



Guidelines for the German Catholic Church's commitment to refugees

“When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him.

You shall treat the alien who resides with you not differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens. I, the Lord, am your God.”

(*LV 19:33–34*)

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Foreword

Flight, expulsion, and the loss of homeland are characteristic features of our time.

At present, many people search protection especially here in Germany. They hope for a life in dignity, liberty and security. There is no doubt: The high number of refugees poses major challenges

to our country – simple solutions are not in sight. In this situation, many fellow citizens are seized with fear, resentment is spreading.



Archbishop Dr Stefan Heße

We Christians must not let ourselves become infected by this. “Today, more than in the past, the Gospel of mercy troubles our consciences”, Pope Francis says and wants us to take good note of that. Today the “globalization of charity” can also be found in our immediate vicinity. The hopes and fears of the many people seeking protection are in a special way also the hopes and fears of the Church.

I am grateful for the alert confidence and the active support shown by many Christians meeting the current challenges. People in the Church and in society have done an admirable job in many places to concretely improve the situation of the refugees. More than 5,000 full-time helpers and more than 100,000 volunteers are involved in the Catholic aid given to refugees in Germany. They ensure that the basic needs of the people coming to us are met and that they experience personal care and affection as well as human support.



These “guidelines” are intended to strengthen the already existing commitment and at the same time to induce new activities. The text is based on recommendations developed during the “Catholic Refugee Summit” in Würzburg in November 2015. Nearly 130 practitioners and experts involved in the Church’s aid given to refugees at my invitation have come together for an open exchange on the foundation and topical areas of the Church’s commitment to refugees. The German bishops then discussed, supplemented and adopted the “guidelines” at their spring plenary assembly 2016. They provide a viable ethical orientation and they also serve a needs-oriented further development of the Church’s aid given to refugees. What unites us despite the diversity of experiences and perspectives is the conviction that caring for refugees and migrants is a matter of course for the Church.

Archbishop Dr Stefan Heße

Special representative for refugee issues
of the German Bishops’ Conference

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I. The current situation

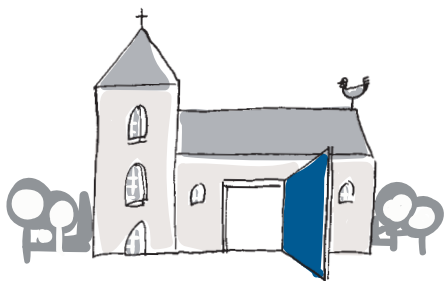
Flight and expulsion are taking place on a previously unheard of scale worldwide in our time. Whilst most refugees still remain in the crisis-ridden regions of the Middle East and Africa, the worsening supply situation and an increasing lack of prospects in the refugee camps in those areas is leading a growing number of people to seek refuge in Europe.

In the current situation, we are experiencing an impressive amount of solidarity and a willingness to help in our country. At the same time, the signs of helplessness and overburdening are unmistakeable in many places. The public debate has also taken on a harsher tone in many cases, and this is far from doing justice to the concerns of people in search of protection. In particular the increase in the instances of xenophobic violence is triggering considerable concern. The current refugee movements impose new challenges on Germany and Europe which can only be overcome by adopting a viable ethical orientation. The Church is particularly challenged in this difficult situation. As Christians, we firmly support the concerns of refugees and asylum-seekers. In this process, we constantly also cast our gaze towards the well-being of society as a whole, and in particular to the needs of disadvantaged people in our country. This working paper is intended to help gain certainty as to guiding principles and priority topics of the Church's commitment to refugees.

II. The foundation for the Church's commitment to refugees

1. Caring for refugees and migrants is a matter of course for the Church. A particular testimony to our Christian identity is given when each individual who seeks protection and refuge in our country is treated with dignity.

Experiences of flight, migration and homelessness are prevalent in both the Old and the New Testaments. The Biblical passages are typified in equal measure by appeals to exercise hospitability and to particularly care for those in need of protection and assistance. "For I was ... a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35) – in light of the refugee movements that are taking place in our times, these words from the Gospel according to Matthew very directly speak anew to each one of us. The hopes and fears of people who are on the run are also the hopes and fears of the Church. Xenophobia and racism are incompatible with the Christian perception of humanity. Together with Pope Francis, the Catholic Church in Germany is striving for a living "culture of acceptance and solidarity". We are however not unaware that not everyone shares this commitment to refugees and migrants without reserve, even in our own Church. There is actually open criticism at times. This is why we need a debate within the Church which tackles fears and anxieties and helps to overcome them.





