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POPE FRANCIS ON FORCED MIGRATION: A PASTORAL OF MERCY AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

Alexander Hendra Dwi Asmara
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ABSTRACT

Dealing with refugees, was the late Pope Francis' legacy, during his pontificate, both as the leader of the Catholic Church and a global figure. This article reviews Francis' pastoral approach of mercy, especially in his concern and advocacy for migrants and refugees, as expressed through his gestures, statements, thoughts, proposals, and policies. Along with issues of global inequality and ecological damage, Francis believed that forced migration can only be addressed through joint efforts based on recognizing human dignity, solidarity, the need for participation, as well as connectivity and inclusivity that encompasses the entire human family. This article then highlights the impact of this stance on the responses of societies and national leaders and considers its relevance in the context of Indonesia.

Keywords: forced migration, refugees, human dignity and human rights, pastoral of mercy, global solidarity, migration theology, Catholic Church

Introduction

During his pontificate, the late Pope Francis gave great attention to social issues, including those of refugees and other displaced people. Together with the issues of global inequality and the climate/environmental crisis, forced migration was a major concern for Francis both as the leader of the world's Catholic community and in his capacity as a global actor. As the leader of the universal Catholic Church, he approached forced migration not merely as social and political matters, but rather as a humanitarian issue that demands human solidarity and compassion. Thus, he emphasized “pastoral of mercy,” a pastoral approach rooted in the vision of God's mercy to all people, especially the stranger. In its core, pastoral of mercy realizes Jesus' commandment: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’ (Matthew 25:35).

This article discusses Francis' pastoral concern for forcibly displaced people – those who have to leave their homeland and move to another place because of unavoidable reasons. To achieve this purpose, we underline Francis' “highly symbolic gestures” shown in his thoughts, various writings, messages and public statements. We also examine the institutional reforms he carried out, their global influence, and their relevance in the Indonesian context. This article will be divided into four parts. In the first part, we discuss how concern towards migrants and refugees was Francis' personal commitment that delivered a prophetic message to the international world. In the second and third part, we focus on his critical analysis and reflection that eventually initiated institutional actions and concrete proposals, shown in his pastoral of mercy. In the last part, the article will reflect on how Francis's message and action influence and inspire several Catholic institutions in Indonesia to participate in addressing refugees and vulnerable migrants.

Francis' Personal Commitment to Forced Migration

The Church and its advocacy of migrants and refugees certainly predates Jorge Mario Bergoglio's election and pontificate as Pope Francis. St. John Paul

II, in his “Message for the 90th World Day of Migrants and Refugees” in 2003, defended the right of people not to emigrate. He stated that “building conditions of peace means in practice being seriously committed to safeguarding first of all the right not to emigrate, that is, the right to live in peace and dignity in one’s own country.”² Later, Benedict XVI, in 2013, also strongly advocated for the right to remain in one’s homeland. However, the Latin American pontiff has gone further and deeper than any of his predecessors in advocating for the human dignity and human rights of migrants and refugees.³ These humanitarian actions were strongly presented in his personal visits and encounters with refugees and migrants all over the world. From the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), Francis is considered as the proponent of the dignity of the human person as the foundation for the right to stay and the right to migrate. This dignity entails that every human being deserves respect, care, and protection, not because of their race, religion, or nationality, but solely because of their sharing in human nature.

Francis’ first action related to migrants and refugees was his July 2013 visit to Lampedusa, a small island in the Mediterranean Sea, where, according to monitoring group Fortress Europe, between 1993 and 2011, 20,000 migrants and refugees tried to cross to Europe.⁴ This small island has been notoriously called a stateless space or even a “non-place” where efforts are made to control the waves of unwanted migration.⁵ Francis’ visit to Lampedusa

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2. Pope John Paul II, “Message for the 90th World Day of Migrants and Refugees,” (2003), last accessed October 27, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20021202_world-migration-day-2003.html
 3. Martinus Dam Febrianto, “Displacement and the Option for Migrants: A Theological Response,” *Mission Sparks: Academic Journal of Asia Region*, January 2024, 60-61.
 4. Kushner reminds us that there are no definitive statistics on the number of people who have died in the Mediterranean on the way to Europe. However, it is true that the sea is a “stage” for humanitarian tragedies. In October 2013, a small fishing boat carrying more than 500 Somali and Eritrean refugees caught fire about a mile from Lampedusa. Only 155 people survived. It was the largest humanitarian disaster in the Mediterranean since World War II. See Tony Kushner, “Lampedusa and the migrant crisis: Ethics, representation and history,” *The Journal of Mobile Culture Studies*, Vol. 2 (2016), 66-67.
 5. Kushner, “Lampedusa and the migrant crisis,” 67.

