Both the Old and New Testaments contain powerful examples of refugees forced to flee their homelands because of threats of violence or oppression. The Book of Exodus follows the Israelites as they escape slavery in Egypt only to wander in the desert for 40 years, waiting for the Promised Land. Their experience as refugees became a lesson enshrined in law; God commanded the Israelites to “Treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt.”

The New Testament also begins with a story of escape, this time the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt because of King Herod’s plan to kill the newborn Jesus. Jesus’ time as a refugee lends special emphasis to his reiteration of the same law that God gave the Israelites: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.”

The Catholic church has embraced the call to welcome the stranger throughout its history, often providing services and support to immigrants when governments were unable or unwilling to do so (for a fascinating account of what life was like as an immigrant in New York City in 1925, read Marie Reilly Owens’ article “The Catholic Immigrant” in the “Suggested Reading” section). Most recently, Pope Francis has drawn on the church’s rich tradition of welcoming the poor and the oppressed in his 2014 address on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. He acknowledges that migration can challenge us, “often reveal[ing] failures and shortcomings on the part of States and the international community.” But rather than feeling discouraged, Francis sees migration as evidence of “the aspiration of humanity to enjoy a unity marked by respect for differences, by attitudes of acceptance and hospitality which enable an equitable sharing of the world’s goods.”

Ananda Rose’s article “Seeking Refuge” illustrates the shortcomings of the immigration system in the United States, while also highlighting the remarkable hospitality and compassion individuals can demonstrate. Rose follows Sr. Zita of La Posada Providencia, an emergency shelter for homeless migrants and asylum seekers in Texas, as the nun ministers to the women and children seeking refuge in the U.S. from countries as wide-ranging as Rwanda and Afghanistan.

“Unfortunately, only when the poor enter the halls of the rich do the rich notice that the poor exist,” observes the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Madeleine Davies’ article “A Loss of Nerve.” Davies argues that instead of assuming that all immigrants from war-torn countries like Syria and Iraq are terrorists, Western countries should offer shelter to these “first victims” of terror. She contrasts Europe’s limited response with the generosity of resource-poor countries like Lebanon, which spends a third of its GDP caring for refugees.

E.J. Dionne Jr.’s opinion piece “Americans & the Needs of Strangers” asks whether immigration policy should really be determined by the “searing pictures” of starving and freezing refugees. He points out that new immigrants only serve to remind us of our “unmet obligations at home” and that we have historically regretted “leaving people in grave danger instead of taking them in.”

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1 Leviticus 19:33-34
2 Matthew 25:35
> Readings for Discussion:


> Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. What are our obligations to strangers? Consider this in light of your own family’s history. How have things changed since your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents came to America? What has remained the same?

2. Do immigrants to a new country have an obligation to try and identify with their new home, perhaps through language or traditions? What are the obligations of the host country towards its new residents?

3. Jesus called us to “welcome the stranger” but questions of national security often conflict with a policy of openness. What should be considered when devising policy on refugees? Does a wealthy country have more of an obligation to take refugees?

> Suggestions for Further Reading:


Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Pope Francis | August 5, 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Our societies are experiencing, in an unprecedented way, processes of mutual interdependence and interaction on the global level. While not lacking problematic or negative elements, these processes are aimed at improving the living conditions of the human family, not only economically, but politically and culturally as well. Each individual is a part of humanity and, with the entire family of peoples, shares the hope of a better future. This consideration inspired the theme I have chosen for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees this year: Migrants and Refugees: Towards a Better World.

In our changing world, the growing phenomenon of human mobility emerges, to use the words of Pope Benedict XVI, as a “sign of the times” (cf. Message for the 2006 World Day of Migrants and Refugees). While it is true that migrations often reveal failures and shortcomings on the part of States and the international community, they also point to the aspiration of humanity to enjoy a unity marked by respect for differences, by attitudes of acceptance and hospitality which enable an equitable sharing of the world’s goods, and by the protection and the advancement of the dignity and centrality of each human being.