2. The aid given to refugees by the Church is carried out at all levels of church life. It is typified by the diversity of its players and of their skills.

A large number of people are doing sterling work in many places in the Church to improve refugees' situations. The guiding light here is the principle of subsidiarity. The 27 dioceses, the Orders, the German Caritas Association with its many sub-organisations and specialist associations, the various church groups, associations and organisations, the aid agencies with their international work, and in particular also the many volunteers in the parishes, are all doing their best to help, to give advice, and to engage in deeds and prayers to meet the spiritual and material needs of refugees and asylum-seekers. Many initiatives are being implemented in fruitful ecumenical cooperation. People who otherwise have little contact with the Church are also experiencing and shaping the liveliness and creativity of Christian brotherly love through their contribution to the Church's aid work with refugees.

3. The Church's commitment to refugees particularly concentrates on human encounter and personal assistance. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the Church is only one among several relevant players providing assistance to refugees.

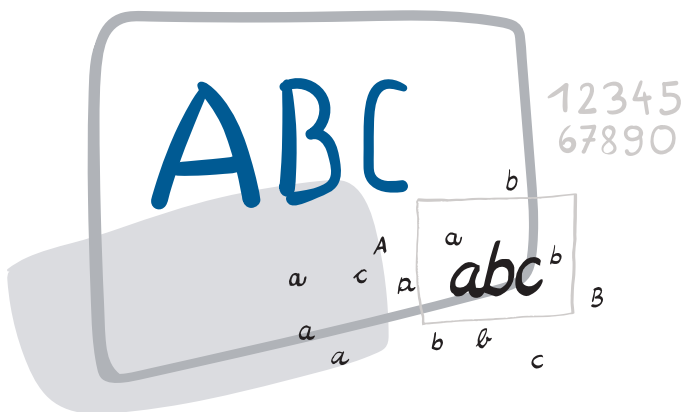
Pope Francis reminds us that “Jesus Christ is always waiting to be recognized in migrants and refugees, in displaced persons and in exiles”. The start and end of all our efforts must therefore always be to conserve the individual dignity of each refugee and asylum-seeker – regardless of their origin and social standing, religion and philosophy, gender and sexual orientation. In all political and social debates regarding appropriate responses to today's migration movements, Christians are called upon to display a particular degree of sensitivity for the many individual biographies and sufferings which are represented by the large numbers of refugees. At the same time, however, the impression must not be created that the Church could offer a



substitute for viable structures of the social welfare state and civil society. Rather, the Church enters into an enhanced commitment in those fields in which a marked need exists for human encounter and personal assistance. What is more, there is a need to intensively network with non-church players who are assisting refugees.

4. The Church defends the interests of all disadvantaged people. The Church's commitment to the many people who are marginalised within our society is to be continued with unreduced energy.

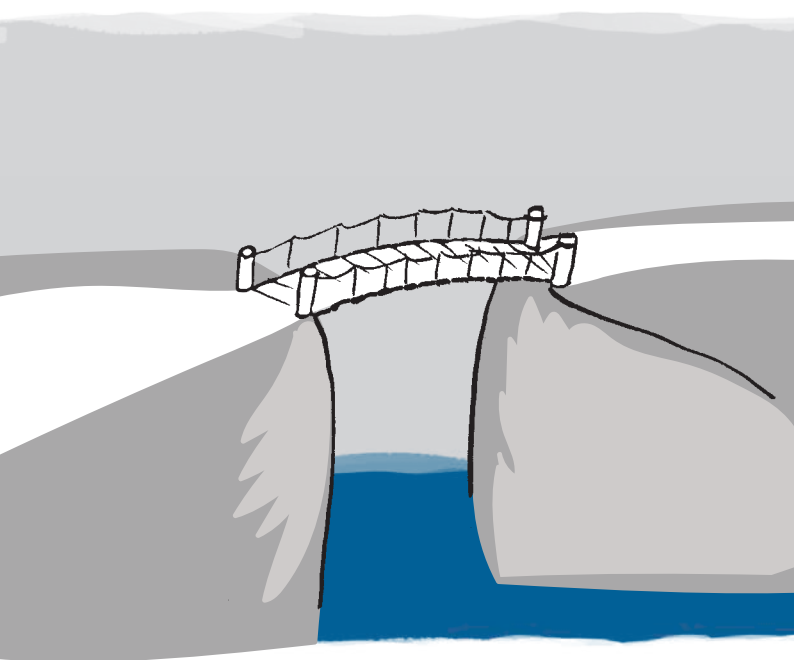
The Church knows of the need in which people find themselves who are unable to live on their wages, pension or unemployment benefit, who seek a training place or a job in vain, who are unable to find affordable housing or are exposed to multiple burdens because they are lone parents. The interests of the disadvantaged in our society and the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers must not be played off against one another, but the Church's welfare work for refugees is understood as forming part of a comprehensive social and charitable commitment. The motivation to provide aid to refugees is fed not only from the special Christian obligation to care for migrants, but is a highly topical principle today, if only for pragmatic reasons: Particularly because we are concerned for the well-being of all of society, we wish to help ensure that today's challenges can be overcome in a spirit of solidarity and shared humanity.



