

Walking with Refugees – the Church Amidst the Refugee Crisis in Europe

I would like to recall the poignant memories of the weekend when thousands of refugees set out from Budapest, Hungary, towards Austria and, finally, reached the other side of the border on board of buses provided by the Hungarian government.

I will never forget that march. I am very well aware that the refugees were hindering the traffic and broke several rules. However, what this persistent march gave proof of was their final desperation and their determination forged by the war, suffering, persecution and defencelessness they had left behind. And we have to admit that the heartlessness of some also strengthened their feelings of hopeless resolution.

I cannot forget that march. It was similar to the processions led by Martin Luther King in the cities of the US in the 1960s or to the opponents of the apartheid in South-Africa singing “We are marching in the light of God”. Looking at the crowds of refugees walking on the motorway I was also reminded of the wandering, let me use the word “migrant”, Jews on their way to a new homeland. This association is closely linked to a prayer written by the Reformed pastor Sylvia Bukowski: “God of Mercy, who led your people across the desert and shepherded them in the exodus; we cry to you for the millions of refugees who have left their homes in uncertainty and are escorted by poverty, persecution and violence on their way. May you be their guide and guardian, oh Lord!”

In the marching crowd of refugees you could see a one-legged man supporting himself on crutches and trying to keep up with the others. Many were carrying children in their arms or on their backs. One of the parents was pushing a toddler in a shopping cart. Yet others were carrying elderly or sick relatives on their shoulders.

I believe that the Bible’s account is relevant today as well: Jesus has compassion on the crowd, because they are like sheep without a shepherd.

Are we able to have mercy? Do we dare to show empathy? Can we speak words of compassion even if others demand us to demonstrate power?

Let politicians be concerned with politics. As a church we should ask ourselves: are we able to use the voice of humanity and act in a credible manner? When the bodies of 71 suffocated refugees, including women and children, were found in a delivery van on Austrian territory, the Austrian Lutheran Bishop Michael Bünker suggested that, following the identification of the deceased, the victims should be buried in a respectful way according to the rites of their own religion. In Hungary, a middle-aged Syrian man collapsed and died near the railway station of Bicske. Do we know anything of him? Has anyone tried to track his identity or his family down?

Although official reports consequently refer to the alienating term ‘migrants’ instead of refugees, we should make an effort to imagine how traumatised these people must be with all their experiences of war and life-threatening situations. Can we realize what it must feel like to be scapegoated all the time? Can we fathom what it means to give birth to a baby during such a flight and spend the night at a railway station five days later? We should keep this in mind at Christmas time when writing and listening to heartbreaking sermons about the Holy Family...

Still, something has changed. More and more people dare and manage to express their feelings of solidarity towards refugees. Voices of disapproval and reservation seem to be less frequent and the willingness to help is getting stronger.

Beside the sadness and despair expressed in this text, I would also like to voice my hope and even joy. Although the past few weeks have been full of hardships and painful experiences, we have also seen examples of resourceful love. Several Lutherans have shared their insights and practical advice on the internet. The spontaneous help offered by many civil activists is side-by-side with the conscious and relentless efforts of the Diaconal Service of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary to organize aid activities. The Hungarian Interchurch Aid, one of the country's largest and internationally recognized charity organizations, is also present with its decades-long professional experience. Secondary school students are inquiring about ways to contribute, university students are acting as voluntary interpreters and congregations are collecting donations. Many of our international partners have also stated their willingness to help.

All of us can do something to make the suffering of refugees more visible in our countries and to give a face to people who might seem threatening and frightening as members of a crowd. We can make their story heard. Most of all, we can help to recover their dignity.

In my experience, something is stirring within more and more of our Hungarian fellow-citizens. We might indeed be capable of showing our purer sides. We can see Ezekiel's prophecy fulfilled: "I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ez 36:26)".

I know that we could talk about Schengen borders, quotas, registration, hot spots and similar subjects for a long time. These are indeed serious issues. Everyone has their own responsibilities. At the same time, wherever we stand, let us not forget the most important thing of all: exercising mercy.

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