

**Rome, 18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> September 2018**

**World Conference on Xenophobia, Racism, and Populist Nationalism in the Context of Global Migration organised jointly by the World Council of Churches and Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity**

This three day conference had twin aspects:

- (1) Input: to “describe, analyse, understand and address the exclusion, marginalisation, stigmatisation and criminalisation of migrants and refugees, and the justifications for these attitudes and discourse which now exist in several different parts of the world, even within the churches”;
- (2) Output: to produce a clear message for the world at large about the churches’ position in relation to these issues.

Input

The ambitious programme involved speakers from diverse faith communities, civil society and inter-governmental partners such as UNHCR, UNICEF and the Council of Europe, and divided the conference into four key sessions:

- xenophobia, racism and populist nationalism in the world today;
- uncovering myths: countering the narrative of fear;
- integration and just community;
- accompanying migrants and communities: challenges for the churches

There were, in addition, three sessions during which the conference split into regional working groups (Northern Europe, Western and Central Europe, Southern Europe, North America, South America, Asia, Australia and Oceania, and the Middle East). This provided an opportunity for useful interaction on key questions within our own context, each group then providing a summary to the conference in plenary. Finally, two sessions were set aside for preparation of the conference message (see below).

As the conference opened, Cardinal Peter Turkson, Prefect for the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, and Rev. Olav Fykse Tveit, WCC Secretary General, invited us to think about how fear drives xenophobia, racism and nationalist populism. Globalisation has not yet made brothers and sisters of us for fear and mistrust still prevail but the church can offer the message that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Christian discipleship comes with the responsibility to love one another and Christ provoked his disciples to extend the boundaries of love, even to enemies. We are engaged in a joint pilgrimage for a new hope. Msgr. Brian Farrell emphasised importance of ecumenism and, indeed, collaboration with government and civil society in order to respond to this situation of injustice.

In his keynote address, Felipe Camargo from UNHCR highlighted the current proliferation of xenophobic narratives and hate speech against migrants, the role of the internet and the failure of certain states to ratify the Council of Europe’s Convention on Cybercrime, the Additional Protocol to which creates a requirement on ratifying states to criminalise the dissemination of racist and xenophobic material through computer systems. He urged a redoubling of efforts to promote tolerance. He argued for enforceable legal instruments, rather than conventions and expressions of agreement, which tackle root forms of intolerance. He, like other speakers, highlighted the importance of education and awareness-raising to combat populist agendas which are

fundamentally based on lies. These were all themes which were picked up as the conference unfolded.

It was strongly felt that a united church is in a unique position to influence this narrative: we are an international community of people rooted in the real world and an ideal agent of international civil society. We don't just preach tolerance but love, which has no end. Bible stories are a powerful tool which reveal a framework which goes beyond the law for how issues should be dealt with. They provide information and accountability for the communities who read them. As Christians, we have an opportunity to show our faith in practice by seeing the face of Christ in the other, by loving and by offering welcome. Christianity can offer a way back to critical thinking, and an understanding of human identity which is divine and diverse. However, a lack of coherence in our messaging, and our complicity in the problem, have to be acknowledged.

Although there was no Jewish panellist since this session fell on Yom Kippur, an inter-faith panel comprising speakers from the Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Islamic perspective demonstrated how much coherence there could be, not only at an ecumenical level but across faiths. This depends primarily on universal acceptance of the "golden rule" (treating others as you would wish to be treated yourself).

Interventions from the floor were both thoughtful and lively. Understanding and tackling root causes of migration was an issue to which people often returned: e.g. acknowledging the reality that many migrants are driven to move by climatic and economic conditions rather than conflict or persecution, how can developmental conditions be created in order to address this?

Professor Raymond Ranjeva, a former vice-president of the International Court of Justice, invited us to consider an apocalyptic point: climate change will reduce the available habitable space in the world and we can either look ahead to a flaring of sovereignty and conflict regarding occupation of land or embrace solidarity which involves sharing what we have. Either way, the current obsession with migration is distracting people from the very survival of the human race.

