

**Address to the 2017 Orthodox ~ Catholic
Ecumenical Gathering**

**Deacon Steve Swope
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Your Eminence, Metropolitan Alexios, your Excellency Archbishop Gregory, dear brother clergy and lay faithful of our sister churches, my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. I am so very delighted and honored to have the opportunity to address this Orthodox-Catholic Ecumenical Gathering.

It seems to me that in a world that is increasingly divisive, frequent and public ecumenical gatherings are a sign to the world that Christians are all united in our faith in Jesus Christ and the demands of his Gospel.

This gathering is a continuation of ecumenical activity that has its roots some 50-60 years ago and it reminds me of a specific occasion that occurred in April of 1965. At that time, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been named the recipient of the Pacem in Terris award which is given annually by the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa. This award is given to individuals whose work for peace and justice is particularly effective and notable. Over the years, the award has been given to seven Nobel Peace Prize Laureates. Upon receiving the award, Dr. King observed that the Christian family was indeed coming closer together when he said, "When a Catholic group can give an award to a fellow by the name of Martin Luther, things are getting better." Dr. King knew that the Christian community, speaking the truth of the Gospel, could take on the biggest global challenges and in doing so redirect the world toward both peace and justice.

His All-Holiness Bartholomew I and His Holiness Pope Francis have addressed the urgent need of coming together in defense of the sanctity of human life. United as brothers, as the successors of the brothers Andrew and Peter, they have prayed together and have worked tirelessly to respond to a serious situation which challenges all Christians to come together and to strive for peace and justice. That situation is the tragic and escalating global refugee crisis.

Given the prominence of reporting on refugees and the varied reactions to the crisis by governments around the world, it is hard to imagine that many people are not aware

that a crisis is at hand. Yet there are those who misunderstand who the refugees are, why they are migrating, and what rights they have.

Simply put, a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. Around the world today many people live in cities, towns and villages which are subjected to the constant violence of war. They flee their homes, not looking for economic advantage but for safety and peace for their families. While some may argue that by fleeing their homeland, refugees are illegally entering other countries and should be returned home, international law stands solidly contrary to that argument. Under Article 14.1 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was largely authored by Eleanor Roosevelt and the United States; all refugees are granted the fundamental human right to seek and enjoy asylum in other countries. Article 33.1 of the International Refugee Convention of 1951, stipulates that no nation may force the return of a refugee to the country which they have fled. Setting aside the legal protections guaranteed to refugees, and being pragmatic, it would be impossible to stop the river of humanity fleeing war torn areas or to try and return all of those who have fled to their native lands.

We are currently facing the greatest refugee crisis since World War II. There are 65.3 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes by violence and persecution. 44 million of those people are internally displaced, meaning they still reside in their native country but have been forced from their homes. 21.3 million people, one-half of whom are under the age of 18 have fled their home country simply looking for the safety offered by other nations.

In Syria, where a six year long civil war between the Assad regime and Syrian rebels has raged, hundreds of thousands of civilians have died and the violence endured by the Syrian people has escalated as a result of incursions into populated areas by ISIS and bombing by Russian forces. Seven years ago, a peaceful Syria had a population of 23 million people. Today, 6.6 million Syrians are internally displaced and 4.9 million others have fled their country. Essentially 11.5 million people or roughly one-half of Syria's citizens no longer live in their own homes.

The sheer number of refugees around the globe and from Syria in particular is mind-numbing. It is all too easy to become wrapped up in these huge numbers and not see the extent of real human suffering taking place.

As a Catholic Relief Service Global Fellow, I was part of a 2016 CRS delegation that spent almost three weeks in Greece and Serbia, meeting with refugees, hearing their individual stories and observing the work being done on their behalf. Spending time with men, women and children who were running for their lives, carrying all of their remaining possessions on their backs and facing a dangerous journey into the unknown put a human face on the refugee crisis for me. In many ways, the stories the refugees told us were as unique as they were, but in one horrific way they were the same, they were all refugees due to the death and destruction all around them. This journey also allowed me to witness the tremendous work being done for the refugees by Christians, Muslims, Jews and other people of good will.

