Seven Last Words
Seven Acts

Reflections and Responses to Global Migration
The Seven Last Words is a devotion that reflects on the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth as he was crucified. Traditionally prayed during Lent, the Seven Last Words allow the faithful a means of meditating on and identifying with Christ’s suffering and passion.

Franciscans International offers a contemporary take on this Lenten tradition, reflecting on Jesus’ last words through the lens of migration. Like Jesus of Nazareth, who endured dehumanizing cruelty, many migrants and refugees today experience dehumanization as a result of violence and poverty, unjust laws and inadequate immigration policies, xenophob...
other causes. 2017 saw international migration at an all-time high, with an estimated 258 million people living in a country other than their country of birth (United Nations, Migration Report 2017).

Pope Francis, who has expressed “particular concern for the forced nature of many contemporary migratory movements,” has called for “a coordinated and effective response to these challenges” (Forum on Migration and Peace 2017). His vision, which can “be articulated by four verbs: to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate” (Pope Francis, Forum on Migration and Peace 2017), invites people of faith to respond to issue of migration in a just, compassionate, and comprehensive way.

Similarly, the United Nations has begun the process of crafting a Global Compact on Safe and Orderly Migration, which aims to be the first inter-governmental agreement that will address international migration. Various actors, including non-governmental organizations such as Franciscans International, are currently working to ensure that this Global Compact includes a holistic, rights-based approach to migration.

By meditating on the passion of Christ through the lens of migration, we can engage in a deep, spiritual reflection on the realities faced by so many of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters and can begin to consider responses to this burning issue. The Seven Acts proposed here, which are inspired by the Holy See’s statement, Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points, and Now and How, Ten Acts for the Global Compact, from civil society, distills seven everyday actions that all people of faith and good will can to do to support and uphold the dignity and human rights of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters.

“When we turn that gaze to migrants and refugees, we discover that they do not arrive empty-handed. They bring their courage, skills, energy and aspirations, as well as the treasures of their own cultures; and in this way, they enrich the lives of the nations that receive them.”

- Pope Francis, 51st World Day of Peace
When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

Luke 23: 33-34
EDUCATE OURSELVES ABOUT THE DRIVERS OF HUMAN MOBILITY, THE REALITIES OF MIGRATION, AND THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF XENOPHOBIA, RACISM, AND DISCRIMINATION

In a recent address to Catholic universities and educators, Pope Francis encouraged the audience to “deepen theological reflection on migration as a sign of the times.” Indeed, migration has become a contentious issue in many countries all over the world and, in a period of extreme uncertainty and unrest, a preponderance of “fake news,” as well as rampant suspicion and fear, it is all too easy to blame migrants and refugees for the problems plaguing our world today.

This need not be the case. Our response to migration, can be based on sound facts and information about the drivers of human mobility, the lived realities of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters, and the many gifts that they bring. In doing so, we can arrive at a better understanding of the root causes of global migration (which include conflict, insecurity, persecution, human rights violations, structural inequalities, climate change, and environmental degradation), we can dismantle the ignorance and fear that undergird social exclusion (xenophobia and racism), and we will be able to discover the many positive aspects that migration contributes to global development.

Moreover, our awareness of the current migration phenomenon can extend beyond facts and figures. If we take the time to theologically reflect on the gravity of the situation facing our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters, perhaps we might be able to see in their faces the face of Christ, who identified himself in the poor and the hungry, the oppressed, and the stranger (Matthew 25).

Photo: Rohingya refugees cross the Naf River from Myanmar on makeshift rafts, heading for refugee camps in Teknaf, Bangladesh. Three weeks earlier, after being forced from their homes and stranded on the river’s shore, they built rafts from bamboo poles and jerry cans before eventually boarding them. © UNHCR/Andrew McConnell.
Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.” The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, “Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He replied to him, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Migration has emerged as one of the most divisive political issues today, causing intense polarization in our public discourse and conflicts in communities all over the world. The tensions and anxieties surrounding migration have been fueled by the criminalization of migration, which seems to be the de facto response of many governments. This criminalization results in social exclusion and forces migrants and refugees into the shadows, depriving them of access to basic human rights and preventing them from fully participating in and contributing to their host community.