Fear – and its exploitation - was another topic to which the conference often returned. Threats need not be real; perception is everything and, if enough fear is around, it will drive xenophobia, racism and populism in a bid to protect self, culture and nation. Churches are not immune but could be proactively creating social cohesion by talking to people at a local level and promoting *ubuntu* (togetherness). Understanding the context for fear in each place is important. Proximity and connection through the development of personal stories undermine the narrative of fear. A small section of society can have a disproportionate impact. People think that public opinion is what other people think – but it may only be a small group shouting loudly. Aside from telling personal stories which bring people closer together, we should be working with good migrant journalists to ensure that the voices of refugees are properly heard.

Later speakers discussed nationalism: how the right to a national identity has been used to justify racism and, indeed, how nationalism was becoming a form of idolatry. One speaker described nationalism as providing "social cement", which feeds xenophobia. Professor Fernand de Varennes, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, highlighted that the concept of human rights as a limit on national sovereignty is now a concept under challenge. He also made the point that governments need help to face the rising tide of xenophobia. The human rights system, based on the screams of those in the past, should be cherished and not dismantled. Mario Giro from the Comunità di Sant'Egidio affirmed that a just community is an antidote to nationalism and that we need to remind the world of what it has forgotten.

Rev. Traci Blackmon developed this theme, arguing that the church should be dismantling systems which perpetuate injustice, and suggesting that Jesus became human in a marginalised form to reveal tyrannical power. The church can be political without being partisan. The church is neither the master nor the servant of the state but should be its conscience.

A final session dealt with “good and promising practices” from the churches in their work with migrants. We heard about the “Welcome Manifesto” developed by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy. This two-page booklet sets out the theological foundation for radical hospitality and how that should be applied in practice. Amongst other things, we also heard about the development of the Casa delle Culture in Scicli, efforts in relation to integration on Lampedusa, and the operation of the humanitarian corridors programme, all three of which are co-ordinated by Mediterranean Hope.

### Output

A draft document prepared by Rev. Msgr. Bruno Marie Duffé was circulated to conference delegates at the end of the first day of the conference and was discussed in a lively plenary debate. This, and proposed changes emailed overnight, enabled the ecumenical drafting team to refine the draft before its second reading at the end of the following day. Further discussion in plenary enabled wording to be agreed. This ecumenical consensus provides a clear alternative to the increasingly prevalent xenophobic, racist and nationalist rhetoric being heard across the world. There is, of course, work to be done in ensuring that the message reaches its intended audience.

### Papal Audience

The conference concluded with an audience with Pope Francis in the Sala Clementina in the Palazzo Apostolico at the Vatican with Cardinal Turkson acting as intermediary for the group. Pope Francis advised that he had written a speech for the delegates but, instead of reading it out, would prefer to use the time to meet each of us individually.<sup>1</sup> We each therefore had an opportunity to shake hands with him and say a few words. Many of us used that time to thank him sincerely for his efforts in relation to migration.

### **Recommendations**

There is some obvious follow-up work for the churches following this conference. First, having successfully recorded a unified position in relation to the conference theme, it would seem sensible for churches to review and publicise the ecumenical message. It would be a great pity for this to disappear into a vacuum. Given its length, key messages may need to be condensed, and thought should be given to how to make this accessible to congregations and the public at large.

Second, churches and individuals could be active in countering the culture of fear and misunderstanding by promoting a culture of storytelling which highlights the positive aspects of migration. Similarly, churches and individuals could be proactive in creating opportunities for individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to meet one another. This would help to promote a culture of integration and to discourage us from dehumanising groups we do not know.

Fiona Kendall  
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<sup>1</sup> The speech can be found in Italian and French at <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/20/0659/01410.html> and [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2018/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180920\\_conferenza-razzismo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/speeches/2018/september/documents/papa-francesco_20180920_conferenza-razzismo.html)