

**Deacon Steve Swope's Keynote Address
to the AACCW Convention Luncheon
Peachtree City, Georgia
September 23, 2017**

Good Afternoon.

[Audience: Good Afternoon].

When Gwendolyn was reading my introduction and she read the part that says Marie and I find time to relax, the first thing that went through my mind is one of these is not like the others.

[Audience: Laughter].

I have enjoyed the 10 years since my ordination and have been given a wide variety of responsibilities as a Catholic Deacon. One of those is sort of interesting.

My mother passed away in December of 2016 and the thing she was proudest of, of all the things I've done in my life, being a deacon in the Church, running a company, having two children, have two wonderful grandchildren that were her great-grandchildren and more...the thing she was proudest of was that I was CEO of the company that ran *Gone With the Wind*.

[Audience: Laughter].

Mother was a deep South Woman from just outside of Charlotte. We would be around her friends and of course they all would start talking about all the things that their kids had done and then Mom would say, "That is so nice, but oh, my Stephen runs '*Gone With the Wind*.'" Those were sort of the "bless your heart" moments that Southerners know so well.

[Audience: Laughter].

Once she asked me about Olivia de Havilland, who is still alive, she said is there anyway I can meet her and I said, "Mother, I worry about the book rights, not the movie rights. I don't know Olivia personally." [Audience: Laughter]. She never quite understood that.

Well enough about that. I am delighted to have the opportunity to come and speak with you and share with you some of the experiences I've had over the last eight years as a Catholic Relief Services Global Fellow Ambassador Educator.

One thing that occurs to me, that I want to share with you is, that we all have experiences in life and things occur around us and sometimes we don't really take serious notice of them. Sometimes we don't appreciate them all. Then something will happen and we will sort of wake up and see the event and perhaps even our life in a completely different light. When that happens, it can really make us think a little differently about the world around us. Let me give you an example of that.

I heard a story recently about a couple that had a marvelous day. They spent all day Saturday together. They enjoyed themselves. As the day grew to a close they decided to sit on their back porch and have a nice glass of wine. So they were sitting on the back porch. It's a beautiful fall

day. They were just happy being together. After a few minutes, the woman looks wistfully into the distance watching the sunset; and she said, 'I love you so much. I don't know what would ever without you.' And her husband was taken aback. He looked at her and asked, Honey, is that you talking or is it the wine? [Audience: Laughter]. And then she said, 'Darling, you know it's me talking...to the wine.' [Audience: Laughter and some clapping]. And he suddenly saw things in a completely different light. [Audience: Laughter].

Well, one thing I want to share with you, with the focus on the grace of our Blessed Mother for this convention; is how we can look at Mary's life and see some things that maybe we haven't seen before. These are different pictures [the pictures and other references are from a PowerPoint presentation for the rest of the talk] that come mostly from the Renaissance era and they depict different events in Mary's life. In the top left we see the Annunciation. Then the Visitation when she goes to see Elizabeth. Then, of course, the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. On the top right, we see the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt as refugees. Next on the second row we see when Jesus goes back as a twelve-year-old to the Temple and is left behind for three days while his parents come looking for him. Then we can see that Mary is involved in the Ministry of Jesus at the Wedding of Cana. We see her present as he's taken down from the Cross and placed in her arms, and finally we see the Assumption of our Blessed Mother.

When we look through all of these, we know that they all have their foundation in Scripture and Tradition. We're familiar with every single one of them. But there's one that that we might not think very much about, it almost seems like a side note. It is the picture that shows that the Holy Family were refugees. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were forced into exile, because of persecution. They were refugees.

We know about Jesus and Joseph and Mary's status as refugees because it comes from Matthew 2:13, "When they departed, behold the Angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said rise, take the Child and His mother, flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you."

Now I want you to think for a moment about this young Hebrew girl. We think Mary might have been 15, 16, 17 perhaps 18 years old at the most. She was being taken to Egypt a country where she doesn't know the culture. She doesn't know the customs. She doesn't know the language. Could her husband find employment? What's in front of her when she goes fleeing into Egypt with a young baby?

Could you imagine how frightened she was? Can you imagine how scared she would have been?

Sadly, people fleeing their homeland for safety didn't end 2,000 years ago...we still have refugees all over the world today.

