

Pope Francis's Address to Refugees coming from Lesbos – 19 December 2019

This is the second life jacket I receive as a gift. The first was given to me a few years ago by lifeguards. It belonged to a girl who drowned in the Mediterranean. I gave it to the two Under-Secretaries of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development. I said to them: “This is your mission!” With this I wished to underscore the inescapable commitment of the Church to save migrants’ life, so that they can then be welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated.

This second life jacket, handed by another group of lifeguards just a few days ago, belonged to a migrant who disappeared in the sea last month of July. No one knows who he was or where he came from. It’s only known that his life jacket was found drifting in the central Mediterranean on July 3, 2019, in specific geographic coordinates. We are faced with another death caused by injustice. Yes, because it’s injustice that obliges many migrants to leave their lands. It’s injustice that obliges them to cross the deserts and suffer abuse and torture in detention camps. It’s injustice that rejects them and has them die in the sea.

The life jacket has a colored resin cross, which is designed to express the spiritual experience I captured in the words of the lifeguards. In Jesus Christ the cross is source of salvation, “folly to those who are perishing — says Saint Paul —, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). In Christian tradition the cross is symbol of suffering and sacrifice and, at the same time, of redemption and salvation.

This cross is transparent: it represents a challenge to look with more attention and to always seek the truth. The cross is luminescent: to encourage our faith in the Resurrection, Christ’s triumph over death. The unknown emigrant, who died with the hope of a new life, also shares in this victory. The lifeguards also told me how they are learning humanity from the persons they are able to save. They revealed to me how in every mission they discover the beauty of being a great human family, united in universal fraternity.

I decided to show this life jacket here, “crucified” on this cross, to remind us that we must keep our eyes open, have our heart open, to remind everyone of the imperative commitment to save every human life — a moral duty that unites believers and non-believers.

How can we fail to hear the desperate cry of so many brothers and sisters who prefer to face a stormy sea rather than die slowly in the Libyan detention camps, places of torture and ignoble slavery? How can we remain indifferent in face of the abuse and violence of those that are innocent victims, leaving them at the mercy of unscrupulous traffickers? How can we “make a detour,” like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Cf. Luke 10:31-32), making ourselves responsible for their deaths? Our sloth is a sin!

I thank the Lord for all those who have decided not to remain indifferent and spend themselves to help the hapless, without asking themselves too many questions on how and why they ran into that poor half dead individual in their path. The problem isn’t solved blocking the ships. We must commit ourselves seriously to empty the detention camps in Libya, evaluating and implementing all possible solutions. We must denounce and pursue the traffickers that exploit and mistreat migrants, without fear of revealing connivances and complicities with the institutions. Economic interests must be put aside so that the persons, each person, whose life and dignity are precious in God’s eyes, is at the center. We must help and save, because we are all responsible for the life of our neighbor, and the Lord will ask us to give an account of this on Judgment Day. Thank you.

Now, looking at this life jacket and looking at the cross, let each one pray in silence.

May the Lord bless all of you.

Tr. ROSA DIE ALCOLEA