expressed his deep empathy and solidarity by “standing in the shoes” of the other, the migrants and refugees. Furthermore, his visit also articulated his critiques towards the “borderization” process in Lampedusa, which included the establishment of a detention center for migrants, dispatchment of border guards and patrol boats, etc.⁶ Thus, he challenged public conscience for ignoring or becoming desensitized to their human suffering.⁷ Precisely because Lampedusa is such a representative symbol of rejection and neglect, the arrival of Francis was a strong message to the world to open its eyes and show real concern for the fate of migrants and refugees.

In September 2013, Francis greeted and chatted with migrants in Centro Astalli. He also met with 350 refugees and 300 volunteers working for JRS Italy in the Gesù Church.⁸ In 2016, Francis visited migrants on the Greek island of Lesbos. Surprisingly, he invited 12 migrants to go with him to Italy by plane. The number 12 represents the number of the tribes of Israel and the number of the apostles. Francis wanted to make a strong gesture that welcoming refugees actualized God’s command in Judeo-Christian tradition to welcome the strangers.⁹ In the same year, Francis visited Mexico and celebrated mass at Ciudad Juárez, just 300 feet from the border. In his message, he stated:

Here in Ciudad Juárez, as in other border areas, there are thousands of immigrants from Central America and other countries, without forgetting the many Mexicans who are

6. Paolo Cuttitta, “‘Borderizing’ the Island Setting and Narratives of the Lampedusa ‘Border Play’”, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* Vol. 13, No. 2 (2015):196-219.

7. Francis in his homily in the island of Lampedusa used the term “globalization of indifference” where people become used to the suffering of others, makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people. See Francis, “Homily of Holy Father Francis, Visit to Lampedusa,” last modified July 8, 2013. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html

8. Tara Carr-Lemke and Miguel Glatzer, “You are Instead a Gift: Pope Francis’s Response to the Global Migration and the Refugee Crisis,” in *Pope Francis as a Global Actor: Where Politics and Theology Meet*, eds. AJ Lyon, Christine A. Gustafson, and Paul Christopher Manuel (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 271.

9. Carr-Lemke and Glatzer, “You are Instead of a Gift,” 274.

looking for a way to cross to “the other side” [...] This crisis can be measured with numbers and statistics, but instead we want to measure it with names, stories and families. They are brothers and sisters displaced by poverty and violence, by drug trafficking, by criminal organizations.¹⁰

Aside from visiting refugees and migrant centers, Francis consistently uttered his message to welcome refugees and migrants during his state visits. In 2015, during his visit to Philadelphia, he delivered his message to Hispanic migrants “not to be ashamed of their traditions” and “to contribute to the American society.”¹¹ In April 2023, during his visit to Hungary, Francis again delivered a message of solidarity towards refugees, particularly those fleeing from Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa.

Francis’ supportive gestures towards refugees and migrants were meant to create prophetic messages to the world so that political leaders and the international community would be willing to welcome and provide protection to people who are forced to move from their homeland for various reasons.¹² Following Antonio Lemos’ argument, Francis’ gestures reemphasized the idea of “the right to stay” grounded in the dignity of human person that has been the center of Catholic migration ethics:

The right to stay includes a life of peace, dignity, and access to the basic goods for human flourishing in one’s homeland. The

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10. Carr-Lemke and Glatzer, “You are Instead of a Gift,” 273.
Pope Francis Holy Mass Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, February 17, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160217_omelia-messico-ciudad-jaurez.html
 11. Carr-Lemke and Glatzer, “You are Instead of a Gift,” 274.
Pope Francis, “Meeting for Religious Liberty with The Hispanic Community and Other Immigrants,” Address of the Holy Father, Independence Mall, Philadelphia, Saturday, last modified September 26, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150926_usa-liberta-religiosa.html.
 12. Daniel G. Groody, “Passing Over: Migration as Conversion,” *International Review of Mission*, 104, no. 1, (2015): 46-47.

popes insist that states, the international community, and intermediary societies are responsible to ensure this freedom to choose whether to leave one's country by providing the basic goods for human flourishing.¹³