It's stunning to think about people forced into refugee status. People going to places they don't know and not living among the friends and family that they know and love. It is happening in the world that we live in today. There are 65 million human beings on this planet that are refugees. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees declares them to be refugees because they have left their homeland because of war or because of persecution. *65 million people, just think about that!*

Twelve years about in Syria there were 22 million Syrians. Six million have now left their country. *Six million*. One quarter of the population no longer lives there and they've left because they didn't want to die in a war.

In the summer of 2015 we had an image that sprung onto our television screens and I can tell you profoundly changed my view of refugees.

This is the picture of little Alan Kurdi. Alan was two years old. He, his mother, and his brother drowned in the Aegean Sea trying to make their way from Turkey to Greece. He was a Syrian national. We saw this pictures in September, literally just two years ago and it touched most of us. It touched our hearts. We wondered how can this be happening, we do something different. Why is this happening in our world? We have to understand the underlying cause of refugee migration if we're going to do something to help the millions of refugees.

There's a simple reason we have refugees in this world; and it is because there's war and there's devastation, and there's death, and there's persecution. Those things come together and force people to flee their homes.

In every presentation I give about refugees, I want people to understand what's really going on. I have a pretty good understanding because in January 2016 I had the opportunity to go to Greece and Serbia with a Catholic Relief Services delegation. While there we worked with refugees but even more importantly, we spent time *talking* to the refugees. We wanted to get to know who they are, hear their stories and find out why they're running from their homeland.

What we learned is pretty simple. The main reason people are leaving Syria is due to war. Most of the population in Syria live on the west coast. That's over here where Damascus is, Hama, Aleppo, and up through the north [using the PowerPoint map of Syria]. Not many people live in the center of the country because it is all desert. Mostly there are only oil fields there.

The different colors you see on this map represent the warring factions in Syria. The Assad regime is represented by the blue; the rebels are in yellowish orange. The green color represents the Kurds and the red is for the Islamic State.

What you'll notice when you look at this map carefully is that in almost in every major city two of those warring factions are coming together. So, in the major cities, like Aleppo, like Hama, like Damascus, there are active battles going on day in and day out, while people are trying to go about living their lives. It finally become intolerable. It is not only dangerous but society breaks down and simple services like water, electricity, and schools no longer are available. People have little choice but to leave.

What happens when refugees flee the country? Where do they go to get away from all of that. The answer is *anywhere!* Millions have tried get across the Aegean Sea and into the safety of Europe. They have few possessions and what they have they must carry. They travel light, entire families are running for their lives and all of their possessions are in a large black trash bag.

But they do not travel unaided. The American Catholic Church is there through the generosity that you provide to Catholic Relief Services. CRS is the international humanitarian outreach agency of the American Catholic Church. It's through CRS that you and I reach out to help people in need outside of the United States. So, let me tell you a few things that are being done for the refugees in your name; and then I want to share with you a couple of stories of the real people that I met.

One thing that CRS does is meet people as they get off of the boats in the port of Athens, Greece. They are met at the dock, quite literally as they disembark. This young woman [in PowerPoint presentation] had been in Syria three days earlier and now she had made it all the way to Athens. She was met by CRS volunteers and people that work for a dozen other groups (like Caritas and Doctors Without Borders) to provide her with instructions on how to continue going northward into Europe.

Because it was January and only 24 degrees, we were handing out diapers and handing out coats and shoes and gloves. The families were coming from Syria and many of the kids didn't even have shoes.

I do want to tell you about these little orange bags. While I was there I was part of the group handing out these bags. I finished handing out diapers so I started handing out these little orange bags to every man and woman that came by. They were each getting an orange bag; what was in them, I had no clue but we had a lot of them so I was just giving them out. One of the long time local Caritas workers came over and she said, "Deacon, the men don't get orange bags." I said, "Oh?" thinking that this was discriminatory. [Audience: Laughter] And she said emphatically, "The men do not get orange bags!" And I said, "Oh really... and why not?" She said, "These are feminine products...if you know what I mean." [Audience: Laughter]. And I said, "Oh my." I still wonder about the guys I had given them to. [Audience: Laughter].

But it brought something home to me, when you're running for your life, how very, very difficult it is to think of all the things you would like to take. How hard I must be to have to hand carry every single thing you need on the journey. It was important to have the ability to provide men and women, and babies and young children with those things that were deemed the very basic necessities of life as they continued their journey.

