every person can flourish.

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe) is the alliance of 31 Justice and Peace Commissions in Europe, working for the promotion of justice, peace, respect for human dignity and the care of creation. Justice and Peace Europe contributes to raising awareness of the Catholic social doctrine in the European societies and the European institutions. Its General Secretariat is based in Brussels.

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