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Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to the Summer School on Human Rights in beautiful Sicily, to speak to you on this year´s topic of refugees and migrants´ rights in connection with the religious dimension. It is an honour and a privilege to address you as former director of The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration.

Intro

Actually, as a theologian specialised in the spirituality of the Christian East, I started my career as assistant of the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Geneva. This will undoubtedly shine through in what I am about to say about migration policies and practice. As well as my current role as chair of the Dutch Platform on International Freedom of Religion and Belief based in The Hague. We often work in collaboration with the Netherlands Foreign Office as we aim to draw attention to the plight of many, whose fundamental human rights are being denied.

Migrating brings people in situations that make them extremely vulnerable and that put them at risk of being exploited by others. Let me show you a short clip that addresses the developments in Europe in late 2015.

I myself am from Maastricht, a city whose name is now linked to a European Treaty and familiar to many, as a symbol, positive or negative, of the ambitions of the European Union. I remember how excited I was when the European Union came into being.

Quite a few years ago, one night in December 1991, sometime after midnight, I took my bike and went to the riverside. And in the dark I looked across the water to watch the lights in the building of the provincial government that sits on the East bank of the river Meuse.

In the building, the European Summit was coming to an end. At that precise moment, I felt, big decisions were being taken on the future of our continent and for my own life. It was a moment of hope.

25 years later, the atmosphere had changed quite a bit. And again I found myself in almost the exact same spot. This time, I was talking to a lady who owns a nice apartment overlooking the river all the way into Belgium. Really comfortable and very privileged.

Reactions

What we were discussing was a dilemma. The city had just decided to go the extra mile and welcome more refugees within its borders than they were obliged to by national policy. A laudable gesture. The lady who had invited me for coffee was living right next to the empty office building that had been designated as the living quarters for new asylum seekers and was about to be refurbished. She was struggling with conflicting emotions.

On the one hand, she welcomed the care and protection for - as she called them: - 'real' refugees, implicitly expressing ambiguity about people's motivations for migrating. On the other hand, she had reasons to doubt that the arrangement that the city had brokered would be beneficial both for existing inhabitants and newcomers. The city had created a delicate situation that called for diplomatic responses in order to regain trust. They had to make people see the real picture and the

challenges ahead. But it appeared that local authorities although – taking lessons from decades of **legal** experience -, were not very good at handling **emotions**.

Emotions conduct relevance. It means that if we want to mobilise people for a good cause, we have to connect to what is **relevant** to them. We have to be able to understand their world and genuinely enter it. We have to **touch** them.

Migration realities

When I was in charge of The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration, an international facilitating organisation that brings together national governments, INGOs, big cities and business enterprises around the challenges of migration, we were quick to realise that the *evidence base* that we were keen to insist on: realistic data and insights about what is happening 'out there', the FACTS, only matter so much when it comes to migration debates.

February last, when I invited a professor of Migration Studies at Maastricht University to speak to a local audience, she impressed us with her insights on global migration flows and the effects of national policies regarding migration and asylum, making it clear that many decisions designed to 'protect' a country from migration pressures actually increased them. Also, that many arguments used in the migration debate are factually false. Her presentation was entitled: Myths and Realities of Migration. Allow me to quote some lines from Dr Siegel´s presentation.

And, don´t worry, this keynote will not turn into a full-fledged lecture!

Dr Siegel addressed 7 common myths about migration:

Myth 1: Migration is at an all-time high and accelerating fast
Myth 2: Refugees are mainly hosted in Developed (European) countries
Myth 3: Poverty is the main cause of South-North migration
Myth 4: Development will reduce migration
Myth 5: Most migration is from developing countries to developed countries
Myth 6: Migration Policies have become more restrictive
Myth 7: Migration restrictions reduce migration

And let me highlight two of them:

Development: Migration Transition Theory

Migration **restrictions** do not necessarily reduce migration

a. They change the nature of the movement
b. They mainly change the way in which people move
c. They affect who migrates (selection)
d. They do not change the process driving migration, like development, social transformation, labour markets

In Europe, the debate about migration and refugees has been polarised to the extent that many people cannot and will not see the nuance. They want clear-cut answers and strong decisions.

Policy decisions

These counterintuitive insights give rise to some hope as they open up the possibility of distinguishing more options to act, more policy choices, than people, both the population and its

leaders, usually realise there are. But at the same time, reactions to them were a bit distressing as well, because they underlined the distance between what is actually taking place and what people seem to experience.

Part of the anxiety caused by the current developments in migration flows to Europe stems from perceptions and related fears that are connected to **identity** and especially **religious** identities.