I would like to tell you about a few of people that we encountered. In Athens, I met a woman named Hiatt, pronounced just like the hotel company but spelled differently. Hiatt is one of the most courageous women I've ever met. When I think about Hiatt, I think of the Blessed Mother. I think about a woman who had courage. A woman who had grace. A woman who had dignity. A woman willing to take a risk. And a woman who is willing to put her entire trust in God. Hiatt was from a town called Hama. She has six children. Her husband was an accountant in Hama, and was on his way home from work as an accountant one day when he turned down a street just as a battle between the Assad forces and the rebel forces broke out. He was killed. Hiatt had also had friends and neighbors that had been killed so she decided it was time for her to move. And she was going to become a refugee.

Her brother-in-law, the brother of her deceased husband, lives in Munich, Germany. Hiatt knew that under the Merkel Government's plan for refugees, if you could get one of your immediate family members into Germany and they received asylum, the rest of the entire family would be granted asylum as well. But Hiatt had a problem. Her oldest son is the boy in the middle, Mohammed. [PowerPoint presentation]. She has another son right here, named Mustafa. And her son is Amad. She has two daughters as well, and fourth son, an eight-year-old. Her fourth son is not in this picture, or for that matter even in the country. Because Hiatt needed the help of the older three boys to take care of the youngest two children, she had no choice but to send her eight-year-old ahead, by himself, from Syria to Munich. She entrusted him with a total stranger to make the journey across Turkey; then across the Aegean Sea where 1900 people had died that year and finally into Athens. He then was able to find his way to Munich, to his uncle with the help and generosity of humanitarian organizations.

The trip for the little boy took seven months. Hiatt had gone seven months without hearing from her son, she didn't know whether he was alive or whether he was dead. She knew nothing of his journey. But she found out seven months later, after he had arrived in Munich and had been granted political asylum. So she and her other children, the other five, had set out on a journey all the way to Germany where they can immediately receive asylum.

Hiatt's problem when I met her was that she was broke. When she left Syria, she had 10,000 Euros. During the journey, she was charged 5,000 Euros to cross Turkey and another 5,000 Euros to cross the Aegean Sea. It is unconscionable but there are thousands of horrible people along the way, just waiting to take advantage of the refugees. Hiatt arrived in Athens with no money, no hope, and five young children. But it isn't all bad. In Athens she was met by Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Athens, and Caritas Greece. She was put up in a hotel in Athens for five days. She was given counseling. She was given food. Her kids were given coats. And she was basically provided with everything she would need for the journey forward. She was told how to catch the buses. How to get on the trains. She was given money, direction, and at the end she had help and support.

When I sat and talked to Hiatt, she said something to me that I'll take with me the rest of my life. I asked her if this journey was really hard for her; leaving in Syria all of her friends, all of her family, all of her culture, everything she'd known. And she said, "Sir, my children have never done anything wrong. I used to take my young son to play soccer. I took him to piano lessons. I took him every single day to school and helped him study." It occurred to me as she was speaking that she was a soccer mom, like my wife was. That's who she was. She continued, "Now I don't want my children to die. They've done nothing wrong they haven't even had a chance to live. Why should my children die and your children live?" I didn't have an answer for her. Yes, my children should not die, but neither should Hiatt's.

Probably the biggest regret I have of my time in Greece is that I didn't give her my email address. I don't know if she made it. I don't know if all of her young children survived the journey. But I pray for Hiatt and for those she was traveling with. I pray every single day that they made it to Munich. And believe me, I've Googled her 1,000 times and found nothing. Maybe she made it. If she did it is because of the generosity of many, many people and most of them are very young people.

I met this young girl, she was about 16 years old. Her job at this transit station was to blow bubbles for the young Syrian kids. You see the bubbles there? The kids had never seen that. Now my grandkids play with those soap bubbles all the time. They call her the Bubble Girl. [Audience: Laughter]. She worked with a humanitarian group called the Balkan Center for Migration. All that her job entailed was entertaining and playing with the children while their parents were trying to figure out their next steps; to make sure they had whatever meager provisions that they could gather together for the trip going north.

I was talking with the Bubble Girl and she was completely fluent in English. She is a wonderful young woman. I asked her if she liked her job. She said, "I loved this job. It's the best job All I do is play all day. I just play and I get paid. Isn't that awesome!" I told her that was fantastic. Then she said, "The best part is that I haven't had to buy shampoo in six months." [Audience: Laughter]. She was a Bubble Girl alright. [Audience: Laughter].