From the Christian standpoint, the reality of migration, like other human realities, points to the tension between the beauty of creation, marked by Grace and the Redemption, and the mystery of sin. Solidarity, acceptance, and signs of fraternity and understanding exist side by side with rejection, discrimination, trafficking and exploitation, suffering and death. Particularly disturbing are those situations where migration is not only involuntary, but actually set in motion by various forms of human trafficking and enslavement. Nowadays, “slave labour” is common coin! Yet despite the problems, risks and difficulties to be faced, great numbers of migrants and refugees continue to be inspired by confidence and hope; in their hearts they long for a better future, not only for themselves but for their families and those closest to them.

What is involved in the creation of “a better world”? The expression does not allude naively to abstract notions or unattainable ideals; rather, it aims at an authentic and integral development, at efforts to provide dignified living conditions for everyone, at finding just responses to the needs of individuals and families, and at ensuring that God’s gift of creation is respected, safeguarded and cultivated. The Venerable Paul VI described the aspirations of people today in this way: “to secure a sure food supply, cures for diseases and steady employment... to exercise greater personal responsibility; to do more, to learn more, and have more, in order to be more” (Populorum Progressio, 6).

Our hearts do desire something “more”. Beyond greater knowledge or possessions, they want to “be” more. Development cannot be reduced to economic growth alone, often attained without a thought for the poor and the vulnerable. A better world will come about only if attention is first paid to individuals; if human promotion is integral, taking account of every dimension of the person, including the spiritual; if no one is neglected, including the poor, the sick, prisoners, the needy and the stranger (cf. Mt 25:31-46); if we can prove capable of leaving behind a throwaway culture and embracing one of encounter and acceptance.

Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more. The sheer number of people migrating from one continent to another, or shifting places within their own countries and geographical areas, is striking. Contemporary movements of migration represent the largest movement of individuals, if not of peoples, in history. As the Church accompanies
migrants and refugees on their journey, she seeks to understand the causes of migration, but she also works to overcome its negative effects, and to maximize its positive influence on the communities of origin, transit and destination.

While encouraging the development of a better world, we cannot remain silent about the scandal of poverty in its various forms. Violence, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, restrictive approaches to fundamental freedoms, whether of individuals or of groups: these are some of the chief elements of poverty which need to be overcome. Often these are precisely the elements which mark migratory movements, thus linking migration to poverty. Fleeing from situations of extreme poverty or persecution in the hope of a better future, or simply to save their own lives, millions of persons choose to migrate. Despite their hopes and expectations, they often encounter mistrust, rejection and exclusion, to say nothing of tragedies and disasters which offend their human dignity.

The reality of migration, given its new dimensions in our age of globalization, needs to be approached and managed in a new, equitable and effective manner; more than anything, this calls for international cooperation and a spirit of profound solidarity and compassion. Cooperation at different levels is critical, including the broad adoption of policies and rules aimed at protecting and promoting the human person. Pope Benedict XVI sketched the parameters of such policies, stating that they “should set out from close collaboration between the migrants’ countries of origin and their countries of destination; they should be accompanied by adequate international norms able to coordinate different legislative systems with a view to safeguarding the needs and rights of individual migrants and their families, and at the same time, those of the host countries” (Caritas in Veritate, 62). Working together for a better world requires that countries help one another, in a spirit of willingness and trust, without raising insurmountable barriers. A good synergy can be a source of encouragement to government leaders as they confront socioeconomic imbalances and an unregulated globalization, which are among some of the causes of migration movements in which individuals are more victims than protagonists. No country can singlehandedly face the difficulties associated with this phenomenon, which is now so widespread that it affects every continent in the twofold movement of immigration and emigration.

It must also be emphasized that such cooperation begins with the efforts of each country to create better economic and social conditions at home, so that emigration will not be the only option left for those who seek peace, justice, security and full respect of their human dignity. The creation of opportunities for employment in the local economies will also avoid the separation of families and ensure that individuals and groups enjoy conditions of stability and serenity.

Finally, in considering the situation of migrants and refugees, I would point to yet another element in building a better world, namely, the elimination of prejudices and presumptions in the approach to migration. Not infrequently, the arrival of migrants, displaced persons, asylum-seekers and refugees gives rise to suspicion and hostility. There is a fear that society will become less secure, that identity and culture will be lost, that competition for jobs will become stiffer and even that criminal activity will increase. The communications media have a role of great responsibility in this regard: it is up to them, in fact, to break down stereotypes and to offer correct information in reporting the errors of a few as well as the honesty, rectitude and goodness of the majority. A change of attitude towards migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of a throwaway culture – towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world. The communications media are themselves called to embrace this “conversion of attitudes” and to promote this change in the way migrants and refugees are treated.

