

Concept of Equal Citizenship and
Points of Convergence of Religious Creeds
and Other Value Systems

by Rev. Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo,
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at *World Conference on Religious Creeds and Value Systems:*
Joining Forces to Enhance Equal Citizenship Rights
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***Introduction - The Search for Belonging, Inclusion, Citizenship comes
from the very depths of the human heart and soul***

Your Excellencies and dear colleagues in search of justice for all,

I wish to begin by thanking His Royal Highness Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as well as His Excellency Ambassador Jazairy and the members of the Board of Directors of the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue for the honour to address you. I am well aware of the expertise represented among today's speakers so I am particularly humbled by the invitation to share my own reflections. Although I am certain that the theme of this panel calls for both theological and socio-political analysis, I decided to depart, not from creedal statements of belief or from political laws or policy, but from the depths of the human heart and soul.

In order to do so, I share with you a poem written by a young Syrian refugee to whom my organization offered assistance and accompaniment in Istanbul, Turkey. Here is what he has to say:

*The hope.....
I will not live again, so I need to live in peace
I will not surrender. Will appeal to all the people, all humans*

*I will appeal to the earth and the sky and all that is alive
Because I want to live in peace
I will not give up no matter what happens will not be surrendered
I have hope in life
Here and there who want to do good things?
We are all human beings and our duty to help each other
I want to live in peace
I want to eat and drink, and sleep.
I want to sate my desires psychological and spiritual
as well as completing my study
I am a human I have the right for life
Enough for me five years as refugee's homeless hungry and scared
Enough for me 25 years I suffer injustice because of the
affiliations of intellectual and socio-political of my family*

Points of Convergence for promoting equal and inclusive citizenship rights:

Just last week, I spoke here at the United Nations on a panel shared with a UN official. She stated emphatically, "Human rights don't fall out of the heavens." When my turn came, I begged, with much respect, to differ from her point of view. I affirmed my own belief, and that of many of the major faith traditions whose leaders and experts have joined us today, that we do believe human rights came from heaven based on our certain faith that God created all people in His image and likeness and gave both a unique identity as well as equal rights and fundamental freedoms to all His creatures. I believe that this basic truth, one shared by many believers, especially by those of us from the Abrahamic traditions, was powerfully proclaimed by the refugee whose moving words I just had the privilege to read.

Catholic Church Teaching in this regard traces its roots to Jesus Himself, who urged respect both for religious and civil law; thus, He cautioned his followers to: “... repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”¹

Over the years, the Popes and Bishops, who represent the official teaching authorities of the Catholic Church, further developed the doctrine concerning the rights and duties of citizens in their respective countries. Moreover, they cautioned against leaving people stateless and urged solidarity in receiving and including those forced to leave their homelands because of religious, political, or ethnic persecution or because of abject poverty or other root causes of forced displacement. In 2002, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document focusing on the participation of Catholics in political life² and thus touching on some issues related to active or equal citizenship. The following key points were made:

It is commendable that in today’s democratic societies, in a climate of true freedom, everyone is made a participant in directing the body politic.³ Such societies call for new and fuller forms of participation in public life by Christian and non-Christian citizens alike. Indeed, all can contribute, by voting in elections for lawmakers and government officials, and in other ways as well, to the

¹ The Gospel according to Matthew 22: 17-22

² DOCTRINAL NOTE on some questions regarding *The Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican City, 2 November 2002, published with the approval of Pope John Paul II, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html#_ftn6

³ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 31; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1915.

development of political solutions and legislative choices which, in their opinion, will benefit the common good.⁴ The life of a democracy could not be productive without the active, responsible and generous involvement of everyone, 'albeit in a diversity and complementarity of forms, levels, tasks, and responsibilities'".⁵

The democratic structures on which the modern state is based would be quite fragile were its foundation not the centrality of the human person. It is respect for the person that makes democratic participation possible. As the Second Vatican Council teaches, the protection of 'the rights of the person is, indeed, a necessary condition for citizens, individually and collectively, to play an active part in public life and administration'.⁶

In an essay entitled, "Toward a Catholic Vision of Nationality,"⁷ Mr. Donald Kerwin cites additional Catholic perspectives on citizenship:

"... In Catholic social thought, rights set forth 'the minimum conditions'⁸ that allow all people to participate in 'dignified life in community'.⁹ Rights both allow and require people to contribute to the good of their communities. The 'dignity' or 'good' of all 'is realized when people gain the power to work together to improve their lives, strengthen their families, and contribute to society.'¹⁰

... A Catholic vision of nationality and citizenship would not exclude immigrants because of their means of entry. It would weigh whether a person

⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 75.

⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, 42: AAS 81 (1989), 472.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 73.

