

RESPONDING AS CATHOLICS TO THE REFUGEE CRISIS
Open letter to Canadian Catholics from the CCCB
(for full length letter, see www.antigonishdiocese.com)

These past weeks all of us have been haunted by the images of refugees flooding into Europe from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa. Since his pontificate began, Pope Francis has repeatedly reminded us of their need for help, and appealed to the world not to turn our hearts away when homeless masses seek shelter, protection and a better life. Shortly after his election as Bishop of Rome, the Holy Father visited the island of Lampedusa to focus attention on the boatloads of refugees who have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean:

These brothers and sisters of ours were trying to escape difficult situations to find some serenity and peace; they were looking for a better place for themselves and their families, but instead they found death. How often do such people fail to find understanding, fail to find acceptance, fail to find solidarity. And their cry rises up to God!

A year ago, speaking before the United Nations General Assembly, the Secretary of State for the Holy Father, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, repeated the Pope's constant appeal to us and to the international community to "*take action to end the humanitarian tragedy now underway*" by *preventing war, stopping aggressors, protecting populations and helping victims.*

As our world and our country debate how best to respond, we as Catholics must ask what we might do personally and in our local communities. Here are a few suggestions on what we can do to help in this tragic, overwhelming and complex problem.

1. Sponsor a refugee family. During his Angelus message this past September 6, Pope Francis invited parishes, religious communities, monasteries, and shrines throughout Europe to welcome refugee families in preparation for the Year of Mercy. Should we in Canada do less? When we refuse to welcome others, our country, our homes and our hearts become closed to life. Although many among us face economic difficulties, what we have and own is so much more than what is accessible to the world's refugees. For our own peace of mind and our eternal salvation, we cannot refuse to share what we have with those in need. Should you, with your diocese, parish or community organization wish to learn more about sponsoring a refugee family, you can obtain information and suggestions from:

2. Donate. Our Church in Canada is blessed with several aid and development agencies which do outstanding international work and are deeply involved in assisting Syrian and other refugees and displaced persons. Their work is only possible through the generous donations and support of many Catholics as well as other people of good will.

3. Get involved politically. Any response to a major emergency situation is always most effective when governments, local communities and committed citizens work together. Our current federal election campaign is an important moment to engage political candidates and parties on what, if elected, they will do to assist refugees. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), as well as the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, have each reflected on

questions and concerns for voters to consider and discuss among themselves and with candidates running for office.

4. Be informed. The situations facing refugees, including those from Syria, are complicated. The questions involve not only the urgent need for humanitarian assistance, but also the complexities of international cooperation, peacekeeping, safeguarding communities from terrorist acts, and the enormous challenges in resettlement. In addition, local and regional conditions frequently change and new emergencies emerge. Our faith and our common humanity impel each of us to do what we can to assist. But our efforts will be all the more effective, and enduring, if we are well informed. In addition to the websites of the four Canadian development and aid agencies noted above, excellent sources of information as well as different perspectives on the needs of Syrian refugees and on the conditions affecting refugees in general are available.

5. Combat prejudices and fears. Major obstacles facing refugees as they seek protection and shelter involve apathy, indifference, apprehensions and prejudices in those countries where they seek refuge. When our hearts are fearful, our doors remain closed to others in need. Many of the Syrian refugees are Christians or members of other minorities, but the majority are Muslim. New arrivals to Canada (and even others who have lived with us for years or even centuries) experience prejudice, intolerance, fear and indifference when they interact with our dominant society. One way to address this negative and destructive attitude, particularly when those targeted by prejudice belong to other religions, is through inter-religious dialogue. Moreover, as Pope Francis noted in his recent Encyclical *Laudato Si'* (no. 201), religions should dialogue among themselves “for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor and building networks of respect and fraternity.” Inter-religious dialogue not only builds bridges, but helps us affirm our own faith and understand it better.

6. Stay focused. There are some 13 million refugees now throughout the world, of whom four million are from Syria. The problems they face are immense, and their situations will not be easily or quickly resolved. Our efforts to work with refugees must be long-term, if they are to be treated justly and our world is to know peace. Within several months, our Conference’s Commission for Justice and Peace will release an up-to-date reflection on the challenges affecting refugees as they face resettlement in Canada. In addition, the Holy See offers resources to assist Catholics and others determined to stay focused on finding solutions.

7. Meditate on Scripture, fast and pray. Every good thought, word and deed is inspired by the Holy Spirit and will come to fulfillment in God the Father. With Christ, we are to take up his Cross to bring reconciliation and healing to others. Meditation, prayer and fasting focus our attention, move our hearts, give vision and insight. Moved by our meditation, we intercede to God through fasting and prayer to transform our lives, lead us to change our ways, and motivate us. Uniting us with God in his call to solidarity and compassion, by meditating on the Scriptures, praying and fasting, hope is born, our love for others strengthened, and our commitment to justice and charity deepened. Scripture, prayer and fasting show how faith must lead us to good works. It has been the practice over the past years for the Bishops of Canada to call on the Catholics in their diocese and parishes to meditate on, and to fast and pray for, the needs of all the people in the Middle East and for peace throughout the world.