In a hotel for refugees run by Caritas Athens and supported by International Orthodox Christian Charities, Catholic Relief Services and Save the Children, I met a Syrian woman named Hiat. Hiat was from the city of Hama which is located about halfway between Damascus and Aleppo. Before the war, Hiat was happily married with young children. She took her oldest boys, Muhammad and Mustafa to piano lessons and soccer practice and cared for her younger children at home. She drove a minivan and she and her family were middle class and prosperous. Hiat like so many other women around the world, was a soccer mom.

By the time we met, Hama had been virtually destroyed by the warring factions and incursions by ISIS and Hiat was a widowed mother of six children. In the summer of 2015, Hiat's husband, a non-combatant civilian was killed. He died as so many innocent civilians do, he was simply coming home from work when a battle erupted on the street he was driving on. His decision to take that particular street, on that particular day and at that time cost him his life. Hiat told me that following his death, and seeing killings and starvation in the city of Hama, she decided to go to Germany where her brother-in-law lives. It was the policy of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's government to grant asylum to an entire family when it was granted to any one family member. Hiat certainly could not go to Germany and leave her children behind to fend for themselves and she needed her older children with her to help with the youngest ones. So, Hiat made the incredibly difficult decision to send her 8-year-old son to Germany to seek asylum for the family, all alone. He made the dangerous journey north in Syria, across Turkey and then across the Aegean Sea to Greece with a total stranger. The trip from Hama to

Athens took four months, four months in which Hiat heard nothing from or about her third child. Arriving in Athens, the little boy was met by his Uncle who took him was able to take him safely to Germany.

Seven months later, after finally getting word that asylum had been granted to the family, Hiat set out with her other five children. Being driven north through Syria, she made her children lie face down in the bed of a pickup truck so that they would not see the bodies of those killed around Aleppo and in the frontier near the Syrian~Turkish border. She found smugglers who would take her family across Turkey and they charged her 5,000 Euros for the trip. After arriving in western Turkey, she found other smugglers who would arrange for the frightful trip across the Aegean Sea. She was scared to death, but paid the 5,500 Euros the smugglers charged. She and her children were with 50 other people in a boat designed to hold 30. For the fee that they paid to cross the Aegean, they were issued life preservers – which were really inflatable pool toys with no ability to save a life. She was aware that over 3,700 people had drowned in the Aegean in 2015. Her children screamed the entire 4.1-mile, six-hour trip to the island of Lesbos.

When Hiat arrived in Athens, she was out of money, had no food and had no expectation that she would be helped. Instead, she was being give 3-4 days to rest at the refugee hotel, two hot meals a day along with diapers for her two youngest children. While at the hotel she was able to get directions on how to continue her journey north with the aid of both humanitarian and governmental agencies.

Hiat told me how very much she missed her 8-year-old son, whom she had not seen in almost a year and if that he was not in Germany she would end her journey in Greece.

I had an opportunity to talk with her oldest son, 12-year-old Muhammad who told me that he wants to go back to school, and he misses learning. He wants to eventually be a doctor. I asked how he was doing on the trip and this courageous little boy said all he wished was that they had an airplane so he could get to his little brother.

I asked Hiat if she had questions for me or wanted to tell me anything else. She said that, "she did not understand why this is happening" that "they didn't do anything wrong, why is this happening? Finally, like any mother anywhere in the world, Hiat's thoughts were on her children not herself. She told me that her husband was dead and she would rather die than allow harm come to her children. She asked, "my children

have not lived at all, why should they die; they have done nothing wrong, why should they die?" You and I know the truth, Hiat's children should not die, no refugee children should be dying.

Hiat and her children were there in Athens, in one sense they were refugees, all alone, but in another sense, they were embraced by a community of strangers reaching out to help.

Not all refugee families are separated, most are complete families traveling intact with a husband, a wife and several children. This explains the fact that 70% of all refugees are women and children and 30% are men.

I met one such family at a medical clinic run by Doctors Without Borders at the Serbian~Croatian border. Ahmad Feres and his seven-year-old son Karam were at the clinic because little Karam was sick with the flu. Before the war in Syria began, Ahmad had a job as a civil engineer in the city of Aleppo. He also taught on a part-time basis at the University of Aleppo. Ahmad holds two masters' degrees in engineering. When I first met Ahmad, I asked him if he spoke English, he immediately replied that he was fluent in English, Arabic, Farsi, and French. He noted that Karam was fluent in Arabic and English and then asked what languages I spoke and I could only say, English!