But I do want to tell you about this young woman on the screen. To her left Erin Mackey of CRS – she was part of our delegation. Is there nybody here from St. Matthew's in Tyrone? That's your Deacon Bill Hampton and this is me. We we're talking to this young woman and her name is Tadia Rastic. Tadia was 24 years old at that time. Tadia worked at a transit point where buses would come in and the refugees would transfer to trains that would go onto Croatia. She worked there as a translator. When I first met Tadia I said, "Do you speak English?" She said, "I speak Farsi, Arabic, French, and English. What do you speak?" [Audience: Laughter]. I weakly said, "English." [Audience: Laughter].

Tadia told us a marvelous story that she didn't think was all that important. Thousands of people that would come through that transit station every day, literally, thousands of people all at once. In that crowd she noticed a woman, traveling alone, who was pregnant and clearly in some level of distress. She was bent over, holding her womb, clearly not feeling well. So Tadia pulled her out of the line and suggested that they both go to the nearby clinic that's run by Doctors Without Borders. The doctors could take a quick look at her and see if anything's wrong. So, they went to the clinic and she was able to see a doctor that was there from, of all places, Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

By the way, all the doctors along the route traveled by refugees are women because if you're a Muslim woman, you cannot see a male doctor, but males can see women doctors. So all the doctors are women, without exception.

So, this American doctor, who also happens to be an obstetrician, gave her a quick exam and determined she had a serious medical problem that would require some surgery, so they sent her back to Belgrade to the hospital. She received the needed surgery. I don't know what the problem was but she was taken care of.

She spent two weeks in the hospital and then returned to the journey traveling northward. She finally arrived back at the same transit station and once again thousands of people wandering around there. By luck, Tadia happened to be working that day. It had to be a miracle with the thousands of people there but she and Tadia saw each other. The woman was overjoyed. She threw her arms around Tadia and she was crying she was so excited. She told Tadia, "You saved

my life. You saved my baby's life. The doctors told me if I had gotten on that train and gone into labor, I would have died and my baby would have died and we would be no more." Tadia's reaction was like, WOW, she never expected anybody to tell her something like that.

Well, then the woman wanted Tasha's card. "Give me your business card. I want to stay in touch with you." As they were parting, she told Tadia that she needed to tell her something important. "My doctor, the doctor there told me that I'm going to have a little girl and I'm going to name her Tadia." [Audience: Ah]. And today there is a little Syrian girl running around in Europe with a Serbian name. [Audience: Laughter].

This young woman Tadia saved two lives by just doing her job. I haven't saved a single life in ever. Only the Lord knows how many people Tadia has helped and saved along the way. She does it just because she is a compassionate person. She is someone who cares about other people. That sort of thing is what's really happening on the ground in Europe.

We saw men and women, mostly very young, working hard to help every single refugee as they were coming through. I ran into a group of evangelical students from Dallas, Texas. Their job was to pick up trash, that's it. For three weeks all they had done was pick up trash. They told me it was the best thing they've ever done in their lives, because they got to meet lots and lots of refugees and feel they were making a difference.

I want you to know the truth about who's migrating as refugees. Seventy percent of the people we saw were women and children and only thirty percent were men. That is the truth. What you read in the media, what you hear in political campaigns is not true. Seventy percent were women and children and when you think about it, that makes perfect sense because most of the Syrians were traveling in intact families. If you have a husband and a wife and two children, 75% of that family are women and children. That's what we saw when we were there. Not men that were ready for battle. Not 21 year olds looking for some sort of grand adventure in war. These were families. Like my family. Like your family. Running for their lives. It is real, it is visceral, it isn't fake news.

You and I have a calling. our calling, as Christians, is to help those in need. Jesus made it really clear to us in Matthew, Chapter 25 that our very salvation depends on our response to human need. It's the big test and what's great about it is that Jesus told us what the exam is going to be. We don't even have to study for it, he told us the questions and the answers We have to help those in need. We can do it if we work together. You and I can do things that nobody else can do if we just pull together.