I think of how even the Holy Family of Nazareth experienced initial rejection: Mary “gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7). Jesus, Mary and Joseph knew what it meant to leave their own country and become migrants; threatened by Herod’s lust for power, they were forced to take flight and seek refuge in Egypt (cf. Mt 2:13-14). But the maternal heart of Mary and the compassionate heart of Joseph, the Protector of the Holy Family, never
doubted that God would always be with them. Through their intercession, may that same firm certainty dwell in the heart of every migrant and refugee.

The Church, responding to Christ’s command to “go and make disciples of all nations”, is called to be the People of God which embraces all peoples and brings to them the proclamation of the Gospel, for the face of each person bears the mark of the face of Christ! Here we find the deepest foundation of the dignity of the human person, which must always be respected and safeguarded. It is less the criteria of efficiency, productivity, social class, or ethnic or religious belonging which ground that personal dignity, so much as the fact of being created in God’s own image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-27) and, even more so, being children of God. Every human being is a child of God! He or she bears the image of Christ! We ourselves need to see, and then to enable others to see, that migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved. They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy, a more united country, a more fraternal world and a more open and evangelical Christian community. Migration can offer possibilities for a new evangelization, open vistas for the growth of a new humanity foreshadowed in the paschal mystery: a humanity for which every foreign country is a homeland and every homeland is a foreign country.

Dear migrants and refugees! Never lose the hope that you too are facing a more secure future, that on your journey you will encounter an outstretched hand, and that you can experience fraternal solidarity and the warmth of friendship! To all of you, and to those who have devoted their lives and their efforts to helping you, I give the assurance of my prayers and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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Seeking Refuge

Life and Death at the Border

Ananda Rose | December 18, 2014

I have only just arrived at La Posada Providencia, an emergency shelter for homeless migrants and asylum seekers in San Benito, Texas, when Sr. Zita Telkamp receives a call from a Homeland Security center in the neighboring town of Harlingen. “They’ve got another mother and child for us,” says Sr. Zita. A few minutes later she is barreling down Highway 77 through sheets of rain in the shelter’s communal minivan. You would never know by her lead foot that she is in her eighties—she has been a Sister of Divine Providence for sixty-five years, six of those as program director of La Posada.

La Posada has become a trusted resource for Harlingen’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility, which is overflowing with undocumented migrants, many of them women and children. The number of Central American mothers and children coming through south Texas has been steadily increasing since 2011, but last summer it skyrocketed. Some compare the situation to the European refugee crisis following World War II. United States Customs and Border Protection reports that about seventy thousand unaccompanied minors were apprehended in 2014. An array of religious leaders, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been calling on Washington to respond to this ongoing humanitarian crisis. Meanwhile, the crisis continues.

Since it opened its doors nearly twenty-five years ago, La Posada has received men, women, and children from over seventy nations. On the day of my visit, there were clients from Honduras, El Salvador, Cuba, Sudan, and Eritrea, but come another day and you could meet someone from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Romania, Rwanda, Yemen, Afghanistan, China, or Peru. Last year, La Posada served clients from twenty-five nations. The people who have passed through its doors are survivors of human atrocities of nearly every kind—religious and political persecution, ethnic cleansing, human trafficking and slavery, extortion, kidnapping, mass murders, terrorism, forced conscription, rape, and other gender-based violence. They come because home is no longer safe.

That’s why the United Nations has urged the U.S. government to designate many of these women and children as refugees rather than migrants—especially those coming from Central America. Rather than being sent home, the UN argues, these people should receive international protection. The internationally agreed-upon definition of a refugee is someone who has fled her country based on a well-founded fear of persecution, and who does not feel that her own government can protect her. Refugees, according to the traditional understanding, are persecuted for their race, religion, or political affiliation. When we hear the word “refugee,” we may associate it with places like Syria, Iraq, or Sudan. Countries like Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are not in the throes of civil war, yet the hundreds of thousands who have traveled to the United States from Central America in recent years are fleeing civil strife.