Let me show you figures from *Faith on the Move*, a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, indicating the religious affiliation of the about 3% of the world's population that has migrated across international borders. I have to stress, though, that the numbers date back to **2010**.

For Europe, in that same year, that translated to the following graph.

Again, these data are counterintuitive when compared to the general picture presented in media and politics and raise quite a few questions. And often reactions from the general public hinge on **perceptions**. It is not very effective then to provide people with mere information and data, the *evidence base*; as it will fail to convince them.

There are several ways in which people react to information that doesn't fit their world view: resistance, rejection, inertia.... But they all result in the same: a lack of acceptance. A change of heart, to use that expression, can only come through a genuine exchange. The lived experience of people has to be the starting point. Not a moral principle, however lofty it is.

Religious traditions are experts in doing just that: changing hearts. And they often use stories, they tell tales, present parables, to win over people, to catch their ear, make them see the world in a different light. Therefore, they succeed in **connecting the person to the cause**.

Most religious traditions promote the idea of **asylum**, that is, of providing refuge to persons seeking protection outside their homelands. I give you two quotes from Scripture, but there are more. It is quite a pervading theme.

And the Christian church developed a practice of offering asylum to persons who sought its sanctuary.

When reflecting on migration in religious terms, a series of scenes come to mind: Abraham setting out on his long trip, Moses leading his people to a promised land. Preachers going into the world to spread a message of hope. But we can recognize that all major religious traditions have gone through experiences of going 'out there', taking the risk of the unknown, of the **encounter with the other**.

Encounter

A powerful encounter with the unknown is related in the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah receiving three mysterious guests. In Eastern Orthodox icons the representation is called the *philoxenia*, Greek for hospitality or literally ´the love of strangers´.

It is the story of Abraham and Sarah's generous hospitality and their encounter has become a strong symbol of God's 'oikonomia', or arrangement. Sharing a table, sharing a meal as the centre of people's connection to the mystery of life.

- For the hosting population, opening the door to strangers and inviting them to a common meal is not always an easy and straightforward duty. We can feel the obligation to obey these rules but we can also be very apprehensive. We have to have enough trust in order to comply and to enjoy even the presence of the unfamiliar.

- For those on the move, travelling to the unknown can be a risky undertaking and arriving can feel like a home-coming, but it remains a challenge to become part of a new and unfamiliar environment.

For both it will always involve other people, **meeting a stranger**, being at risk of encountering a threat or not finding a sympathetic gesture.

Just as a reminder, only last year thousands of stranded migrants were being evacuated from the makeshift Idomeni camp on Greece's northern border to be taken to specially designed processing facilities near Salonica.

We are all aware of how these **ambiguities** are currently playing out around us.

- On the bright side, we have the inhabitants of the Greek and Italian villages e.g. who welcome those who have just arrived and try to help wherever they can. They respond with strong feelings of sympathy to those whom they recognise as fellow humans. They can identify with them and want to give them courage and hope.

- On the dark side, we have the shortcomings of people who take advantage of the distress of others. And those who are trying to help can lose confidence in their societies when governments fail to help them cope with the influx of newcomers. They can even become disappointed with the choices made by the people they have welcomed. They can feel betrayed when people move on.

Essentially, this is all about human feelings, about interpersonal relationships and people's expectations. And, fundamentally, it is **about trust**.

Mixed affect

The emotions that were palpable in the discussions I had with the lady in Maastricht, who I mentioned earlier, were about struggling with new realities and new neighbours. Such mixed feelings create a momentum, an opportunity for **alternative choices**. It is a characteristic of our times maybe that we witness an acceleration of such states of mind. It creates a **volatile environment** in which opinions can be swayed and new loyalties are formed.

I came across a quotation from the French sociologist Bruno Latour, from his book 'Rejoicing, Or The Torments of Religious Speech': in it he describes his state of mind as follows:

"It's a twisted situation: he is ashamed of what he hears on Sunday from the pulpit when he goes to mass; but ashamed, too, of the incredulous hatred or amused indifference of those who laugh at people who go to church. Ashamed that he goes, ashamed of not daring to say he goes. He grinds his teeth when he hears the things said inside the church; but he boils with rage when he hears the things said outside the church. All that's left for him to do is hang his head, weary, sheepish, before the horrors and misconceptions on the inside as well as before the horrors and misconceptions on the outside; it's a double cowardice, double shame, and he has no words to express this, as though he were caught between two opposing currents, with the resultant clash leaving him whirling on the spot."