There is an initiative going on sponsored by the USCCB and Catholic Relief Services. It's called Catholics Confront Global Poverty. The whole initiative allows us to speak to power, especially those in government, with one voice as the Catholic Church. We have the ability to send a clear message. You can go online to confrontglobalpoverty.org and sign up. When serious issues come before our Congress we can have a single and loud as American Catholics in this country. The goal is to get 30 million Catholics to sign up. We can speak with that one voice to those in power and tell them what they should be doing. We can tell them that as a nation of immigrants

and refugees we should be openly welcoming those fleeing death, destruction, and persecution. We have that ability but we all have to work together to get the job done.

There is another opportunity for all of us. The Holy Father is going to announce a campaign on the 27th of September called *Share The Journey*. You and I are called to share in the misery, and the joy, and the hope that each refugee has in their heart. This campaign, that tells you how far we've come as a Church and point the direction we can go in aiding migrants and refugees. The Holy Father wants us to use social media: Facebook, Instagram, whatever you're on. We have the ability to communicate to world that we care about refugees and that we're willing to share their journey.

The first way we can do it is through prayer. Prayer is the most powerful weapon we have as Christians. Constantly pray for those who are fleeing. Pray for those who have lost loved ones along the way and pray for those who are left behind in Syria to fend for themselves in cities like Aleppo where there is no water, where there is no electricity, there is no sanitation.

We also have a duty to learn. Sometimes people get offended when I say this, especially when I speak to civic groups, but don't watch CNN and don't watch Fox. That's not news, they are only about opinions, and yelling and shouting about what they see as the "other side." In a real way, they contribute to the divisiveness so prevalent in our national discussions. If you want real news, listen to the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation or read the magazines *The Economist* or the Catholic publication *America*. These are sources that are really all about the news and telling factually what is going on, on the ground.

You can also go to the United Nations High Commissioner Refugee website and find out what's really happening with regard to the refugees, you can check out the Vatican and the Archdiocese of Atlanta websites. If you try, you can see what's really happening and then share that information with others.

You and I are also called to act. The only difference between belief and opinion is action. If we don't act on our beliefs they are merely opinion. Action demands that we have to speak the truth to those around us. Respectfully, but honestly and openly. When we hear people talk of refugees as if they're here to destroy our country, Germany, France or any other country, we need to set the record straight. We need to state clearly that these are people fleeing for their lives just as Joseph and Mary and Jesus were fleeing for theirs. We have a duty and obligation to protect them simply because they're human beings. We have to protect their dignity.

I have a favorite saying about why we help those in need. Someone approached me about our trip to Greece and Serbia and they asked, "Why do you do it? They're not even Catholic. They're mostly Muslim." The answer is simple. *We don't help others because they're Catholic. We help them because we are.* That's what it means to be a Catholic Christian.

We also have an opportunity to give. We can give in our communities. You can give to Catholic Relief Services which is run by the Church. You can also give to a number of humanitarian organizations that support those who are fleeing. I learned of one and I probably should have known something about it. Does anybody know who Vlade Divac is? There's got to be one

person here who might know. [Audience member: Yes]. He's been nominated to the National Basketball Association Hall of Fame. I'd never heard of the guy. He is Serbian and he and his wife Anna have set up a foundation and they've given away millions of dollars for Refugee Support. What a generous man.

We have to share with one another what's going on. That is the opportunity that Share the Journey gives us. You can go to the *Share the Journey* website, which is right there, sharethejourney.org and download stories and post them to Facebook, and Instagram, Twitter, and any other social media account you're on. If you're not into social media, you can email the stories to your friends.

We can help raise awareness of the plight of the refugees. And in doing so, maybe provoke a few more people into prayer, a few more people into acting, and a few more people into giving.

There is one observer who said something profound. I don't generally don't read from a slide that I am displaying but I think it's such a great quote it is worth seeing and hearing. He says, "If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help those in need, either we have to pretend that Jesus is just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without any conditions whatsoever and then admit we just don't want to do it."

Does anybody know who said that? It wasn't Pope Francis. It wasn't Mother Teresa. It was Stephen Colbert. Stephen Colbert is a Catholic. He teaches CCD in his parish and he supports the help, rescue, and resettlement of refugees in our country and in others.

If we look to the Blessed Mother, one of the first refugees that we hear about in the New Testament, we can see her strength, and we can see her grace, and the courage she had to venture into the unknown. It's our duty and our obligation as Christians to have that same strength and that same courage; to stand up for refugees, to be their voice when they're the voiceless and to reach out our hand to them and welcome them into our midst.

Thank you and may God bless you and your families and all whom you love.
[Audience: Applause].