Pastoral Reflection and Analysis for Migrants and Refugees

Francis' gestures should not be separated from his insightful messages and visionary ideas, expressed in various interviews, messages, greetings, homilies, apostolic exhortations, and encyclicals.¹⁴ Through his writings, Francis not only offered deep reflection, but also provided analysis of the root causes of forced migration. Researchers pointed out two main causes of forced migration that reappear consistently in Francis' writings, namely, structural situations and circumstantial causes.¹⁵ Structural situations refer to the causes of forced migration that are stable and enduring, creating consistent patterns, such as policies or cultural perspectives. Meanwhile, circumstantial causes are more of particular, often accidental, events and conditions such as natural disasters.

Among the structural situations that cause forced migration, Francis mentioned "globalization of indifference" during his first public statement on migrants and refugees in Lampedusa in 2013. This term explicates the fading attention on the refugee crisis even though there is no lack of information in today's world about distant hardships. This failure includes a lack of empathy and solidarity with migrants and refugees and a failure to feel and suffer with

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13. Antonio Lemos, "The Theological Foundations of the Right to Stay in Catholic Social Teaching," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 13, no.1, (2025): 168-181, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024241302057>
 14. Jonathan Y. Tan, "Pope Francis' Preferential Option for Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers," *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 43, no.1, (2019): 58-66.
 15. Fabio Baggio, "The Right to Remain and the Causes of Forced Migration," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 13, no. 1, (2025): 183.
Lemos, "The Theological Foundations of the Right to Stay in Catholic Social Teaching," 168-181.

others. A similar message is stated in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), but with a focus on the value of solidarity and encounter as counter-culture to the “globalization of indifference.” He said:

Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. Greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone. If we were able to take this route, it would be so good, so soothing, so liberating and hope-filled! To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of immanence, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make. (*EG*, art. 87)

Francis revisited this theme in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) as he said “there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters, point to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded” (*LS*, art. 25). Again, Francis strongly attacked indifference in his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2014. For him, we need to “move away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of throwaway culture – towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world.”

Aside from “globalization of indifference,” in *Gaudete et Exultate* (2018), Francis also denounced “ideological errors” as another structural situation that cause inhuman action towards refugees and migrants. In *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), Francis warned of the growth of ideological errors called xenophobia and

closed mentalities in which migrants and refugees are excluded from the development of society; even their human dignity is set aside because they are not citizens of the country where they are (*FT*, art. 39). In *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), he spoke of the traumatic impact of migration on families. In *Laudato Si'*, he cautioned against the wrong idea of development as favoring only a few and becoming detrimental for the majority (*LS*, art. 109). Francis also criticized an exclusivist mindset that causes poverty which eventually forces many people to leave their country (*LS*, art. 50).

Among the circumstantial causes, Francis highlighted the increasing number of migrants fleeing their countries of origin due to “environmental degradation.” In *Laudato Si'* (art. 25), he pointed out that forced migration occurred due to climate change:

Changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.

However, their existence as refugees is not recognized by international law,¹⁶ thus they have no legal protection.¹⁷ Attention to environmental

16. According to the Convention and Protocol on Refugees, a refugee is a person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, being a national and being outside the country of his habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to that country.

See United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, “Article 1. A (2),” *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, last accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-relating-status-refugees>.

17. “For humanitarian reasons, there is currently a tendency to recognize these people as “de facto” refugees, given the involuntary nature of their migration.”

See. Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, “Article 4,” *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, (1981), last accessed October 27, 2025,

degradation must be accompanied by sincere love and strong commitment to those affected. Unfortunately, those affected are mostly poor countries in the global south, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Sahel region of Africa, the small island states, and the countries of Central America. According to current data, in Sub Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, between 31 and 143 million people might be forced to migrate within their own country in 2050 because of the climate crisis. By 2050, 50 percent of the population in South Asia will dwell in areas that are projected to turn into moderate or grave hot spots due to climate disasters. Thus, inspired by Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Francis sees the complex entanglement between the environmental crisis, poverty and migration. There is an urgent need to strengthen collaboration among countries for environmental protection and migration regulation (*LS*, art. 175).