He and his wife have three children a boy who is 12, Karam, and a daughter who is five. According to Ahmad, his eldest son was an excellent student up until three years ago when the schools closed in Aleppo. His younger children had not yet started school when the education system was shut down, so they have never had any formal schooling. Ahmad and his wife have been doing the best they can to educate their children at home.

Ahmad told me about the circumstances that led to them becoming another refugee family fleeing Syria. He said that 18 months ago their home was destroyed in one of the aerial bombings of Aleppo. His family was lucky. He was at work and his wife and children were at the market at the time of the bombing. I asked Ahmad who bombed their home, was it the Assad forces, the rebels, the Russians or the Americans? He looked astonished and replied that he didn't know and then added, "does it matter, my home was destroyed."

He moved his family to another house and it was also destroyed in an attack. After moving to a third and then fourth house which were also attacked they ended up in a

small room on the outskirts of the city. The area was not safe because it continually was the site of battles between the Assad regime and the rebels. Almost 80% of their home city of Aleppo had been destroyed, basic services like electricity and water were no longer available, and food was scarce. He said that society had totally collapsed and life as they previously knew it was gone.

Ahmad told me that he is like many other Syrians, he just wants his family to live in peace, his children to receive an education, and to continue his work as an engineer. He completely rejects the notion that countries receiving refugees will be in greater danger of terrorism. He said the Syrian people are peaceful and industrious, and the idea that Syrians would want to harm the countries that are willing to host them is simply irrational.

To save his children he and his wife decided to leave the country they loved; that is until peace returns. I asked Ahmad if he would ever return to Syria with his family. He said that once the war is over and peace was restored he would. He asked, “Who does not want to live in their native land, in their own culture, with their friends and relatives.” And so, Ahmad’s family, like millions of other refugee families continued their hard journey northward.

At the transit station where I met Ahmad and Karam I also encountered people from around the world who were there just to help the vast number of refugees.

It was interesting to note that all of the doctors were women. You see a Muslim man may be treated by a woman doctor, but a Muslim woman should be treated only by women. I found it remarkable that the volunteers with the humanitarian aid organizations not only paid close attention to the physical and emotional needs of the refugees, but were also careful to give attention to cultural norms.

The volunteers are mostly young and enthusiastic. The aid workers were from all over the world and from every faith tradition. There were Christian and Muslim doctors working side by side; Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant migration lawyers and counselors working with refugees. At one transit station, there was even a small group of evangelical kids from West Texas who happily took on the job of picking up the small pieces of trash blowing around so that the area would remain fit for human habitation.

Typical of the volunteers we met was a wonderful young woman named Tadia Rastic. Taida was an interpreter in Serbia who works with refugees to explain the next steps of

the journey and offer necessary assistance. It gives great comfort and reduces anxiety when refugees are able to speak with someone who knows their own language.

A woman who was about seven months pregnant, came to the refugee transfer station feeling a great deal of pain. She assumed it was from the stress of her journey. Taida urged her to go to medical clinic where after a quick examination it was determined a more thorough exam was needed. The doctors in the clinic arranged to transport her to a hospital in Belgrade. At the hospital, it became evident that the woman needed a surgical procedure for a medical condition that threatened not only her unborn child's life, but hers as well. As part of the preparatory evaluation before surgery, an ultrasound was done, and the mother was informed she would be having a daughter. Her serious medical condition was surgically treated and after a few weeks of recovery and rest she was given medicine for her onward trip. Before she left Belgrade, she was told by the doctors that if she had gone into labor on the refugee train, on the refugee bus or in a refugee camp, both she and the baby would have died.

