

Pope defends 'right to emigrate' in annual migration message

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI said the world has a responsibility to help refugees find places to live and work in safety, as part of its vocation to form "one family."

Welcoming refugees is an "imperative gesture of human solidarity," the pope said in a message released at the Vatican Oct. 26.

"This means that those who are forced to leave their homes or their country will be helped to find a place where they may live in peace and safety, where they may work and take on the rights and duties that exist in the country that welcomes them," he said.

The pope made the comments in his message for the 2011 World Day for Migrants and Refugees, which will be celebrated Jan. 16 in most countries. He chose "One Human Family" as the theme for next year's commemoration.

The human family is multiethnic and multicultural, the pope said, and everyone, including migrants and the local populations that welcome them, "have the same right to enjoy the goods of the earth whose destination is universal, as the social doctrine of the church teaches."

"It is here that solidarity and sharing are founded," he said.

The pope underlined that the increasing movement of peoples today is often motivated by situations of conflict or discrimination.

"For these people who flee from violence or persecution, the international community has taken on precise commitments. Respect of their rights, as well as the legitimate concern for security and social coherence, foster a stable and harmonious existence," he said.

The pope defended the "right to emigrate" as a fundamental right to leave one's

country and enter another country to look for better conditions of life. That implies responsibilities among immigrants and the host countries, he said.

“States have the right to regulate migration flows and to defend their own frontiers, always guaranteeing the respect due to the dignity of each and every human person. Immigrants, moreover, have the duty to integrate into the host country, respecting its laws and its national identity,” he said.

At a news conference to present the papal message, a Vatican official said such integration does not mean mere assimilation into a kind of “melting pot.”

Archbishop Antonio Veglio, president of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, said that immigrants can undergo a “de-culturalization” when they are expected to simply conform to the host culture. At the other end of the scale, immigrants who completely resist the host culture end up living in a kind of cultural ghetto, he said.

The proper balance involves “cultural synthesis,” in which cultural values are exchanged, benefiting both the immigrant community and the host country, he said.

Archbishop Veglio related that when he was named to head the council for migrants in 2008, he noticed that its activities included pastoral outreach to Roma, or Gypsies.

“I thought, ‘Oh, Lord, I have to defend the Gypsies?’ That was a stupid reaction. I didn’t realize this is a people of 12 million throughout Europe with their own history,” he said. He said he understands now that Gypsies cannot simply be assimilated into various European cultures, because they have one of their own.

Father Gabriele Bentoglio, undersecretary of the pontifical council, said there are about 15 million refugees in the world today, and about 27 million internally displaced persons. Many have acted with “courage” in leaving tragic circumstances in their homelands, he said.

Father Bentoglio said it’s a common misperception that only places like Europe or the United States are facing a large influx of immigrants. Last year, he said, South Africa had 220,000 people requesting refuge in the country, nearly equal to the total

for all of Europe.

He said the behavior of many countries today is one of refusal and discrimination toward immigrants, in contradiction to the international agreements they have signed.