

The dignity of the human person

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Catholic Social Teaching's emphasis on the dignity of the human person is a lens that Catholic institutions use to evaluate how we as a global society enhance or threaten the dignity of the human person, especially the most vulnerable of people – including those on the move.

The Catholic Church's view of all individuals as endowed with an intrinsic human dignity is the basis for its commitment to live in solidarity with displaced populations and for the importance it places on accompaniment. Accompaniment is a way of 'walking alongside' the refugee or migrant, rather than seeing the person solely as a recipient of services. It is also consistent with the concept of empowerment or a client-centred approach often espoused within a professional social work framework and used as a response in contexts of forced migration. We believe there are several comparative advantages in the Church's presence in activities addressing forced migration, which are linked to this concept of accompaniment.

The Catholic Church's long-standing presence in many settings provides an important advantage when responding to forced migration. In many places, the Church is indigenous to the location, in contrast to an international entity arriving after displacement occurs. This local presence encourages trust and a sense of mutual identity with the local community; refugees and other displaced persons turn to the Church for assistance even when they are from other faith backgrounds. The indigenous character of the local church is also why many international organisations turn to local church partners for collaboration in assisting affected populations. Furthermore, the voice of those affected can be brought to larger policy discussions through internal Church networks; a 'ministry on the margin' approach brings top leadership in contact with migrants, and in turn can influence political leaders.

The Catholic Church often has access to communities where others may not; this may be because of pre-existing Church

relationships, or perhaps because religious pastors are not viewed as threatening by those in control. For example, Catholic priests and religious sisters visit immigrants in detention worldwide and often have special access as pastoral agents.

The Catholic Church, while just one of many faith-based perspectives, is often recognised as a moral authority that can be a motivating force to take action on behalf of, and with, others. Pope Francis's challenge to confront the "globalisation of indifference" during his visit to Lampedusa in 2013 has been cited internationally through both secular and faith-based channels. And in April 2014 Cardinal Seán O'Malley, together with a number of bishops from the United States and other countries, celebrated a Mass at the border fence between the US and Mexico to highlight the need for changes of heart and policy toward our brothers and sisters across borders; this attracted considerable news coverage nationally and internationally.

Catholics, and others committed to a faith tradition, also bring a holistic approach that includes a view of the individual as a spiritual being. Incorporating the centrality of spirituality and religion in the lives of many migrating persons within humanitarian responses at all levels – from individual assistance to supporting the ability to practise religion – is something that many more organisations could recognise and incorporate into their protection responses. Faith is an important factor in resilience for many who have suffered due to forced migration.

Past experiences with government agencies, whether in their home country or, for example, with immigration enforcement agencies in their country of destination,

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can negatively affect displaced populations' views of those offering assistance. In such an environment, the Catholic Church and other faith organisations can have a comparative advantage in gaining the trust of displaced persons. This trust allows faith-based organisations (FBOs) to serve as bridges to government entities to voice concerns and assist with protecting the most vulnerable, helping them find their way in their new community, and educating them about their rights under current laws.

Catholic Church-affiliated entities share these advantages with other FBOs involved

in assisting in forced migration contexts, and common agreement with both faith-based and secular organisations on addressing forced migration has led to strong coalitions and partnerships among a cross-section of those concerned about turning humanitarian indifference into positive change.

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Cardinal Seán O'Malley and bishops celebrate Mass at the US-Mexico border, April 2014.

