

Our Franciscan Involvement with Refugees

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The main issues of the work of our "Justice and Peace" Commission of the Cologne Province since 1983 are:

1. Christian-Muslim Dialogue
2. A campaign against arms trade from Germany to other countries

Both issues led to a closer contact with refugees in Germany so that the work with and for refugees has become a main issue within our lives, especially for our Franciscan community in Köln (Cologne).

I. When in 1992 there was war in Bosnia, we realized very soon, that this would have an impact on Muslim-Christian relations in Germany, even though this war originally was not because of religion.

At this time about half a million refugees came from Bosnia to Germany. Many years before migrants from former Yugoslavia, from Croatia, and Serbia had come to Germany to live and work there. So there was a large presence of Bosnian Muslims, Croatians and Serbians in Germany.

For many years we have organized inter-religious peace prayers with Jews, Chris-

tians and Muslims; therefore we wanted to organize a prayer for peace in Bosnia, together with Catholic, orthodox and Muslim Bosnians, and German Protestant as well as Catholic friends.

We tried to get in contact with the Bosnian Muslim Community in Cologne, with the Catholic Croatian Mission and with the Serbian Orthodox Church and with the Jewish Synagogue in Cologne. It was not easy to bring all these groups together at a round-table to talk and prepare a prayer, but we succeeded, and so we had several prayers for peace together. At the same time we wanted to have concrete steps of solidarity.

Some friars of my province worked close together with the Franciscan province of Sarajevo and the "bread of Saint Anthony" on behalf of victims of war and displaced people in Bosnia. At the same time we started a common inter-religious Humanitarian action, especially for the Bosnian Muslims, which was called "Zajedno pomoci- zajedno molíti" (pray together-work together). Together with Bosnian refugees and young people of our neighborhood, Turkish Muslims and members of our Catholic parish, we collected clothes and money for food and medicine and sent it to Bosnia. Sometimes it was hard work, but the common involvement brought us closer together; Bosnian Muslims, Franciscans, Protestant, and Catholic friends. Friendships began and we supplied some small services to the Bosnian refugees such as help with the administrative procedures, sup-

port visiting officials of our town, help searching for lodging and giving refugees the chance to register in our house to get status. Especially we tried to get longer permits to stay for some families in mixed marriages of Muslims and Christians who could not return to Bosnia easily. Some refugees found shelter in our houses. One family stayed here in Vossenaack and two young Bosnian Muslims, wounded during the war, lived in our house in Remagen for some months. During the last years most of the refugees returned home but we remain in contact.

2. In Germany there are 2 million migrants from Turkey, among whom there are a lot of Kurdish people as a result of social discrimination, war and forced displacement (more than 2000 villages and hamlets have been evacuated). Many of the inhabitants of the Kurdish region left Turkey and came to Germany, most of them as migrant workers, some as refugees.

Germany is the second supplier of arms for the Turkish military following the USA. Since 1984, we Franciscans work together with other Christian Peace associations to form a Campaign against the arms trade. My participation in this campaign was to research and inform people about German arms trade to Turkey. Our Conference of "Justice and Peace" of the Franciscans in Central Europe works together with German and Kurdish friends for a peaceful solution to the war and for a dialogue of Turks, Kurds, and Germans. Thus, we try to fight against

the roots of displacement. We were encouraged to do so by a friend of mine, Lissy Schmidt, member of Pax Christi, who worked as a journalist in Kurdistan and wrote most of our publications. She was killed because of her work, in 1994. Her death made it an obligation for us to continue the work for the Kurdish people. The war in the Kurdish region of Turkey has caused more than 2 million internally displaced persons, peasants thrown off their lands to live in the slums of Turkish cities. Responding to a request from a Kurdish friend who knew our humanitarian work for Bosnia, we organized several humanitarian projects together with Kurdish friends. We provided food and coal for the winter to ten thousand families who had been internally displaced. We got support from Missionszentrale der Franziskaner and several Franciscan provinces, Church agencies and the German Department of Foreign Affairs. It has become more and more difficult for Kurdish people to get refugee status and to be able to stay in Germany. Many of them have been sent back by force. In some cases, people have been tortured afterwards in Turkey.

In Cologne about 150 so-called illegal Kurdish refugees live in sanctuary within parishes, monasteries, and church houses. Some friends, members of a campaign, called "No human being is illegal," Protestant and catholic parishes support them. Because they are labeled illegal they have no access to social welfare or civil and social rights. For the same reason, they receive no money to

live and are not allowed to work. Some of these Kurdish refugees lived in our community in Cologne as well as in other communities in several German Provinces. One of the refugees living in our community in Cologne was imprisoned last month and due to be sent back to Turkey. With the help of some friends we were able to get him released by organizing some actions of protest. Now he has legal status. A lot of Turkish migrants and Kurdish refugees live in our neighborhood. We have contact with both groups. I am the leader of two youth groups of mainly Turkish young people. We also have contact with some of the Kurdish families. Some refugees have asked for help with the officials, with the courts and with lawyers, in an effort to prevent their deportation. Accompanying them, I got to know how difficult life is for refugees in Germany. They are often treated with disrespect and in a way that ignores their dignity. Sometimes I find it difficult to remain peaceful when experiencing the treatment of refugees by some officials in the municipality.

The common involvement with refugees of Brother Louis Bohte and the Dutch "Justice and Peace" Commission along with Franciscans International Germany led us to ask Franciscans International Geneva, to organize a seminar on the human rights situation of refugees and migrant workers in Western Europe. This was organized together with the ICIVIC and took place in April during the annual meeting of the UN Human rights commission. We tried to make governments

and members of Parliament sensitive to the injustice refugees are facing by bad treatment and discrimination from municipalities, police, and others. What I learned in this conference is, that very often economic factors lead to forced displacement in their countries of origin, and economic interests benefit when they have no legal status in our countries because they are cheap workers without a chance to claim social standards.

Conclusion

Migration and the arrival of a huge number of refugees will be one of the main challenges for West and Central Europe during the next years. What we can do is to be simply brothers and friends to the refugees living in our town and in our neighborhood. When they ask us we can accompany them to the municipality or to court to petition for asylum. We can fight together for legal status and against deportation. Moreover we can accept their invitations to their homes and their hospitality, thereby giving them the chance to be the ones who offer hospitality. There are many possibilities to get in contact with refugees for all of us, in parishes, Friaries, monasteries, and small fraternities. We only have to be open-minded, friendly, and respond to the needs of people living as strangers and pilgrims among us. We must also denounce the violation of their human rights and dignity. And we should fight against the roots of displacement, wars, arms trade, and unjust economic structures.

The work with refugees changed my life in two senses. Life became more difficult, because there is always a lot to do, but at the same time I can say that life became rich by receiving the hospitality of many refugees and their families and getting closer to people with another cultural and religious background. One example from my experience was an occasion when I was asked to come to Stuttgart to a Church where 20 Kurdish refugees were staying. The Minister of Internal Affairs wanted to throw them out and put pressure on the Bishop. The refugees asked me to speak with the Bishop, as the Parish Priest felt under pressure from the Bishop to remove them. It was a hurried visit and

the refugees had only one room and twenty beds and I had to stay with them for the night. I had to ask them to give me soap and a razor to prepare myself for my visit to the Bishop. I felt that I was very much the one in need of clothes, food, and shelter and I experienced first-hand the real hospitality of the refugees in that situation. The dialogue with the Bishop failed as I was not received and the next day we had to leave quickly because we heard that the police were due to arrive to arrest the refugees.

In this situation I felt very close to what we are called to live as minor brothers in the world.