

Ms Ursula von der Leyen,
President of the European Commission
Mr Charles Michel,
President of the European Council
Mr David Sassoli,
President of the European Parliament

Brussels, 6 December 2019

European asylum & migration policy: exercise solidarity, share responsibility, show leadership

We would like to extend our congratulations on your respective appointments and our assurances that we will be praying for you and your colleagues.

Our organisations represent Churches throughout Europe – mainly Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant and African instituted – as well as Christian organisations particularly concerned with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. We hold dearly the inviolable dignity of every human being created in the image of God and are deeply committed to the concepts of the common good, global solidarity and a society welcoming strangers.

It is against this background that we address you today on the issue of a comprehensive, protection and human rights oriented EU asylum and migration policy. We welcome the “fresh start” suggested by Commission President von der Leyen at a time when the situation of many of the most vulnerable asylum seekers, refugees and migrants is becoming more and more alarming, both within the EU and at its external borders. Our call is for the exercise of solidarity, sharing of responsibility, and courageous leadership.

In particular, we ask the EU institutions to play their role in:

- Facilitating a comprehensive, preferably long-term, legally sound mechanism for Search and Rescue at the EU`s southern border. This should either include state led and EU-supported search and rescue or support to civil society activities. Moreover, there is urgent need to clarify EU legislation so that civil society search and rescue, like any other humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants, is decriminalised.
- Adopting a system of relocation of those rescued at sea as well as those arriving in the member states at the EU external border. While Italy and Malta clearly need solidarity on

Search and Rescue, Greece and Cyprus need more support to deal with the recent significant rise in new arrivals exacerbating the overcrowded conditions of the hotspots (Greece) and the high number of beneficiaries of international protection (Cyprus). We expect all countries to play their part, but recognise the challenges these countries particularly experience as external border states of the EU. As European church leaders formulated in their 2018 Christmas message: "Solidarity should be the guiding aspect when governing migration and particularly refugee reception. Solidarity means that the stronger shoulders accept more responsibility than the weaker ones, but also that everyone contributes what they can". In this sense national efforts and European support must go hand in hand.

- Developing an EU wide system of evacuating those refugee and migrants stuck in Libya under conditions violating their human rights. The system should be based on the example of nationally operated Humanitarian Corridors and should try to provide solutions for at least 50,000 persons of concern currently registered by UNHCR.
- Upscaling the EU commitment to resettlement in the context of global responsibility sharing by providing more places. The target of 30,000 places annually put forward by a coalition of civil society organisations is a good goal for 2020, and one that should be pledged at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019.
- Advancing reform of the dysfunctional system of the current Dublin regulation. A preference and links-oriented model of mandatory redistribution should form the basis of such a reform.
- Creating legal migration routes: without safe and legal migration routes to Europe and without a human rights-based refugee and migration policy, people will continue to take dangerous routes and risk their lives to reach Europe. The creation of safe and regular pathways for persons in need of international protection and migrants across all skills levels requires the issuing of humanitarian visas, speedy family reunification, extending resettlement programmes and concluding labour migration policies and student visa agreements with third countries.
- Ensuring the EU is guided in its action and funding by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union with regard to the external dimension. All EU member states are party to the European Convention on Human Rights and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and must not enter into any agreements with states that do not guarantee the full respect of human rights. The principle of non-refoulement must always be respected as a binding principle.

We are aware that these asks may seem difficult due to the current discourse at EU level, which often focuses on the protection of borders rather than protection of the vulnerable and on return rather than welcome.

It is clear, however, that all the demands taken together, including the number of 'spontaneous' arrivals into the asylum systems of EU member states, are presenting an entirely manageable task for a community of 446 million inhabitants (after Brexit) in one of the richest regions of the world.

While we appreciate efforts by the EU and its member states to speed up asylum procedures, all efforts that do so by reducing access to legal counselling, legal review appeals or exclusion from the procedure undermine the right to asylum and should be rejected.

It is equally clear that a policy of solidarity would need to be underpinned by a solid integration, inclusion and anti-discrimination policy.

What we ask of you is leadership in addressing both myths and moods in the EU on migration and bringing evidence back into the debate. The widespread practice of presenting migration as an unsolvable problem, with Europe as the location of the crisis, and the promise to be “tough” on migration is a useless attempt to address fears in society.

Migration is and will be a feature of life in Europe in an increasing number of member states and can, if well organised, contribute to wealth and social harmony in the EU. This however requires policies, which aim at overall cohesion and inclusion in society, so that citizens and newly arrived do not need to fear insurmountable challenges in areas such as employment, housing or access to social services.

Churches across Europe have over decades, and in particular since 2015, contributed massively to a structure and culture of welcome. We will continue to do so. We also stand ready to support those defending Christian values and practice through loving our neighbour.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Matthew 25: 40



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