In a March 2014 report by the UN High Commissioner of Refugees titled “Children on the Run,” the agency concluded that more than half of the four hundred migrant children interviewed for the report qualified for international protection based on their stories of extortion, rape, murder, gang conscription, and other chilling human rights abuses. These grim realities have prompted human-rights organizations to pressure receiving nations to recognize these emerging forms of displacement. They urge countries like the United States to respond to each asylum-seeker on a case-by-case basis, knowing that deporting all these people means sending some of them back to a place where they face the threat of death—or worse.

At La Posada, the numbers tell the story of this crisis: For the five years preceding fiscal year 2013, La Posada served an average of 210 migrants and asylum-seekers a year, while in fiscal year 2013 La Posada served 589. By fiscal year 2014, those numbers more than doubled: they received 1,411 clients, including 631 children under the age of 18, and 555 women.
The women’s dormitory consists of just one bedroom shared by all the female clients and their children. Six twin beds fill the room end to end and are usually shared by several children at a time. To one side is a tiny bathroom that has been completely demolished. Because La Posada doesn’t have the resources to pay professionals to rebuild the bathroom, Sr. Zita has been taking trips to Home Depot for materials and having some of La Posada’s male clients do the work. That sort of creative problem-solving is how La Posada keeps running despite the many setbacks. “Somehow God always provides for us,” she says.

Tucked away at the end of a tranquil road, La Posada is surrounded by verdant corn fields and a meandering resaca—a marshy stream—used to irrigate the papaya trees and vegetable garden tended by guests. La Posada was originally located in Harlingen, where the organization sometimes faced opposition from locals with anti-immigrant views. They blame increased crime on the high level of immigration, or are simply uncomfortable with certain aspects of the asylum process. Sr. Zita says La Posada gets less grief out in the middle of nowhere.

When Sr. Zita and I arrive at the Homeland Security center in Harlingen, there are two mothers standing outside in the rain, each with a young son. They are from El Salvador. “Who am I taking?” Sr. Zita asks both mothers, but neither speaks English—and Sr. Zita doesn’t speak Spanish. An ICE agent explains that one of the mothers has received a money transfer from relatives in San Antonio and is waiting for a taxi to take her and her child to the bus terminal. The other mother is headed with her son to Chicago, but they have no money, which is why Homeland Security called Sr. Zita.

Because of the sheer numbers of mothers and children inundating Homeland Security facilities like the one in Harlingen, ICE has been releasing them with papers to reappear in court for immigration hearings at a later date. Many never show up. Some of them have no money and nothing but the clothes on their backs. That’s where La Posada comes in. The only nonprofit shelter of its kind in the Rio Grande Valley, the organization provides short-term and long-term shelter for its clients, as well as ESL and life-skills training, and legal and medical services. It also provides three meals a day, including a home-cooked dinner attended by all clients.

“I just want to go to Chicago now,” one of the mothers says through tears. Her fifteen-year-old son made the journey first; he is waiting for her in Chicago. Her younger son, who is nine, is silent and bleary-eyed. Over the course of eight days, they traveled from La Paz, El Salvador, through Mexico, and crossed the border near McAllen, where Border Patrol found them. La Paz means “peace,” but, as this mother tells me, “No hay paz en La Paz.” She says she has known countless people who have left La Paz for the United States, despite the perilous journey through Mexico, where criminals prey on vulnerable migrants, many of whom are extorted, murdered, kidnapped, trafficked, and sexually assaulted. Thousands more die in the scorching wilderness of the borderlands. But this mother, like so many others, was willing to take the risk because the situation at home is so dire. El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in the world, largely the result of gang violence and drug trafficking.

When we return to La Posada, Sr. Zita ushers mother and child into the main house where the woman calls her contact in Chicago. The contact will wire money to Sr. Zita, and when it arrives she will drive them to the bus depot in Harlingen. In the meantime, they will both get showers, clean clothes, a warm meal, and a safe place to sleep.