The text captures a state of unresolved inner conflict. This particular scene is about the experience of a person struggling with his religious convictions in a secular society, but it reminded me of other contexts in which *sensitive societal issues* drive **existential polarisation**. It is exemplary for the strong feelings of confusion and powerlessness that they evoke.

Religious messages have a role to play in society and they structurally do, sometimes adding to the confusion but also strengthening people´s resolve. The topic of migration is no exception in this respect. Religious representatives speak out when such sensitive social issues are at stake.

For instance, drawing from the earlier Charta Oecumenica (2001) that spells out a very clear vision for Europe as a community of values, the CEC in its Open Letter 'What Future for Europe?' of 2016 refers to:

"Solidarity with refugees is a consequence of Christian faith and our commitment to working towards a just and compassionate society. Therefore, the present predicament of refugees and migrants is a matter of grave concern for CEC."

One such attempt at a consistent and principled translation of these concerns into recommendations, is the 2014 CCME paper 'RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAFE AND LEGAL PATHS TO PROTECTION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION' which concludes:

"International and European law oblige EU institutions and Member States to develop measures and policies that open safe and legal paths into the European Union for those who must flee war, violence and severe human rights violations. Such a policy would also be in line with core Christian and European values."

Basics

Throughout this week you will undoubtedly hear a lot about policies, legal frameworks and institutions. Allow me to just quickly point out a few considerations.

In addressing States with pleas for upholding human rights, we should not lose sight of two basic points are of importance:

- **Human rights** and **refugee rights** are – although interrelated and converging – not the same.
    1. Both share a common purpose of safeguarding human dignity.
    2. Asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to all the rights and fundamental freedoms that are spelled out in **international human rights instruments**.
    3. But the rights of individuals on the territory of States are governed by both **international and national law**.

- Under **international law** the **right to asylum** is rather weak
    1. The logic of refugee status would suggest the right to a place of protection
    2. It is Governments, however, which grant asylum. The refugee's right to enjoy it is therefore limited by the willingness of the government to proffer it.
    3. So, although states are prohibited under international law from returning refugees to persecution (refoulement), they are not <u>required</u> to take them in.
        - In the European Union, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) sets out minimum standards and procedures for processing and deciding asylum applications, and for the treatment of both asylum seekers and those who are

recognized as refugees. Implementation of CEAS varies throughout the European Union.

And – time allowing - I would like to complement this with some observations on Freedom of religion.

Last month, I spoke on migration issues at the annual meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders. I would like to refer here to their Brixen Declaration on European Mass Migration, also of 2016. Let me quote a part that I consider particularly valuable, as it addresses the concerns of both host communities and migrants and refugees. Its second paragraph reads:

"We unreservedly support freedom of religion and belief for everyone, but also recognise the difficult balance inherent in providing the necessary resources for migrants and refugees to practice their religion, whilst respecting the customs and identity of host communities. We recognise that there is no easy solution to this problem, and we will work to improve our understanding of the needs of migrants and refugees."

In this context, faith-based organisations are facing multiple challenges. Among them are the following:

a. Authorities and aid agencies will generally stress that they ´don´t do religion´
   - But often it is faith that helps sustain the mental and physical health of refugees
   - faith-based humanitarian groups prove to be a major source of aid and comfort
   - Religious leaders are confronted with the choice of whether to provide sanctuary to undocumented immigrants fearing deportation.

b. Meanwhile, authorities´ reactions to such initiatives vary and are liable to change.

c. Moreover, we have seen rising tensions between members of different religious backgrounds, both in asylum facilities and more generally in European society.
   - The impact of extremists of whatever conviction has turned upside down shared religious values of openness to the other
   - Fortunately, several religious communities set an example by working together across religious borders to help refugees.

Obviously, the influx of migrants poses dilemmas for religious communities and the stakes are high. Cooperation, however, will only thrive when people feel connected through a **common objective**.

a) When people are motivated to take a positive stance and willing to help, they will need support and comfort in that position. Often, there is opposition, suspicion and outright hatred towards those who are trying to help.
b) Likewise, it is important to understand the feelings of insecurity, loss of control and alienation of those who struggle with major changes in society.

It is imperative to find ways to transcend and bind opposing narratives, to create a vision and connections that offer collective significance and foster a shared mentality.

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to end my address, again, with a very short video. My impression is that the more people realise the role migration has played in their own family´s histories, the better they are able

to put themselves in the shoes of newcomers. It should help them dispel some of the fears that have started to haunt them. The clip speaks for itself.