Another circumstantial cause of forced migration are the dictatorships that justify any means to maintain absolute power. Francis condemned dictatorships that caused modern forms of persecution, oppression and slavery in society and that eventually encouraged forced migration. He stated:

Above all I ask leaders and legislators and the entire international community, above all, to confront the reality of those who have been displaced by force, with effective projects and new approaches in order to protect their dignity, to improve the quality of their life and to face the challenges that are emerging from modern forms of persecution, oppression and slavery.¹⁸

Looking at Francis' analysis on both structural situations and circumstantial causes, one cannot understand them fully without illumination

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_cor_unum_doc_25061992_refugees_en.html.

18. Pope Francis, "Address to the Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People," (2013), last accessed October 27, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130524_migranti-itineranti.html.

from his reflection on migration. First of all, Francis reflects that migration is a fundamental experience and vocation of every human being, that each of us is a migrant. In his prayer during the papal visitation to Lesbos, Greece in April 2016, Francis said that “together, as one human family, we are all migrants, journeying in hope to you, our true home, where every tear will be wiped away, where we will be at peace and safe in your embrace.” Thus, as migrants, all people are invited not to be indifferent or insensitive to other’s suffering, but rather, to give protection and care so that together people will be able to endure fear, uncertainty, and humiliation. The motivation to understand migration is centered on the theological perspective of the dignity of the human person.

In the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (2020, art. 39), Francis stated the centrality of human dignity: “No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings; yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human.” Here, Francis calls again, as previously mentioned in his messages for the World Day of Peace (2018) and the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2018 and 2020), for an appropriate response to the reality of migration, including forced migration, namely to welcome, protect, promote and integrate migrants and refugees (*FT*, art. 129) which requires global governance of migratory movements that is not only an emergency response, but includes medium and long-term planning (*FT*, art. 132).

Secondly, Francis reflected on the role of the Church in addressing the growth of forced migration. He proposed the concept of “synodal journey of the Church with migrants.” Originating from the Greek words *σύν* and *ὁδός*, the term synodal means “journey together.” The synodal Church “expresses her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel.”¹⁹ The nature of the Church (currently on her synodal journey) is a

19. Synod of Bishops for a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission, Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches: First Phase [October 2021 – April 2022] in Dioceses and Bishops’ Conferences, Published by Secretary General of the

journey towards the heavenly homeland. He emphasizes that the Church has always been a mother open to the whole world, that Jesus is always waiting to be recognized in refugees, migrants and other displaced persons, and that the response to the “globalization of migration” must be a “globalization of charity and cooperation.”

Francis’ Pastoral of Mercy

Francis’ defense and attention to refugees and migrants is deeply rooted in his vision of mercy that characterizes his papacy. In order to promote the spirit of mercy, Francis declared that the liturgical year 2015–2016 was to be celebrated as a Year of Mercy. In his first Apostolic Letter – *Evangelii Gaudium* art. 14, he stated that mercy is the core being of the Church: “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.” Referring to a well-known theologian Walter Kasper’s theological perspective of mercy, Francis said that “[Mercy] is a sensitivity to the real needs before us. Mercy is a willingness to overcome selfishness that only cares about ourselves and makes us deaf and blind to the spiritual and physical needs of those around us. Mercy means softening our frozen hearts so that we can hear God’s call.”²⁰

Francis believed that humanity is so in need of mercy because humanity “is deeply wounded [...] wounded by poverty, social exclusion and the many slaveries of the third millennium.”²¹ Thus, mercy has the power that changes

Synod of Bishops Via della Conciliazione 34, Vatican City (September 2021), last accessed October 27, 2025,
<https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/document/common/vademecum/Vademecum-EN-A4.pdf>

20. Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 2014), 143.

21. Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli* (New York: Random House, 2016), 15.

the world and “a little mercy makes the world less cold and more just.”²² Deeply rooted in the vision of mercy, he proposed a “pastoral of mercy” as part of his approach for the institutional reform of the Church. Pastoral of mercy underlines how the Church is showing her maternal side, her motherly face, to a humanity that is wounded. The Church, as Francis said, “does not wait for the wounded to knock on her doors, she looks for them on the streets, she gathers them in, she embraces them, she makes them feel loved.”²³ Pastoral of mercy demands the “hermeneutic of mercy” which is not driven by indifference and exclusivist mindsets, but rather, by generosity and solidarity. Thus, to choose the hermeneutic of mercy means that people perceive the world as a place of great abundance for all people regardless of their religions and races. It actualizes Francis’ vision that “the Kingdom of God must be built with migrants and refugees and victims of trafficking, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants.”