Also at La Posada are two young mothers—one from Eritrea, the other from Sudan—who arrived in the spring after fleeing civil unrest in their home countries. The Sudanese woman arrived with her three-year-old daughter and her six-month-old son. The Eritrean woman came to La Posada with her two-year-old daughter—and four months pregnant. She traveled with her husband, but, while Homeland Security released the mother and child to La Posada, the husband was placed in a detention center. He was later transferred to a different facility in Georgia, although his wife was not contacted about his move and did not know for several weeks where he was being held.
The women paid $8,000 each to make the journey. They began in Brazil, which they entered with forged documents, then traveled by taxi, bus, car, and foot through the jungles, mountains, and deserts of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. In each country, one guide handed them off to another. Neither has any family in the United States. They know very little English. Rather than trying to enter the United States illegally, they went straight to U.S. border officials and declared themselves asylum-seekers—as their guides advised them to do.

How should the United States respond to the crisis? Is it our moral duty to give shelter and asylum to these mothers and children? “These unaccompanied minors should be cared for in their home countries, rather than burdening our already unsustainable entitlement systems,” Texas Governor Rick Perry wrote to Obama in May 2012. Perry, along with many other Republicans, blames the federal government’s border policies—the lack of effective border security as well as the administration’s supposedly lax deportation policy—for the surge in migrant children. Apparently he is not aware that Obama has deported more migrants than any other president.

Meanwhile, in states as far north as Massachusetts, officials scrambled to open shelters for these children. In an emotional speech in July, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick announced plans to open a facility to house a thousand migrant children. Flanked by Cardinal Sean O’Malley of Boston, Patrick said that decision was based on “love of country and lessons of faith.” He reminded the public of how the United States turned away a boat of Jewish children in 1939, an act that “remains a blight on our national reputation.” Through tears, Patrick spoke of his most personal reason for defending these children who have come here alone: his faith. “Every major faith tradition on the planet charges its followers to treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated. I don’t know what good there is in faith if we can’t and won’t turn to it in times of need,” Patrick said.

Another woman religious, Sr. Pamela Marie Buganski, SND, responded to the crisis by moving from Toledo to Brooks County, Texas—ground zero of migrant deaths in the state—to help Eddie Canales, founder and director of the South Texas Human Rights Center. Sr. Pam has been assisting Canales in his effort to end migrant suffering along the Texas-Mexico border. “How do you get out in front of a disaster like this?” she asks. She has been responding to a seemingly endless series of calls from the relatives of migrants who have gone missing in Texas.

One unexpected way Sr. Pam found herself helping was by providing pastoral care for the forensic teams who have been working to exhume the remains of border crossers who have died in the vast brushland of Brooks County, which is not equipped to deal with the escalating numbers of dead migrants. As a result, most of them have been buried in common graves without proper forensic analysis. For the past few summers, volunteer forensic teams have spent weeks exhuming the bodies of migrants in the hope of identifying the dead and repatriating them so that their loved ones can bury them properly. This summer the team recovered more than fifty sets of remains: Bones buried in shopping bags; skulls in biohazard bags; clothed skeletons thrown into the ground. Krista Latham, a forensic anthropologist from the University of Indiana, headed up this year’s effort. “These are human beings who are refugees of extreme poverty and institutionalized violence,” says Latham. “These are human beings who died trying to get to a place they thought would bring freedom and safety. Human beings who were invisible in life and who were being forgotten in death. Human beings who have family members wondering what happened to them.”

In our last conversation, Sr. Pam called me from McAllen, Texas, where she was volunteering with Catholic Charities for the day. She was in charge of a mother and daughter who had not bathed in a week. “Sometimes all you can do in the face of such a disaster is be present,” she said. She had spent the day helping other mothers and children that had been released from detention. “I’m not a doctor,” Sr. Pam told me. “I can’t fix bodies. I’m not a lawyer. I can’t represent these mothers and children in court. But I can simply be with them.”

This past summer, La Posada welcomed its eight thousandth client, a man from East Africa who had been assaulted by terrorist groups there. “What a privilege it has been for the Sisters of Divine Providence, staff,
volunteers, and donors to have touched so many lives, making God’s Providence more visible in the world and
giving hope to thousands,” says Sr. Zita. “It’s a wonderful feeling that I have to make them feel welcome and
loved not only by God, but by us.” One of Sr. Zita’s colleague’s echoed that sentiment: “The whole point of much
of the Lord’s teaching is having that sense of, ‘When I was hungry you gave me to eat, when I was a stranger you
welcomed me.’ That is what La Posada is all about.”
A Loss of Nerve

Can’t the West Do More to help Syrian Refugees?