5. The integration of people with a different cultural or religious orientation poses major challenges to our society. The Church is aware of its particular responsibility for ensuring the success of social integration processes.

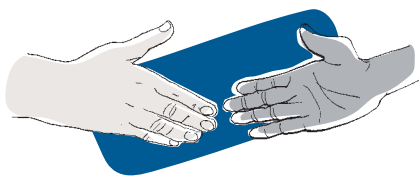
The people who are currently coming to us long for nothing for their home more strongly than peace and justice. In most cases, this is associated with the hope that they will be able to return to their country of origin one day. Since however there are no quick fixes in sight, particularly for the crisis-ridden countries of the Middle East and Africa, Germany will become a new home for a considerable number of refugees in the long term. The cornerstone for their successful participation in society needs to be laid today: There is a need to enable them to learn our language, to gain access to education, to acquire the qualifications which they need for the German labour market and to take up an occupation. Integration is a multi-faceted, reciprocal process posing challenges for immigrants and the host socie-

ty alike. So that diversity and cohesion do not become opposites, there is a need for mutual appreciation and joint fundamental values. Despite some teething troubles, positive coexistence between people from different cultural, religious and philosophical orientations has now become a natural part of everyday life in Germany. This experience provides a sound basis for overcoming the integration-related tasks of both today and tomorrow. As Catholics, we belong to a Church of all languages and peoples. In this awareness, we are playing an active part in forming societal integration processes. We furthermore have many years of experience when it comes to encounters between Christians and Muslims, and can build bridges for communication between secular and religious value systems.



III. Topical areas in the Church's commitment to refugees

Pope Francis reminds us what the task for all Christians is in today's situation: Giving "concrete hope" to people who have lost their homes. The Church in Germany is particularly committed to this mandate in several topical areas.



1. Guidance, skill-building and strengthening volunteer and full-time commitment in the Church's aid to refugees

The many Christians who are committed to the interests of people who seek protection lend a human face to the Church's aid to refugees: They open up to refugees and asylum-seekers a first opportunity to experience our language, offer them an orientation in a new, unfamiliar environment, provide them with goods that are necessary for survival, and approach them with personal respect. Particularly when the voluntary helpers come up against boundaries in terms of what they can do, and their willingness to help risks turning into disappointment, they need to be provided with competent points of contact. Wherever people enter into a voluntary commitment to help refugees, they should be able to access corresponding coordination and training services. At the same time, the full-time helpers also need more further training and development.