As Franciscan men and women, we are called to adopt a spirit of welcome, having recognized that our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters have “done nothing criminal” (Luke 23: 41). Pope Francis encourages us “to overcome indifference and to counter fears with a generous approach of welcoming those who knock at our doors” (Forum on Migration and Peace 2017).

Welcoming migrants into our community, hosting a refugee family, or advocating for their rights can do much to change the negative narrative surrounding migration into a positive one. Indeed, “more widespread programmes of welcome, already initiated in different places, seem to favour a personal encounter and allow for greater quality of service and increased guarantees of success” (Pope Francis, Forum on Migration and Peace 2017). By welcoming our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters, we work to build the Paradise that Jesus promised on the cross.
When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

John 19: 26–27
Although women accounted for slightly less than half (48.4%) of international migrants in 2017, migrant women and girls are particularly at risk of human rights violations. For many, gender-based violence is all too common an occurrence: it is both the cause of migration and a sad reality along the way. Migrant women and girls are susceptible to various forms of discrimination, exploitation, physical and sexual assault, and human trafficking. Our response to migration, therefore, must include an awareness of and a sensitivity to the gendered dimensions of international migration.

In his message for the Celebration of the 51st World Day of Peace, Pope Francis exhorted us “to recognize and defend the inviolable dignity of those who flee real dangers in search of asylum and security, and to prevent their being exploited.”

As Franciscans, we are called to defend the human rights of female migrants and refugees, to promote gender equality, and to empower all women and girls. We can do this by supporting national policies that protect against exploitation or discrimination based on gender, such as labor regulations that ensure equal pay for women and laws that provide them with access to essential healthcare services. In doing so, we uphold that “God does not discriminate: ‘The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the orphan and the widow’” (Pope Francis, 51st World Day of Peace).

“I think in particular of women and children who find themselves in situations that expose them to risks and abuses that can even amount to enslavement.”
- Pope Francis, 51st World Day of Peace

Photo: Genesis with her one-year old son at the room they are renting in Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico. Genesis’ son was born as a result of repeated sexual assaults in Honduras. Entire families from the northern triangle (Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala) are fleeing their homes in search of international protection in neighboring countries. The rampant violence in the region is prompting an overlooked refugee crisis. © UNHCR/Markel Redondo.
And about three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Some of the bystanders who heard it said, “This one is calling for Elijah.”

Matthew 27: 46-47
Jesus’ crucifixion was an example of justice gone awry. Found in both the Gospel of Matthew and Mark, Jesus’ cries to God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, was a cry of desperation. Indeed, in the darkest and most painful hours of his life, the Word made flesh shared in the sense of abandonment and total desolation that so many encounter when they are faced with injustice, tragedy, and oppression.

Today, many of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters suffer this same sense of abandonment and desperation as they experience multiple layers of injustice before, during, and after their migration journey. For many who undergo migration, justice seems to be scarce, broken, or missing altogether. This is especially true when migrants are threatened with detention and deportation.

In addition to advocating for immigration reform, Franciscans can accompany and attend to our detained or deported migrant and refugee brothers and sisters in a variety of ways. We can accompany them to their court hearings or connect them to lawyers. Faith communities can be mobilized to hold prayer vigils outside detention centers or, if possible, to visit these centers in order to provide much needed accompaniment during these traumatic moments.

Groups can also reach out to the families and communities of people in detention or of those who have been deported, providing important pastoral, spiritual, and communal support. These actions can highlight the inhumane treatments that undocumented immigrants often face at the hands of broken immigration systems and the for-profit detention industry.

Photo: Refugees and migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa sleep on the floor at the Tariq al-Sikka detention facility in Tripoli, where people brought back from boats crossing the Mediterranean are held by the Libyan authorities. © UNHCR/Iason Foounten.
After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I thirst.” There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth.

John 19: 28-29
Jesus’ cry for water on the cross was an expression of human need that echoes the desperate cries of many migrants and refugees today. Leaving behind difficult and often violent situations, many find themselves encountering scarcity and lack of access to human rights, such as decent living conditions, employment, and justice. Even basic necessities, such as water, are scare commodities on the migration journey. In many instances, access to these resources can mean the difference between life or death.