Madeleine Davies  |  January 14, 2016

The discovery of a Syrian passport near the body of one of the suicide bombers at the Stade de France in Paris was the “tell” that many of those opposed to admitting refugees had sought. In a speech titled “Attack on Europe,” the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, whose government has already overseen the construction of a razor-wire fence to secure its border, claimed that terrorists were “mingling in the mass of people leaving their homes in the hope of a better life.” Those who opened their nations’ doors to refugees “did not do everything for the defence of European people.”

Orbán is not alone in suggesting that European countries cannot accept more refugees without undermining their national security. Several member states are resisting the EU resettlement plan announced in September, which would use a quota system to resettle a total of 120,000 refugees throughout Europe. While media reports of the refugee crisis have tended to contrast the hostility of certain Eastern European countries with the apparent openness of their Western and Northern neighbors, there are signs that the Paris attacks have caused a more widespread loss of nerve. A YouGov poll conducted shortly after the attacks found that 73 percent of the British public believed that there should be no increase in the number of Syrian refugees admitted into the United Kingdom—up from 51 percent in September. In the same poll, 24 percent said that the United Kingdom should admit no refugees at all. In Germany, where a million migrants are expected to arrive this year, Angela Merkel has seen her once-enviable popularity ratings plummet. Footage of Germans clapping as refugees arrived at Munich’s main train station became a source of national pride in September, embodying her slogan “Wir schaffen das” (“We can do this”). Today there are calls within Merkel’s own party to replace “Willkommenskultur”—the “culture of welcome”—with a “culture of reason.” Reports of North Africans and Arabs robbing and assaulting women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve have only deepened the suspicion and anxiety.

Amid these signs of panic, it is notable that France has remained steadfast in its commitment to resettlement. “The people of Syria and Iraq have fled because they are martyred by the same people who attack us today,” French President François Hollande told French mayors, before confirming that his government remained committed to welcoming thirty thousand refugees over the next two years. It is notable that Serbia, one of the poorest nations in Europe, and not yet a member of the EU, has also kept its borders open. The flight from violence in the Balkans in the 1990s is still recent history, cited by volunteers greeting the weary caravan of refugees now passing through their country.

Intergovernmental organizations have given short shrift to those who cite the Paris attacks as justification for refusing to cooperate with the EU resettlement plan. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), António Guterres, has said that it is “absolute nonsense” to blame refugees for terrorism. As the “first victims” of the terror in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, they should be met not with fences but with reception centers and legal routes of entry. Europeans have also been warned that in turning on refugees they will play into ISIS’s strategy—one predicated on sowing fear, suspicion, and division and thereby precipitating a conflict between the Muslim world and the West.

The fact is that, like the London bombings of 2005, the Paris attacks were the work of home-grown extremists, young men who had grown up in France and Belgium. It is estimated that more than 750 people have travelled from the UK to Syria and Iraq to volunteer with Islamic militants, and that around half of them have returned. The danger, then, is already here, within our own borders. No one is arguing that the mass migration to Europe does not bring with it security risks. The discovery that the alleged architect of the attacks, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, had apparently been able to travel freely between Syria and Europe has led to recriminations about the case with which Europe’s lack of internal border controls can be
exploited. A German police chief has reported more than sixty attempts by extremist Islamic groups to recruit from refugee shelters, according to a Reuters report. Even among refugees, there is a sense of resignation that there may be some extremists among them. “There are of course ticking bombs coming in with the refugees,” Nizar Basal, a Syrian refugee living in Germany, told the news agency. “But the question is, what will happen to us? What will people think about us? They will think we are the enemy.”

Even before the Paris attacks, Europeans were frightened by refugees. There had had been rumors over the summer that among the huddled masses crossing the continent were some jihadists. The image of a tiny toddler in blue shorts washed up on a Turkish beach softened hearts, but scenes of chaos in countries struggling to deal with the unprecedented number of refugees still caused alarm. Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, the UNHCR has been issuing strong warnings that countries like Lebanon—where Syrian refugees now make up a quarter of the population—were buckling under the burden, but few in the West paid attention. It was images of bodies squashed aboard dinghies in the Mediterranean, of refugees shivering around campfires in the Balkans and lying desperate on train tracks in Hungary that finally forced European governments to recognize the magnitude of the crisis. “Unfortunately, only when the poor enter the halls of the rich do the rich notice that the poor exist,” observed Gutieres.