Francis’ pastoral of mercy influenced his attention on refugees and migrants to move beyond mere opinions and thoughts. Thus, he has taken institutional actions and prepared concrete proposals for the growth of advocacy for those forced to move and for responding to the issue of migration and refugees. In the organizational structure of the Vatican, Francis indicated migration as a priority. In August 2016, he announced the creation of a new Vatican office, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, which thereby placed migration issues under his direct supervision.²⁴ As written in the *motu proprio*, this reorganization is administrative in nature, and the new dicastery:

[...] expresses the Holy Father’s concern for suffering humanity, including those in need, the sick and the marginalized, and pays

22. Pope Francis, “Angelus,” Vatican website, March 17, 2013. Last accessed from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2013/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20130317.html

23. Francis. *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, 6.

24. Carr-Lemke and Glatzer, “You are Instead of a Gift,” 277.

special attention to the needs and problems of those forced to flee their homeland, the stateless, the marginalized, the victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters, the imprisoned, the unemployed, those subject to slavery and torture, and others whose dignity is threatened.²⁵

As of January 1, 2017, this office unites the pontifical councils for Health Care, Peace and Justice, Cor Unum, and Migrants and Itinerants, into one entity. Under this dicastery there is a Migrants and Refugees unit or section which is under the direction of the Pope. Later, the Vatican also published the document “Towards Global Compacts on Migrants and on Refugees 2018,” which depict Francis’ teaching, reflections and guidance on migrants and refugees. The document contains Francis’ message for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees and twenty priorities to be implemented in two versions. The first twenty points of pastoral action is intended as a pastoral guide for diocesan, parish, civil society organizations, schools and groups’ ministry to migrants and refugees. The second twenty points of action for *Global Compacts*, using legal language, is intended to be used in advocacy and negotiations with governments to influence *The Global Compacts* that are currently being developed.²⁶

Despite his strong advocacy for vulnerable migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and victims of human trafficking, the decade of Francis’ pontificate was marked by a significant increase in forced displacement worldwide. UNHCR data shows that by the end of 2024, there were 123.2 million people worldwide forced to flee due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or serious events disrupting the fabric of society.

25. Pope Francis, “Statutes of The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development,” August 17, 2016. Last accessed October 27, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco_20160817_statuto-dicastero-servizio-sviluppo-umano-integrale.html.

26. “Introduction,” *Towards Global Compacts on Migrants and on Refugees 2018* (Vatican City: Migrant and Refugee Section Integral Human Development), 1-3.

Among them are approximately 45.3 million refugees and asylum seekers, 73.5 million IDPs, and 5.9 million people in need of international protection.²⁷ Comparing this with UNHCR data for displacement trends at the end of 2013, there were 51.2 million forcibly displaced individuals, of which 16.7 million were refugees, 33.3 million were IDPs, and 1.2 million were asylum seekers.²⁸ In the past decade, the war in Syria, the conflict in Myanmar, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the conflict in Sudan, and the Israeli attack on Gaza after the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, have multiplied the number of people forced to flee. Forced displacement is a consequence of the failure of the world (countries) to maintain peace and security.

There are several reasons that underly the rise in forced displacement. First, it is caused by the decline in global commitment to address this humanitarian problem. Many European countries have cut their foreign aid budgets and have applied stricter policies, marked by the increase of border security and a hardline approach to migration. From July through September of 2024, UNHCR Indonesia stopped financial assistance for around 1,200 refugees in Indonesia who depend on refugee service providers for their basic needs. Second, it is triggered by geopolitical circumstances such as war, an endless number of armed conflicts and latent violence. The war between Russia and Ukraine triggered global concerns which eventually encouraged some European countries to decrease their budget for humanitarian efforts and to increase their defense budget. In his address to the members of the diplomatic corps in 2017, Pope Francis invited them to see how war and violence cause migration: “Millions of people still live in the midst of senseless conflicts. We are frequently overwhelmed by images of death, by the pain of innocent men, women, and children who plead for help [...] and by the drama of refugees fleeing war and migrants meeting tragic deaths.”

27. UNHCR, *Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2024* (Copenhagen: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025), 2.