When the woman arrived back at the transfer station, across the platform crowded with of hundreds and hundreds of people, the woman saw Tadia. She worked her way through the crowd so that they could speak with each other. The woman told Tadia all about her surgical procedure and in the course of a long discussion between the women, she asked how the name Tadia was spelled. Tadia wrote down her name and asked why the spelling of her name was so important. The woman told Tadia that she was so grateful for the kindness offered to her that she was going to name her baby girl Taida after the interpreter. What Taida had done, helping another human in distress, was seen as a common kindness by the woman. It was a kindness that had saved both her life and the life of her baby. Today there is a little Syrian girl living somewhere in Europe with the Serbian name, Tadia. For Taida it was just another day caring for people in need, for the woman it meant life itself.

When we were in Greece and Serbia we saw tens of thousands of refugees and hundreds of dedicated aid workers just like Tadia. The agencies that are there work seamlessly to provide constant aid and direction to the refugees. There are many agencies there, International Orthodox Christian Charities, Catholic Relief Services, Vlade and Ana Divac Foundation, Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children, the Red Crescent, and many, many others. The workers provide the help without any

consideration of the refugee's faith or nationality and work together, hand in hand, whether Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh or no faith at all.

Their efforts are more important now than they were just a year ago. An emerging nationalism in Europe and beyond has changed the way that refugees are treated. Under a March 20, 2016 agreement, all European borders have been closed to refugee migration. Any refugee reaching Europe is now returned to Turkey if they are caught. Those who were in transit at the time of the border closures are frozen in place. The transit stations have been converted into detention camps. Refugees are denied freedom of movement, they are basically imprisoned. Most of the camps fail to meet the international Sphere standards – which define the minimum standard for human living conditions

In Greece alone, over 54,000 refugees are detained in camps which have the capacity to house 38,600. Aid agencies continue to struggle to meet the food, water, sanitation and hygiene needs of the refugees. Through November of 2016, there had been just over 46,000 refugee asylum applications in Greece and only 6,500 had been processed. Still hundreds of refugees are arriving in Greece each day. It is clear that the human will and desire for peace is stronger than any obstacle, any wall, any hardship or any suffering. Our will to come to the aid of the refugees must be just as resolute.

There are those in our own country and abroad who express concern that there exists some potential for a terrorist to enter along with refugees who are granted asylum. While this concern may or may not be valid, it cannot be an excuse for us. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus tells us that our mercy and compassion cannot be contingent upon our own personal safety. On the dangerous road from Jerusalem down to Jericho the Samaritan stopped, incurring personal risk of the same misfortune befalling him as happened to the poor man he was helping. We like the Good Samaritan must be willing to accept the risk of personal harm in order to aid the unending stream of refugees who are in desperate need.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. I believe we need to show great unity in our response to this global refugee crisis. Like His All-Holiness Bartholomew I and His Holiness Pope Francis have done, we too must unite our hearts in prayer for the refugees who are now without a home, for those refugees who have perished along the

way, and for those aid workers who pour out their lives each day for the good of their fellow man.

We must unite our minds around the true facts of this refugee crisis, looking beyond the constant 24-hour news cycle in our own country and beyond the political arguments. We must look toward unbiased and mostly international information sources to more clearly understand the true plight of the refugees. It became clear to our small delegation that both sides of the refugee debate in our own country are ignorant of the reality we saw with our own eyes, or they are failing to relate the entire tragic story.

We need to unite our voices in support of those who have no voice at all. We must advocate at all levels of the Church and government for a more active, Christian and welcoming engagement with refugees.

It is time for us to unite our hands and resources to alleviate the pain, suffering and death that so many refugees encounter each day. By working through the international aid agencies that are “on the ground,” especially those run by our sister churches, we can make a substantial difference in the lives of so many people and provide them with simple human dignity as they await peace and a return home.

The Gospel of Matthew chapter 25, verses 31 through 46 is called the judgment of the nations. In it Jesus makes clear our personal and communal obligation to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those imprisoned. In these words, Jesus tells us that we and the nations will ultimately be judged by one very simple criteria. We will be judged based upon our reaction to human need.

We have in front of us the greatest refugee crisis since WWII. Refugees are hungry, thirsty, unwelcome, naked, sick and truly imprisoned. Our unity, our empathy, our generosity in reacting to their profound need is important. It is important in the lives of each one of the millions and millions of refugees, it is important for their human dignity and their survival. But it is also important in our lives, in your life and in mine, it is important for our salvation.

Let us act swiftly, with unity and with compassion.