



## The Synod of Bishops: Considering Displaced Youth

### 1. Introduction

For the entire month of October 2018, leaders of the Roman Catholic Church met to discern a way forward for its ministry to young people. To ensure that both the voices and the realities of young migrant and refugee people were highlighted, Pope Francis appointed (besides young refugees and migrants present at the Synod as participants) Fr Michael Czerny SJ, the under-secretary in the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, and Fr Roger Stark SSS, the director of the North American Migrants and Refugees Centre in Honolulu, to foreground the predicaments of these vulnerable young people. Pope Francis has already spoken several times of the duty of protection that must be afforded young migrants: "We must adopt every possible means to guarantee young migrants protection as well as integration."<sup>1</sup>

### 2. The Situation of Young Migrants

The concern is borne out by the statistics. As at the beginning of 2017, 28 million children were living in forced displacement, a number that included 12m child refugees and child asylum seekers, and 16m children living in internal displacement due to conflict and violence. It does not include the 7m children internally displaced by natural disasters or the millions who cross borders seeking better opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Only 36% of refugee children have the possibility of attending school and less than 1% of young adult refugees have access to higher education.<sup>3</sup> This should be seen against the overall figures provided by the UN, which show that more than 258m people (about 3.4% of the world's population) reside somewhere other than their homeland due to some form of crisis.<sup>4</sup>

The key countries hosting refugees include Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, Jordan, Kenya and Chad. (Only Germany, among the developed countries, makes the top 10.) Accordingly, it is in these mostly less-developed and poorer countries that provision has had to be made for over 1.2m children to enrol in formal general education, and for 268 000 children to have access to sustained child protection and psycho-sexual support programs.<sup>5</sup>

Fr Czerny said that it was impossible to separate the needs of young people generally from those of young migrants. He said issues of "living through extreme situations of vulnerability, of discernment, of choice, of risk and of courage", which is so often the lot of *displaced* young people, could be an important lesson for *all* young people facing the questions of life.<sup>6</sup> Fr Czerny went on to say, "What I would hope for very much is that this synod would shine a light on who are these young migrants, not to identify them sociologically, but to see them as young people seeking their calling, seeking their vocation, discovering their horizon, and looking for ways to get on with their lives, which in the end, is what we'd say about young people generally."<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Causes of Youth Migration

In a side event to the Synod, Fr Czerny warned against the hysteria that seems to accompany the discussion around refugees and migrants. He warned against casting it always in the language of a crisis. It is more accurately "a series of mismanagements and poor policies and self-interested manipulations. The numbers we are talking about, even on the total scale, are not all that great. Let's get on with it case by case, person by person, family by family. And in fact you'll find out it sorts itself out very well."<sup>8</sup>

During a press conference at the Synod, Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa, no doubt with the movement of young people in pursuit of better opportunities in mind, reminded journalists that “most migration in Africa involves people moving from one country to another within the Continent.” He blamed this phenomenon on “violence and environmental degradation, fuelled by greed and corporate interests.”<sup>9</sup> He and Fr Stark made the point that people should not be forced to move in the first place. Fr Stark noted that “the Pope says time and again... to migrate is a right, not to migrate is a right.”<sup>10</sup>

This touches on the highly contested issue of “wealthy nations [having] a duty to welcome those on the move today while simultaneously providing aid to improve conditions from whence people come.”<sup>11</sup> Fr Czerny went on to say that “accepting refugees does not exempt or exonerate rich countries from the real responsibility they have to promote authentic development with the aim of giving young people the right to remain.”

Recent reports have indicated again what has long been known: that “political and security issues, often linked to economic reasons, convinced young people to migrate.”<sup>12</sup> Another report states: “Often, the main driving force behind youth migration (particularly international migration) is the magnitude of perceived inequalities in labour market opportunities, income, human rights and living standards between the countries of origin and destination. Some young people migrate to escape conflict, persecution, or environmental threats.”<sup>13</sup> A third report gives the same reasons for youth migration: “Unemployment, underemployment, low wages and family poverty are major factors, as is the availability of higher-paying jobs abroad. In developing countries, migrants’ remittances help households cope with poverty, financial crises and natural disasters. Pressure to migrate will become even stronger because of differentiated demographic and income trends.”<sup>14</sup> It is easy to see how improved levels of development in the sending countries would reduce the incidence of youth migration and render remaining in the country of origin a more feasible option.

#### **4. Vulnerability and Danger**

In 2017 a joint UNICEF and International Organisation for Migration report indicated that “seventy-seven percent of migrant and refugee youth traveling to Europe on Mediterranean

migration routes experience abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.”<sup>15</sup> Hence the urgency of the Pope’s call mentioned above, and hence also the importance of this reality, especially the protection of displaced youth, being given publicity at the Synod.

