



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II  
FOR THE 89th WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES 2003**

***For a commitment to overcome all racism, xenophobia  
and exaggerated nationalism***

1. Migration has become a widespread phenomenon in the modern-day world and involves all nations, either as countries of departure, of transit or of arrival. It affects millions of human beings, and presents a challenge that the pilgrim Church, at the service of the whole human family, cannot fail to take up and meet in the Gospel spirit of universal charity. This year's World Day of Migrants and Refugees should be a time of special prayer for the needs of all who, for whatever reason, are far from home and family; it should be a day of serious reflection on the duties of Catholics towards these brothers and sisters.

Among those particularly affected are the most vulnerable of foreigners: undocumented migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, those displaced by continuing violent conflicts in many parts of the world, and the victims – mostly women and children – of the terrible crime of human trafficking. Even in the recent past we have witnessed tragic instances of forced movements of peoples for ethnic and nationalistic pretensions, which have added untold misery to the lives of targeted groups. At the root of these situations there are sinful intentions and actions that go contrary to the Gospel and constitute a call to Christians everywhere to overcome evil with good.

2. Membership in the Catholic community is not determined by nationality, or by social or ethnic origin, but essentially by faith in Jesus Christ and Baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity. The "cosmopolitan" make-up of the People of God is visible today in practically every particular Church because migration has transformed even small and formerly isolated communities into pluralist and inter-cultural realities. Places that until recently rarely saw an outsider are now home to people from different parts of the world. More and more, for example, the Sunday Eucharist involves hearing the Good News proclaimed in languages not heard before, thus giving new expression to the exhortation of the ancient psalm: "Praise the Lord, all you nations, glorify him all

you peoples” (Ps. 116,1). These communities therefore have new opportunities of living the experience of *catholicity*, a mark of the Church expressing her essential openness to all that is the work of the Spirit in every people.

The Church understands that restricting membership of a local community on the basis of ethnic or other external characteristics would be an impoverishment for all concerned, and would contradict the basic right of the baptized to worship and take part in the life of the community. Moreover, if newcomers feel unwelcome as they approach a particular parish community because they do not speak the local language or follow local customs, they easily become “lost sheep”. The loss of such “little ones” for reasons of even latent discrimination should be a cause of grave concern to pastors and faithful alike.

3. This takes us back to a subject which I have often mentioned in my Messages for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, namely, the Christian duty to welcome whoever comes knocking out of need. Such openness builds up vibrant Christian communities, enriched by the Spirit with the gifts brought to them by new disciples from other cultures. This basic expression of evangelical love is likewise the inspiration of countless programmes of solidarity towards migrants and refugees in all parts of the world. To understand the extent of this ecclesial heritage of practical service to immigrants and displaced people we need only to remember the achievements and legacy of such figures as Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini or Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini, or the extensive present-day action of the Catholic relief agency “*Caritas*” and of the International Catholic Migration Commission.

Often, solidarity does not come easily. It requires training and a turning away from attitudes of closure, which in many societies today have become more subtle and penetrating. To deal with this phenomenon, the Church possesses vast educational and formative resources at all levels. I therefore appeal to parents and teachers to combat racism and xenophobia by inculcating positive attitudes based on Catholic social doctrine.

4. Being ever more deeply rooted in Christ, Christians must struggle to overcome any tendency to turn in on themselves, and learn to discern in people of other cultures the handiwork of God. Only genuine evangelical love will be strong enough to help communities pass from mere tolerance of others to real respect for their differences. Only Christ’s redeeming grace can make us victorious in the daily challenge of turning from egoism to altruism, from fear to openness, from rejection to solidarity.

Understandably, as I urge Catholics to excel in the spirit of solidarity towards newcomers among them, I also invite the immigrants to recognize the duty to honour the countries which receive them and to respect the laws, culture and traditions of the people who have welcomed them. Only in this way will social harmony prevail.

The path to true acceptance of immigrants in their cultural diversity is actually a difficult one, in some cases a real *Way of the Cross*. That must not discourage us from pursuing the will of God, who wishes to draw all peoples to himself in Christ, through the instrumentality of his Church, the sacrament of the unity of all mankind (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1).

At times that path needs a prophetic word that points out what is wrong and encourages what is right. When tensions arise, the credibility of the Church in her doctrine on the fundamental respect due to each person rests on the moral courage of pastors and faithful to “stake everything on love” (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 47).

5. It hardly needs to be said that mixed cultural communities offer unique opportunities to deepen the gift of unity with other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities. Many of them in fact have worked within their own communities and with the Catholic Church to form societies in which the cultures of migrants and their special gifts are sincerely appreciated, and in which manifestations of racism, xenophobia and exaggerated nationalism are prophetically opposed.

May Mary our Mother, who also experienced rejection at the very time when she was about to give her Son to the world, help the Church to be the sign and instrument of the unity of cultures and nations in one single family. May she help all of us to witness in our lives to the Incarnation and the constant presence of Christ, who through us wishes to continue in history and in the world his work of liberation from all forms of discrimination, rejection and marginalization. May God’s abundant blessings be with those who welcome the stranger in Christ’s name.

*From the Vatican, 24 October 2002*

**JOANNES PAULUS II**