

Your Holiness,

Your visiting Lesbos has filled us with both hope and joy. It is of great significance that the Roman Catholic church shows its great interest in refugees, the most vulnerable and persecuted population of the world.

Your previous visit was heart-warming and we follow your continuous personal involvement in the matter of the refugees that cross the Mediterranean, mostly trying to reach the countries of Southeastern Europe. Regardless of personal views towards matters of faith and religion, the fact that the Roman Catholic Church addresses fellow human beings, searching for common ground, is one of the most comforting signs of our times.

The refugee crisis, as you are well aware, is far from over. The recent events in Afghanistan, as well as the dramatic developments in other parts of our world that do not receive the same public attention, such as Yemen and Ethiopia, constantly endanger the lives and freedom of more people every day. These people need and are entitled to international protection, as all nations have jointly decided during the Convention of Geneva after the painful experience of World War II. This fundamental human right should not be compromised or doubted.

European countries cannot and should not deny their share of responsibility for the protection of refugees. The shift of responsibility towards other countries in exchange for financial support increases global inequalities and is morally dubious. At the same time, it exposes refugees to danger of ill treatment or places them in a state of limited protection. A Europe built on the values of Humanity, Democracy and Solidarity cannot be legitimised in constantly transferring its own responsibilities elsewhere. The same applies to some governments which unilaterally renounce their own share of responsibility and accountability.

In Lesbos, you will meet thousands of refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Congo and many other countries. A portion of this population will remain in Greece, so the Greek state has a duty to start processing a plan for their integration. Furthermore, in the concept of sharing responsibilities, it is imminent for the EU to introduce a mandatory relocation plan, similar to the one applied during 2015-2017.

As you may yourself witness, the refugee population of Lesbos has been significantly reduced since 2016. Indeed, thousands of people have been moved to the mainland and some have left to other European countries. Nevertheless, there are women, men and children who never made it to Greece. Reports, of serious violations of human rights taking place across European borders, to the extent of pushing people back to Turkey, have been corroborated by international organizations. This systematic practice endangers the life of people, including young children, that often end up abandoned in the middle of the sea. This illegal practice must end, and we ask you to deploy all your influence, in order for this to stop and in order to establish an independent border monitoring mechanism that will investigate these events.

Perhaps the responsible Greek public bodies will inform you about the “Closed and Controlled” centers of reception and identification that are being prepared in five islands of the Aegean, in order to host asylum seekers. One of them has already been established and is currently operational in Samos. We would like to share our thoughts on them. In our experience remaining for an extended period of time in confined facilities, deprives our fellow human beings of their fundamental rights and hinders their integration, whilst negatively impacting on their daily lives and causing them severe emotional distress. To us, their integration to a future hosting community is a process that should begin on day one. Isolation under inhumane conditions leads to insufficient health support and even worse, leaves children deprived of a proper education. In reality, living under such circumstances sadly mirrors a state of imprisonment. Adding to this state is the strict confinement of the asylum seekers that live in these facilities.

We conclude that these centers, which are exclusively funded by the European Union, should be fully reformed and their philosophy shifted, so that they can build a functioning relationship between the residents and the hosting community, thus aiding a smoother process of integration. At the same time, the fundamental human rights of asylum seekers should be protected, including access to healthcare and education. And, above all, people should not be deprived of their freedom and dignity.

Your Holiness,

We would much appreciate the opportunity to express these concerns, along with others that would take too long to describe here, during a meeting with you.

Finally, we would like to express in person our gratitude for the fact that, as a spiritual leader of billions, you stand consecutively against every phenomenon of Xenophobia and Racism reminding us -believers or not- that the greatest value our coexistence depends upon our common human identity.

Signatories:

1. A Drop in the Ocean
2. Actionaid Hellas
3. ARSIS – Association for the Social Support of Youth
4. Babel Day Center
5. Caritas Hellas
6. Centre Diotima
7. Changemakers Lab
8. Community Pope John XXIII
9. Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
10. ECHO100PLUS
11. ELIX
12. Equal Rights Beyond Borders
13. Europe Must Act
14. Fenix - Humanitarian Legal Aid
15. Greek Council for Refugees (GCR)

16. Greek Forum of Migrants
17. Greek Forum of Refugees
18. Hellenic League for Human Rights
19. HIAS Greece
20. Humanrights360
21. INTERSOS
22. INTERSOS Hellas
23. Irida Women's Center
24. Jesuit Refugee Service Greece (JRS Greece)
25. Lesvos Solidarity
26. Médecins du Monde - Greece
27. Network for Children's Rights
28. Mobile Info Team (MIT)
29. Odyssea
30. Refugee Legal Support
31. Refugee Support Aegean (RSA)
32. Samos Advocacy Collective
33. Samos Volunteers
34. SolidarityNow
35. Still I Rise
36. Symbiosis-School of Political Studies in Greece, Council of Europe