28. UNHCR, *War's Human Cost: Global Trends 2013* (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014), 2.

Given the above reality, does Pope Francis' movement have an impact on the refugee issues? Francis' pastoral of mercy, as Carr-Lemke and Glatzer said, has given "Francis's effect" to the world:

It remains to be seen whether Francis' official visits as pope, his writings, his rhetoric and his administrative decisions, rooted in the long tradition of the principles of the Social Teaching of the Church and expressed in the distinctive voice of Pope Francis, will "transform" Western societies, including Catholics, into the attitude of welcoming and accepting refugees and migrants that he has praised as a "gift."²⁹

Francis' active involvement in the issues of forced migration raised general awareness of refugees among the general public.³⁰ He did not just spread and raise awareness about migration issues, but also reframed it by giving new perspective. He mentioned that migrants and refugees were a "sign of the times." Further, Francis also challenged European countries and other parts of the developed world to reflect on their insensitivity and indifference. In his homily at Lampedusa in 2013, Francis said: "Today too, the question has to be asked: Who is responsible for the blood of these brothers and sisters of ours? Nobody! That is our answer: It isn't me; I don't have anything to do with it; it must be someone else, but certainly not me."

Relevance in the Indonesian Context

Discussion about forcibly displaced people or "*pengungsi*" (the term in Bahasa Indonesia for any *de facto* refugee) in the Indonesian context includes all people who are forced to move, whatever the reason, whether due to natural disasters or social disasters, whether from other regions or from other countries. In the global context, there is a distinction between refugees, asylum seekers,

29. Carr-Lemke and Glatzer, "You are Instead of a Gift," 280.

30. Guzik, "Communicating migration – Pope Francis' strategy of reframing refugee issues," *Church, Communication and Culture*, Vol. 3, No.2 (2018): 106–135.

IDPs, or people forced to move for economic reasons (economic migrants) or climate change (climate migrants). Although the UN and the international community have distinguished between these statuses and the implications that accompany them, the Church (and so Pope Francis) chooses not to limit the much more complex reality of forced displacement with various categories. Francis and the Catholic Church express their solidarity with all who must move: refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs, migrants at risk, including those who must migrate for economic reasons or must leave their original environment, which might no longer support a dignified life.

Francis' preferential option for refugees and migrants at risk constitutes a clear invitation for the Catholic Church in Indonesia to demonstrate genuine concern and to develop concrete pastoral responses for these vulnerable groups. It calls on Catholic-based organizations and individuals to sustain and deepen their pastoral engagement and humanitarian services among refugees and migrants at risk. At the same time, it challenges the Indonesian government to reconsider its perspectives and policies toward refugees and asylum seekers, ensuring that they are more aligned with principles of human dignity and solidarity. In the Indonesian context, the number of refugees and asylum seekers is actually much smaller compared to the number in neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Thailand. As of July 2025, there were 11,972 refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia according to UNHCR Indonesia data.³¹ Comparing this with the number of refugees in Malaysia, for example, which reached 200,260 individuals as of May 2025, we can see a sharp difference.³² This number is surely insignificant compared to the estimated nine million Indonesian international migrant workers employed abroad.

31. "The total number of persons registered with UNHCR in Indonesia includes 7,390 refugees and 4,582 asylum-seekers, all of whom are defined as refugees under Indonesian law." See UNHCR Indonesia, "Monthly Statistical Report July 2025."

32. UNHCR Malaysia, "Figures at a glance in Malaysia," (2025), last accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/my/what-we-do/figures-glance-malaysia>.

The Indonesian government has not ratified the Refugee Convention and relies solely on Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 on the “Handling of Refugees” which thus far has had little significant impact on improving refugee management in the country. Refugees in Indonesia can stay, on humanitarian grounds, but without the right to work and are therefore dependent on humanitarian assistance (from UNHCR, IOM, or NGOs) to access basic necessities, health facilities, and even education.³³ Integration is impossible with current policies. Even mere assimilation, that is, living with locals while waiting until resettlement, continues to be a struggle in many regions. Refugees in Indonesia also live in vulnerability, something that is likely a factor in attracting those who meet the criteria to be refugees to Indonesia in the hope of being resettled more quickly in a third country.