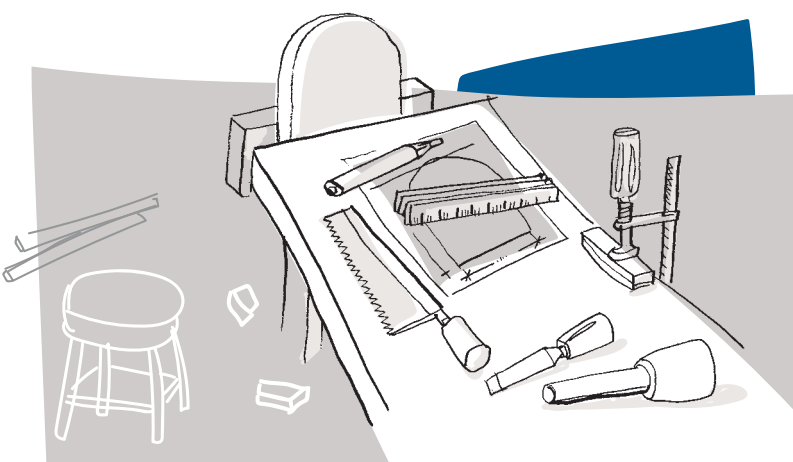
2. Pastoral care

As a result of the current flight movements, the number of Catholics with a migration background is also increasing. Many refugees from the Middle East are members of local Catholic churches which are united with Rome. The classical native-language missions which were established decades ago for Catholic labour migrants are however unable to meet the need for pastoral support for Christian refugees from the Middle East by themselves. Apart from the structural issues that need to be resolved, there is a particular need to ensure that Christian refugees feel welcome in the midst of our Church. There is also a need to accommodate the pastoral needs of the Orthodox Christians among the refugees. Furthermore, our Church parishes can make a major contribution towards reducing fear and anxiety: On the basis of a more profound debate with their own faith, it is also possible to approach people of other denominations and religions with a fresh openness. At the same time, all refugees need pastoral care in a broader sense: Everywhere where people reach their existential limits, they can count on assistance from pastors from the Church. All of this gives rise to new challenges, both for native-tongue pastoral care and for general pastoral care.



3. Housing

Many refugees have been given a roof over their heads in church buildings. Those responsible in the churches also furthermore examine with the necessary creativity and openness which objects can be provided quickly and uncomplicatedly in order to receive refugees. In addition to this short-term assistance for those in need, we already need to strive to find longer-term solutions: Integration can only be successful if sufficient housing is available for everyone who lives in our country and the formation of ghettos is prevented. With the Catholic *Siedlungswerke* settlement agencies, the Church is able to fall back on suitable tools for accomplishing promising social space-orientated housing projects. These were established in response to the housing shortage which occurred after the Second World War, when millions of displaced persons were looking for somewhere to live. The primary task of the *Siedlungswerke*, namely to create appropriate housing for people in difficult financial or social situations, remains unchanged. The bishops and dioceses support the *Siedlungswerke* in carrying out this mandate. In future, there will be a need for church players from the *Siedlungswerke*, the social and charitable services, as well as the building, property and financial administrations, to work together more intensively. Moreover, further church facilities with corresponding resources and skills are called upon to enter into a commitment when it comes to housing refugees.



4. Social participation through work – training posts and vocational prospects for refugees

Gainful employment is a core prerequisite for social participation, and forms the economic foundation for an independent, responsible life. Because of difficulties encountered in recognising professional qualifications, missing documents, shortcomings in training or inadequate language knowledge, refugees frequently face obstacles on the labour market. This is made worse by the fact that employers often feel uncertain with regard to refugees' and asylum-seekers' residence status. Integration into the labour market largely depends on the factors education, qualification and targeted labour market tools. In cooperation with other relevant players, church facilities support immigrants in gaining access to the labour market by offering them a vocational orientation, vocational language courses, preparation for training and for work, as well as assistance during training. In all places where church facilities operate as employers or fund vocational training institutions, opportunities arise for the vocational promo-

tion of refugees. To ensure that vocational integration programmes can be further expanded, church facilities must become more willing to receive them.



5. Social participation through education – helping refugees in kindergartens, schools, further education and adult education institutions

Participation in education is not only key to integration into society, but is also a fundamental human right. From pre-school and school education, through to further education and adult education, many efficiently-operating facilities in Germany are operated by the Church. The many activities of Catholic youth work, as well as of the higher education and students' associations, create venues for social learning. Even more intensive use of all these valuable resources needs to be made than was previously the case in order to provide promising educational prospects for refugees. At the same time, there is a need to reconsider

how greater interfaith opening of Catholic educational facilities can be accompanied with the retention and refinement of their Christian profile.

6. Healthcare and psycho-social assistance for refugees

Each individual in our country needs to have access to suitable healthcare regardless of their respective residence status. Some of those people who are seeking refuge in Germany have been subject to serious physical and psychological torture in their homes, or traumatised by other war and flight-related situations. Refugees with psychological illnesses still do not receive adequate support in our country. Church organisations are already providing the necessary medical, psychotherapeutic and social care in some places. This commitment needs to be expanded further.



7. Unaccompanied minor refugees

Unaccompanied minor refugees constitute a particularly vulnerable group in need of assistance. The more numerous they are, the more we need to do in order to ensure that the quality standards that have been achieved in the past are maintained. The many Catholic organisations that are active in youth welfare have the necessary knowledge and experience to accompany unaccompanied minors on their path to an independent life. In addition to educational services, they particularly require personal guidance and competent points of contact, helping them to cope with their psychological suffering.