In June 2018 UNICEF called on the European Union to provide safe passages and legal pathways for refugee and migrant children, irrespective of their or their parent’s immigration status.<sup>16</sup> It also called for family reunification services. Pope Francis has made similar calls. In a message in 2014 he said of unaccompanied minors,

“They are increasing day by day. This humanitarian emergency requires, as a first urgent measure, that these children be welcomed and protected. These measures, however, will not be sufficient, unless they are accompanied by policies that inform people about the dangers of such a journey and, above all, that promote development in their countries of origin. Finally, this challenge demands the attention of the entire international community so that new forms of legal and secure migration may be adopted.”<sup>17</sup>

The Pope has been correct to point out for consideration this vulnerable category of young people and to insist on their protection in the midst of a very threatening environment.

Ms Vieyra, a young participant at the Synod, urged the Church to take seriously issues around the mental health of young migrants, especially depression, anxiety and distress, which are often linked to experiences of violence.<sup>18</sup> She went on to say that there was an unwelcoming environment for migrants in the USA, and that “current immigration policies in the USA blatantly threaten and disrespect the lives and dignity of migrants. The church must step up and expand the ways it protects and cares for migrant youth and families, or else young migrants will come to believe that secular and political activist groups are the only ones helping them to speak out against racism and to push for change.”<sup>19</sup> Ms Vieyra went on to say that what she has witnessed in the United States is “how the hateful rhetoric and policies in my country are forcing families to experience sustained distress that warps the daily lives” of all migrants, whether they are unauthorized, legal, or US citizens from mixed-status families.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

Fr Czerny brought the Pope's concern for young migrants into sharp focus when he said, "The Holy Father's wish for young people – that they might face a horizon of hope – what more could you wish for a young migrant than a horizon of hope or a promise of hope? That's what young migrants want, and that's what people in the Church and outside of it want."<sup>21</sup>

This discussion is of relevance to South Africa, where Stats SA has noted community surveys which indicate that approximately 175 000 undocumented migrants are under the age of 19. Their lack of documentation hinders them from accessing various services and thus from contributing meaningfully to the economy and to the social cohesion of South Africa.<sup>22</sup>

It is also worth noting that a 2017 survey by the Varkey Foundation found that only 5% of youth surveyed about refugee issues thought that the SA government was doing too much for refugees.<sup>23</sup> Almost 95% held an opposite view. This means that amongst young South Africans there is a fundamental goodwill in this sometimes contested domain. The government would be well advised to note the attitude of young people, and to honour those attitudes by providing positive possibilities for young refugees to access opportunities that will allow them to fulfil their potential. This would also be in line with the sentiments emerging from the Synod around issues of displaced youth.

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**Peter-John Pearson**  
**Director**

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4122494/Ship-carrying-110-migrants-sinks-coast-Libya-Pope-Francis-demands-possible-measure-taken-protect-young-refugees.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/children-move-key-facts-figures/> <sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/pope-francis-refugee-children/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.daily-sun.com/printversion/details/297153/258m-living-outside-their-countries-of-birth:-IPU>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrianrefugees.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/10/24/vatican-expert-tone-down-crisis-rhetoric-human-migration>

<sup>7</sup> <https://cruxnow.com/synod-of-bishops-on-youth/2018/10/15/popes-right-hand-man-on-migrants-asks-synod-to-see-them-as-paradigmatic/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/10/24/vatican-expert-tone-down-crisis-rhetoric-human-migration>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/10/24/vatican-expert-tone-down-crisis-rhetoric-human-migration>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/10/24/vatican-expert-tone-down-crisis-rhetoric-human-migration>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2018/10/24/vatican-expert-tone-down-crisis-rhetoric-human-migration>

<sup>12</sup> <https://destination-unknown.org/youth-on-the-move-investigating-decision-making-migration-trajectories-and-expectations-of-young-people-on-the-way-to-italy/>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.unworldyouthreport.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=84&Itemid=225](http://www.unworldyouthreport.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=84&Itemid=225)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_219045/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_219045/lang--en/index.htm)

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- <sup>15</sup> <http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/47/9/15.1>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/protecting-refugee-and-migrant-children-must-be-priority-eu-unicef>
- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/unaccompanied-migrant-children-resource-kit.cfm>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://spotlight.africa/2018/10/19/synod-of-bishops-ministering-online/>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.chicagocatholic.com/vatican/-/article/2018/10/24/chicago-young-adult-addresses-synod-in-rome>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.chicagocatholic.com/vatican/-/article/2018/10/24/chicago-young-adult-addresses-synod-in-rome>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://cruknow.com/synod-of-bishops-on-youth/2018/10/15/popes-right-hand-man-on-migrants-asks-synod-to-see-them-as-paradigmatic/>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2018/03/07/why-south-africas-undocumented-teens-are-dropping-out-of-school>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/opinion/world-refugee-day-sa-has-1-million-asylum-seekers-and-youth-who-care-9872864>

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