It is time for Indonesia to open itself to Francis’ call to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate refugees. At first glance, the idea of adopting a more inclusive refugee policy in Indonesia may be dismissed as an open invitation for large numbers of refugees to enter the country. However, this assumption is not well-founded. Living and surviving in Indonesia is not easy, particularly due to limited employment opportunities. Indeed, millions of Indonesians themselves seek livelihoods abroad as migrant workers because of restricted economic prospects at home. An inclusive policy that allows refugees to meet their own needs would, on the one hand, reduce their vulnerability. Refugees

33. With the issuance of Presidential Regulation (Perpres) No. 125/2016 concerning Handling of Refugees, Indonesia actually already has a legal umbrella in handling refugees from abroad. However, at the operational level, handling of refugees and asylum seekers continues to experience obstacles and continues to be a polemic. Anindito R. Wiraputra sees the cause as the difference in understanding of the subject of refugees between the Presidential Regulation and the provisions of Immigration and Foreign Relations. See. AR Wiraputra, “The Implication of Defining Refugee in Indonesian Immigration Legal System,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Keimigrasian*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2018), 63-72. Meanwhile, MA Syahrin and YS Utomo linked it to the inability of the Regional Government, low resettlement rates, and reduced assistance from IOM. See MA Syahrin and YS Utomo, “The Implementation of Asylum Seekers and Refugees Law Enforcement in Indonesia After Presidential Decree Number 125 of 2016 on The Treatment of Foreign Refugees,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Keimigrasian*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2018), 83-96. We argue that the preference for prioritizing sovereignty (and the national interests that follow) and putting the humanitarian perspective second is the main factor in the reluctance to welcome and protect refugees and asylum seekers.

would no longer be fully dependent on humanitarian agencies or wait indefinitely for resettlement in third countries. Such an approach would affirm the fulfillment of their basic human rights and dignity. On the other hand, it would also require refugees to face the same socio-economic challenges encountered by Indonesian citizens, while receiving necessary support from the government and local communities. This shift could reposition Indonesia from being seen merely as a transit country reliant on external solutions, toward a context where refugees must adapt and strive to live with dignity. Paradoxically, this may also make Indonesia less attractive for those seeking more favorable transit or destination countries. The case of the Philippines, which has ratified the Refugee Convention yet hosts only a very small refugee population, illustrates that ratification and inclusivity do not necessarily lead to an influx of refugees.³⁴

It is important to emphasize that the above reflections are not intended as a ‘strategy’ for Indonesia to avoid its share of responsibility within the international community on cross-border refugee issues. Hospitality toward strangers remains a fundamental moral call. Rather, the central invitation for Indonesia, together with the international community, is to participate meaningfully in global solidarity in addressing urgent humanitarian challenges. Francis’ four guiding verbs—welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating—should not be regarded as abstract ideals beyond Indonesia’s reach simply because the nation is not yet fully prosperous and continues to grapple with domestic concerns. Instead, these verbs articulate a concrete framework for dignified and humane cooperation between host societies and refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly displaced persons. Such cooperation reflects a deeper form of human solidarity, wherein refugees and host communities work together to build a shared life and promote the common good. By embodying this approach, Indonesia could serve as a

34. Philippines Refugee Statistics, last accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/PHL/philippines/refugee-statistics>.

constructive example at the global level while simultaneously fulfilling the constitutional mandate enshrined in the Preamble of the 1945 Indonesia Constitution: “to participate in the establishment of a world order based on freedom, perpetual peace, and social justice.”

Conclusion

This article has examined Francis’ advocacy for migrants, refugees, and other forcibly displaced persons, by framing it within his broader vision of a *pastoral of mercy*. Through symbolic gestures, encyclicals, messages, public appeals, and institutional reforms such as the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Francis sought to highlight the dignity of every human being and the urgency of global solidarity. His four guiding verbs—welcome, protect, promote, and integrate—offer a concrete moral framework that responds not only to immediate humanitarian needs but also to the deeper structural causes of forced migration, including conflict, inequality, and environmental degradation. While the global displacement crisis continues to worsen, Francis’ witness has helped reframe migration as a *sign of the times*—a theological lens through which to understand human dignity, solidarity, and the Church’s synodal mission of journeying with the displaced.

In the Indonesian context, these principles remain highly relevant. Although Indonesia has yet to ratify the Refugee Convention and policies remain restrictive, a more inclusive approach would affirm the rights and dignity of refugees while enabling them to contribute to their own survival. Such an approach would reduce dependency on humanitarian agencies, foster cooperation with local communities, and transform Indonesia’s role from a temporary transit country into a place of genuine encounter and shared responsibility. In this way, Francis’ vision is not only realistic but also consonant with Indonesia’s constitutional mandate to participate in building a world order based on freedom, peace, justice, and respect for human dignity.

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