8. Female refugees

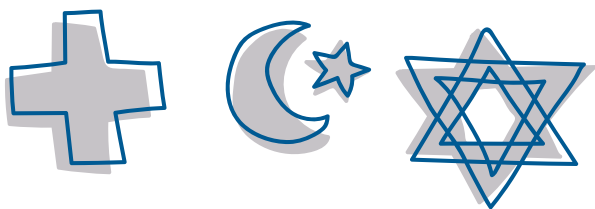
When women are displaced alone or with their children, they are at risk of becoming victims of violence, sexual assaults or human trafficking on their journey. The vulnerability of refugee women must be acknowledged more than was previously the case in the Church and in society. Both in the initial reception facilities and in the subsequent accommodation, women must be provided with information in a language which they can understand as to what their rights are and to what advisory agencies they can turn with their needs. A particular sensitivity for the needs of female refugees needs to be reflected in all areas of the Church's commitment to refugees – but particularly when it comes to educational and vocational prospects, to providing care to unaccompanied refugee girls, as well as to questions concerned with healthcare and psycho-social assistance. The support that is available for women and girls must be orientated towards the goal of enabling them to achieve their ideas for life in freedom and safety.



9. Solidarity with Christians

The Church stands by all people who are suffering. We are aware of our particular obligation towards Christians, large numbers of whom are having to flee from the countries of the Middle East, and are seeking refuge in our country. They are our sisters and brothers in faith. We have a spiritual community with them. It must be ensured that Christian refugees are not marginalised or displaced in our country because of their faith, particularly in asylum-seekers' accommodation centres.

We are making efforts to ensure that Christian life has a future in the Middle East, and are not resigned to Christians who need to leave their countries of origin losing their homes forever. They too have a right to a home; they too have a right to return.



10. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue – cooperation with Muslim and Jewish players concerning aid given to refugees

The current refugee situation also is giving rise to a great degree of solidarity and willingness to lend a hand among Muslims and Jews in our country. This provides an opportunity to resolutely continue along the path of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and to initiate joint projects in support of refugees. Amongst other things, such cooperation may also be helpful in engendering mutual respect between Christian and Muslim refugees and overcoming anti-Semitic attitudes about which the Jewish communities are rightly warning.

11. International assistance for refugees

When Pope Francis calls for the “globalization of charity and cooperation”, he reminds us of our international responsibility – a responsibility which is also based on the fact that Western countries have contributed towards bringing about the disastrous circumstances which are prevalent in many crisis-ridden regions. The refugee movements cannot be expected to ebb any time soon, as long as there is a severe lack of dignified living conditions at polit-

ical, social, economic and ecological level in many countries in our world. This is why we are calling for and supporting a policy at national and international level which follows the principles of a “just peace” and respects the rights of the civilian population.

It is frequently forgotten in the current debate that most refugees do not set off for Europe, but seek protection close to home. In light of this, the Church aid agencies, as well as other Catholic organisations which are operating internationally, have further stepped up their commitment to support refugee projects abroad in recent times. Together with their partners on the ground, they make a major commitment towards creating dignified conditions in the refugee camps and combating the causes of flight.

12. Political positions in issues related to flight and asylum

The major effort undertaken every day by the competent state agencies in our countries in order to house and care for refugees enjoys considerable recognition within the Church. At the same time, we can identify shortcomings in the administrative acts which impose a burden on the debate which is going on within society regarding the topic of refugees.

The Church cannot relieve the State of its sovereign tasks. Since however questions related to flight and asylum touch on the ethical principles underlying Christianity, the Church observes political developments in this field particularly attentively. As Christians, we are called upon to help each individual to live in freedom and dignity. On the basis of this conviction, we endeavour to ensure that fundamental rule-of-law, humanitarian and social achievements are safeguarded, particularly in crisis periods. Each individual who seeks refuge in our country has a right to a

fair process and dignified treatment. This also applies to those who cannot remain in Germany permanently. We have a responsibility for them too. What is more, considerable importance attaches to the unity of the family. This is a valuable asset which we defend. German and European policy on refugees must be measured by these principles.

The Guidelines were adopted by the plenary assembly of the German Bishops' Conference in Kloster Schöntal on 18 February 2016.

“Some people doubt whether our country will be able to master the tasks lying ahead of us. They are concerned about the social problems that we will have to face. In view of the large number of immigrants coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds, many people are worried about the cultural identity of Germany. But what happens to the core values of our Christian civilization, if we replace compassion with hard-heartedness and hospitality with separation? What about our Christian identity, if we allow people to drown along the external borders of the European Union? Of course political and economic considerations are of importance, but they must not prevent us from following the commandment to love our neighbour.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all helpers! Any kind of support is valuable and precious and this also includes prayers. We ask you: Stay committed and don't be discouraged by obstacles and difficulties!”

Taken from: “Stay committed!” – Statement by the German bishops on the aid given to refugees from 24 September 2015



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