

## **Keynote Address, ICMC President Ms. Christine Nathan**

### **‘Migrants in Asia & Our Response’ Workshop**

**1 September 2025, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**

Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Christ, distinguished guests, good afternoon.

It is an honor to join you today as President of the International Catholic Migration Commission, or ICMC. Based in Geneva, ICMC supports and protects refugees, migrants, and displaced persons. Guided by Catholic social teaching, we work with governments, the Church, and civil society to provide humanitarian assistance, advocate for rights-based policies, and promote safe and dignified solutions for people on the move.

At ICMC, we see daily how laws shape the lives of migrants and refugees. International conventions, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and ILO standards on labor rights, guarantee protection. Yet in practice, many national laws fall short. Refugees are often left in limbo for years without the right to work. Asylum systems increasingly deter and delay rather than protect. Migrants, who power entire economies, are excluded from labor protections, healthcare, and basic services.

This legal gap is not abstract, it has real human consequences. In Asia and beyond, migration is growing, driven by climate change, conflict, and economic need. But the laws intended to govern migration have not kept pace. The result is that millions live and work in the shadows, vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and abuse.

Let me offer one example from my own country, India. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed just how vulnerable internal migrant workers are. Even when rights are inscribed in law, migrants are often unable to access them. In 2024, ICMC supported the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India in creating a database of migrant workers, linking them with government programs. We also helped establish five Community Resource Centers and trained migrant leaders to head People’s Collectives. This ensured that migrants themselves had a voice in shaping their futures. This model shows how the Church, working with grassroots organizations, can help bridge the gap between workers and the systems meant to serve them.

ICMC also takes lessons from the local level to global advocacy. Since 2011, we have coordinated civil society participation in the Global Forum on Migration and Development. This brings migrant-led organizations, faith-based groups, and NGOs together with governments to ensure that the perspectives of migrants are central to global migration governance. Through advocacy and dialogue, we press for policies that uphold human dignity, expand safe and regular pathways, and address the root causes of forced and irregular migration.

What these experiences show us is clear: laws work best when migrants and refugees help shape them. They know the barriers firsthand, and involving them makes solutions more effective and more humane. As Matthew 25 reminds us, serving the stranger is serving Christ, and listening to their voices is part of that call.

The task before us is urgent: to reform migration and refugee laws so they are not about exclusion, but about protection, opportunity, and shared responsibility. Laws must reflect fairness, not fear. As Church leaders and grassroots actors, you hold the power to bring these principles to life in communities. By accompanying migrants and refugees, by ensuring they are welcomed in parishes, supported by local organizations, and empowered to speak for themselves, you help turn dignity into reality. When the Church and civil society stand alongside migrants and refugees, helping them access their right to protection, work, healthcare, and community, not only do they thrive, but our societies and our faith communities are strengthened.

Thank you.