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The Church in Poland: welcoming refugees

The Rev. Fr. Pawel Rytel-Andrianik, spokesman for the Polish Episcopal Conference, recently reported on the acceptance of refugees in Poland in the context of the current migratory crisis affecting Europe. The Holy Father will visit Poland this coming 27 July on the occasion of World Youth Day. The following is a brief summary of Fr. Rytel-Andrianik's report.

Poland is not located on the road of the main migratory flows in Europe. There are no direct connections with the principal migratory routes towards Europe (eastern, central and western Mediterranean) that pass through Polish territory. There exists the so-called eastern European route that is not very active, and has a rather local impact. In 2015 12,325 requests for asylum were presented in Poland. The majority of requests were made by citizens of the Russian Federation (Chechens) – 7989, Ukraine – 2305, and other countries such as Georgia – 394, Syria – 295, and Armenia – 195. The problems are not comparable to those experienced in the majority of European Union member states.

In the first trimester of 2016, 2627 requests for asylum were presented. Aside from the main nationalities indicated above, it is worth noting requests on the part of citizens from Turkey (Kurds) and Tajikistan (around 300).

Poland is an ethnically homogeneous country. The phenomenon of immigration in general (and of refugees and asylum seekers in general) is new, different, and strange to the average Polish person. For this reason, even through the official statistics relating to foreign citizens legally resident in Poland show that they make up just 0.4 per cent of the population as a whole, great fears exist. The reason for this may be found in the lack of public debate, in the complicated content of the law and migration procedures and in insufficient involvement by organs of public governance, non-governmental organisations and so on. There is no systematic programme for teaching the Polish people about diversity on the basis of religion, race, culture, etc., other than a number of programmes at local-level or focused on specific target groups, such as border police.

Thanks to the generosity of Polish Catholics it has been possible to help refugees from Sudan, Nigeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Polish bishops, from 2009, have organised collections in their dioceses in aid of refugees, which are available not only to Christians. Gratitude is owed to Catholics in Poland for having raised, in 2014 alone, more than 5 million zloty (1.2 million Euros) for refugees. Caritas in Poland currently assists more

than 3000 people annually, from Africa, Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

Shortly after the appeal launched by Pope Francis during the Angelus of 6 September, urging each parish, convent and shrine in Europe to welcome a family of refugees during the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the Presidency of the Polish Episcopal Conference wrote: "The Catholic Church in Poland, called to lend support to other people in a special way during the Year of Mercy, will do everything within her power to assist refugees in their dramatic situation", and entrusted to Caritas Polska the responsibility for organising and coordinating initiatives relating to aid for refugees at diocesan level through the diocesan Caritas, and recalled the responsibility of national authorities for guaranteeing controls, safety, and basic services for refugees.

On 30 June 2016, at the seat of the Polish Episcopal Conference, a Message to the Christian Churches in Poland, with regard to the solution of the problem of migrants, was signed.

We must not lose sight of the main reason for the current migratory crisis, that is, wars in the Middle East and in Africa. From this there arises the need to pray for peace, to continue efforts at mediation and to appeal tirelessly to the conscience of governors. Many people have remained in their own countries, and there they await the arrival of aid directly in the afflicted regions. At the same time we must take care of those who have decided to leave the land of their ancestors. We ask the faithful of our Churches to pray and give assistance to those in need. We cannot abandon the search for solutions to the current crisis.
