



Open letter to the Catholics of Alexandria-Cornwall
From Bishop Marcel Damphousse
September 11, 2015

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Like you I have been watching with dismay the events that have been unfolding over the past weeks in Syria, Hungary and much of Europe. Since first becoming pope, the Holy Father has repeatedly appealed to the world to show compassion for the homeless masses who seek shelter, protection and a better life.

These brothers and sisters of ours were trying to escape difficult situations to find some serenity and peace; they were looking for a better place for themselves and their families, but instead they found death. How often do such people fail to find understanding, fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity. And their cry rises up to God! (On a visit to the island of Lampedusa to focus attention on the migrants who had drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean.)

As many continue to debate how best to respond, it is incumbent upon we as Catholics to help. This is what we as a Diocese can do at this particular moment.

Financial Assistance

There will be a special collection the weekend of October 4 in our parish communities. The monies will be directed to the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA). CNEWA has been a lifeline for the poor throughout the Middle East, Northeast Africa, India and Eastern Europe for more than 85 years. The Canadian director, Carl Héту, who visited Jordan a few short weeks ago, is in constant contact with those on the ground in the affected areas. For this reason CNEWA is in an excellent position to know where the money is most needed. The Federal Government has announced that it will match donations from Canadians up to \$100 million.

Prayer & Solidarity

Prayer is an incredibly important and concrete thing that we can do to show solidarity with our brothers and sisters. To that end, a prayer service is being organized for October. Details will be announced shortly.

Political Action

As you are well aware, we are in the midst of a federal election and so it is a particularly opportune time to get involved politically. This is your chance to engage the political candidates and parties on what, if elected, they will do to assist refugees. And never underestimate the power of a letter to

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our sitting MP, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Chris Alexander.

Sponsorship

With respect to sponsoring families, the current rules in place in Canada make this difficult, though not impossible. We are currently speaking to several dioceses who have extensive experience in this area in order to find out how best to coordinate such an effort. Since we no longer have an agreement with Immigration Canada (we did in the 80s and 90s for the Vietnamese), there is a lot more red tape to go through. We would also need \$30,000 up front to apply to welcome one family. More would be needed throughout the year as we would be responsible for them. I fear welcoming just one family would really isolate them since, to my knowledge, there are no other Syrian families in the area. We would need to bring in a few families. For the time being, I would therefore recommend we opt to help out more directly the refugees who are still in refugee camps and who have great needs at this time until they can find a better home.

Be Informed

Finally, it is important to stay informed. It is all too easy to become weary of the same news day in and day out, especially if you feel powerless to do anything. I urge you to guard against that and instead to learn what you can about the situations facing refugees. There are some 13 million refugees now throughout the world, of whom four million are from Syria. The problems they face are immense, and their situations will not be easily or quickly resolved. Our efforts to work with refugees must be long term. We have created a special section on our diocesan website devoted to Christians in the Middle East, a good starting point. There you will find information as well as a number of links to reliable websites of organizations that work with refugees.

One of the biggest obstacles facing refugees as they seek protection and shelter is fear by those who would receive them. Let us not be apathetic, indifferent, or prejudiced, for we are all created in the image and likeness of God. We must remember that refugees have not chosen to live in the midst of the chaos that they have left or that they have come to.

God Bless.



+Marcel Damphousse
Bishop of Alexandria-Cornwall