⁷ Donald Kerwin, "Toward a Catholic Vision of Nationality, in *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy*, Volume 23, Issue 1, 2012, Symposium on Migration, Article 7, pages 97-107, <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=ndjlepp>

⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, **ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL** para. 79 (1986), available at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/EconomicJusticeforAll.Pdf>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, para. 91.

migrated to realize her God-given rights. It would look to her contributions, commitment, and ties to her new nation. It would be open to the positive values and contributions of her culture. It would remember that the very purpose of a state is to protect the rights and to further the good of all of its residents."

Points of Convergence and Foundations for Common Action to advance equal citizenship rights:

For the past eight years, I have been privileged to serve as a co-coordinator, together with Canon John L. Peterson, of the Anglican-Episcopal Communion, for a process of Summits convening Muslim (Sunni and Shia) and Christian (Anglican and Catholic) Leaders, to articulate the religious foundations of peace and reconciliation in today's troubled and conflicted world. These Summits were held in Washington, DC, USA (2010), Beirut (2012), Rome (2014) and Tehran (2016). We were honoured to benefit from the strong and active engagement of His Royal Highness Prince El-Hassan bin Talal, His Excellency Ambassador Jazairy and Professor Shahrzade Housmand Zadeh, during the 2014 Summit hosted by the Vatican. These are some of the insights and recommendations related to citizenship that were offered by the Summit participants:

- reinforce the pillars of justice and peace in a violent and changing world through education, which always will stress the importance of common religious teachings that guarantee the dignity and rights of others and so establish authentic plurality and diversity (Beirut, 2012);
- call for a just and comprehensive peace for the Holy Land which embraces the three Abrahamic religions and witnesses

to unity and diversity, and thus embodies the message of dialogue, coexistence and respect evoked by the city (Rome, 2014);

- reaffirm that women play a key role in peace-building at all levels of society, and acknowledge that women often bear the greatest burden of violence, poverty, discrimination, human trafficking, marginalization, inequity, and exclusion (Rome, 2014);
- condemn the use of religion and/or the instrumentalization of religious terms to legitimize unjust actions in the name of religion (Rome, 2014);
- review formation programs, in particular, for religious leaders, so that they could commit themselves to speak and to write objectively about “the other”, avoid referring to others as “non-believers”, simply because their religion differs from one’s own; and always treat with due respect those who do not profess any religion, since they, too, should never be deprived of their rights or dignity (Tehran, 2016).

More recently, subsequent to the 2016 UN Summit on Mass Movements of Migrants and Refugees and the commitment of States to develop and approve, before the end of 2018, two Global Compacts, one focusing on refugees and the other focusing on migrants, Pope Francis reminded Catholics and other people of good will:

Dear brothers and sisters, in light of these processes currently underway, the coming months offer a unique opportunity to advocate and support the

concrete actions which I have described with four verbs [to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate migrants and refugees]. I invite you, therefore, to use every occasion to share this message with all political and social actors involved (or who seek to be involved) in the process which will lead to the approval of the two Global Compacts.¹¹

Based on that call from Pope Francis, the Vatican's Section on Migrants and Refugees, convened other Catholic organizations, including my own, to guide advocacy, on global, national, and local levels, during the development of these Compacts. Recommendations for action related to citizenship include the following¹²:

- The right to life is the most fundamental of all rights, and cannot depend on a person's legal status;
- Migrants should never become a-national or stateless, in accordance with the right to nationality stated by international conventions, and citizenship should be recognized at birth (*ius soli*).
- Immigrants must be protected by their countries of arrival, in order to prevent exploitation, forced labor and human trafficking. This can be achieved by prohibiting employers from withholding employees' documents; by ensuring access to justice for all migrants, independently of their legal status

¹¹ MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS FOR THE 104th WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES 2018 [14 January 2018], "Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees", https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html

¹² Vatican Section on Migrants and Refugees, *RESPONDING TO REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS: TWENTY ACTION POINTS*, September 2017, https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/stocktaking_holy_see.pdf

and without negative repercussions on their right to remain; by ensuring that all immigrants can open a personal bank account; by establishing a minimum wage applicable to all workers; and by ensuring that wages are paid at least once a month.

- Access to education should be assured to all underage migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, so that they have access to primary and secondary schooling at the same standard as citizens and independently of their legal status.
- Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees with special needs are to be treated just like citizens with the same conditions, guaranteeing access to disability benefits independently of legal status, and enrolling unaccompanied or separated minors with disabilities in special education programmes.
- Integration, as a two-directional process which acknowledges and values the riches of both cultures, should be promoted. This can be achieved by recognizing citizenship at birth (*jus soli*); by rapidly extending nationality to all refugees, independently of financial requirements or linguistic knowledge (at least for over-50s); by promoting family reunification; and by declaring a one-off period of amnesty and legalization for migrants who have lived in a country for a considerable amount of time.

Conclusion:

I will return to the cry of heart and soul for inclusion and community, by the young Syrian refugee whom we already heard at the beginning of this presentation:

The day I live will not be repeated.

Here is a future that is almost being destroyed

My life will not be repeated

I want to live in peace

life will not be repeated again,

help me to get back to life.