The contrast between the response in Europe—reactive, ill-tempered, and chaotic—and that of the countries bordering Syria ought to be a cause of shame. People in countries like Lebanon and Jordan have been nothing short of heroic in recent years, and they deserve both more credit and more support. Their generosity has come at huge cost. In September, Lebanon’s Prime Minister told the UN that the refugee crisis was costing his country a third of its GDP. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention but, despite memories of a thirty-year occupation by Syria and the fact that it already hosts four hundred thousand Palestinian refugees, it opened its borders in 2011. Lebanese communities, including those in the poorest parts of the country, responded quickly, offering the refugees shelter and access to services and support. This was at considerable political risk, given the fragile demographic balance between Christians, Sunnis, Shia, and Druze in Lebanon, and the possibility of upsetting a hard-won political settlement between these groups.

Jordan, the fourth-driest country on earth, is hosting six hundred thousand Syrian refugees. Before my visit to the country this year, I read its plan for dealing with the crisis: two hundred pages of detailed projections, followed by a request to the international community for $2,991,736,900—the amount it needs to support the new arrivals and to cope with their impact on the communities hosting them. In contrast with the panic and recriminations that have characterized the response in Europe, this document, with its color-coded charts and neat tables, radiated confidence and optimism.

Jordan’s plan is part of a wider regional response to the Syrian crisis, described by a UN report as a “paradigm shift.” The Syria Regional Response Plan, involving Syria’s neighbors (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) as well as Egypt, combines proposals for meeting the immediate needs of refugees with long-term plans to support the communities hosting them. It is an ambitious piece of work. By the end of this year, it aims to have almost a million children enrolled in formal education, with 1,121 educational facilities constructed, renovated, or rehabilitated. The plan would also give 217,000 refugees access to wage-employment opportunities, building on efforts that are already working, such as an organic olive oil facility set up in Turkey to strengthen the local economy in an area heavily affected by the crisis.

The thoughtfulness of this comprehensive response makes the failure to fund it adequately all the more tragic and short-sighted. As of December 31, the program had only 58 percent of the funding it needs. The UN has warned that, unless funding increases, 1.7 million people in the region will face winter without heating fuel, insulation, or extra blankets. Programs for a hundred thousand out-of-school children and teenagers in Turkey will have to be canceled or postponed. In Jordan, refugees have already lost access to free health care because of insufficient funding, while in Lebanon 70 percent of refugees are living in extreme poverty. In the Bekaa Valley they are burning plastic bags to keep warm, and already there are reports of people dying during winter storms.
Perhaps most worrying is the fact that 2 million Syrian children are not going to school. This number includes both refugees and children still living at home whose lives have been interrupted by the civil war. The No Lost Generation campaign, launched two years ago by a coalition of NGOs, is starting to ring hollow, and the UN reports an increase in what it calls “negative survival strategies,” including child labor, begging, and “survival sex.” This is not an inevitable outcome, and it is not classrooms or teachers that are missing. It is estimated that, with proper funding, half of these children could be in school within two years.

As it stands, Syrians are living in misery and, increasingly, despair. Images of skeletal bodies dragging themselves through the streets of Madaya—a besieged Syrian town described as an “open air prison” by Doctors Without Borders—are a reminder of the horrors refugees are fleeing. Desperation motivates the risky exodus to Europe. When refugees are met in Europe with hostility, they become, as the UN has put it, secondary victims of ISIS’s terrorism. The attack in Paris took place just days after the death of René Girard, one of France’s most celebrated intellectuals. Girard famously argued that human beings need to identify a scapegoat—“chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand”—in order to dispel anger and violence, and that in doing so they sow the seeds of future conflict. We now have an chance to catch ourselves in the act of such scapegoating, and to stop before it’s too late. There is still time for Europe and the United States to give refugees the welcome they deserve and, no less importantly, to provide material support to the millions who will never get beyond the Middle East. Rather than fearing them as potential jihadis, we need to understand them as the principal victims of the sectarian violence now wracking Syria and Iraq—and to treat them as such.