Inequality, in its various forms, is one of the main drivers of global migration. As followers of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, we are called to a duty of justice and to envision a world where resources are shared equitably. We must work to ensure that our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters have access to much needed services, such as healthcare, housing, food security, and education.

One way that Franciscans can share the many resources and social supports that we often take for granted is to ensure that the direct services offered by our local faith communities are available to migrants and refugees. Visiting detention centers, advocating for just wages, bringing breakfast to day laborers, and supporting immigrant-led organizations and businesses, can help to bring valuable resources and support to this vulnerable community. However, because migrant and refugee communities are often submerged, outreach to them must be intentional and sensitive (including to cultural and linguistic needs).

“We can no longer sustain unacceptable economic inequality, which prevents us from applying the principle of the universal destination of the earth’s goods. We are all called to undertake processes of apportionment which are respectful, responsible and inspired by the precepts of distributive justice.”

- Pope Francis, Forum on Migration and Peace 2017

Photo: Br. Sam Nasada, OFM, of the Province of Saint Barbara, writes a note on bottles of water for migrants crossing the desert between Mexico and the United States. © Br. Sam Nasada, OFM.
When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, “It is finished.” And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.

John 19: 30
Welcoming our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters is an ongoing project and will not be completed in one step. Our engagement with justice therefore, must be holistic and must proceed with an eye to fundamental, systemic change. As such, it will be important to partner with immigrant rights groups and other human rights organizations to lobby our government representatives to enact compassionate and humane immigration policies.

As Pope Francis has often exhorted us, we must work to ensure that our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters are “empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity intended by the Creator” (Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018).

We must work with community leaders, law makers, and our migrants and refugee brothers and sisters themselves, in order to identify needs and propose policies which uphold human dignity and human rights. These policies should provide protections for all persons who choose to migrate. Legal protections, however, should not be limited to the duration of migrants’ and refugees’ stay in their country of destination. Safeguards must be included if and when migrants and refugees choose to return to their country of origin. Additionally, we must lobby governments to ensure that returns are truly voluntary, without any form of coercion or threats of detention.
It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”; and when he had said this he breathed his last.

Luke 23: 44-46
As followers of Saint Francis and Saint Clare of Assisi, Franciscans have a special mandate to embrace those who are less fortunate among us. We can live out this spiritual and historical call to be among the *minores* of our time in a variety of ways—“by increasing opportunities for intercultural exchange, documenting and disseminating best practices of integration, and developing programmes to prepare local communities for integration processes” (Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018).

However, a more fundamental change must also occur: the conversion of hearts. Equipped with a belief in our shared dignity and common humanity, Franciscans can change the misconceptions about migration and the negative narratives currently circulating. We can work to promote the welcome and inclusion of our migrant and refugee brothers within our faith and local communities, as well as within society at large.

As people of faith, we can infuse our preaching, theological reflections, and our prayer lives with thanksgiving for the many gifts of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters. In doing so, we not only bring their joys before God, but also before God’s people.

“Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age.”

- Pope Francis, World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018

Photo: Pope Francis has made the plight of migrants and refugees one of the central focuses of his papacy. Here, he meets with internally displaced persons (IDP) in Bangui, Central African Republic. © MINUSCA/Nektarios Markogiannis.
Closing Prayer

Most high and glorious God, the poor, crucified body of Christ inspired Saint Francis and Saint Clare to a genuine, loving concern for the poor and the oppressed. We follow in their example, as we reflect on Your Seven Last Words. Like Francis and Clare, we pray:

That in gazing on Your poor, crucified body, we may know the Body of Christ who still suffers with those who experience injustice and violence;

That in meditating on Your words on the cross, we may hear Your cries echoed in the cries of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters;

That in contemplating Your suffering, we may empathize and show mercy to those who are displaced and excluded;

And that in desiring to imitate You, who welcomed all, we may also welcome all, especially the stranger and the outcast.

Just as Francis’ embrace of the leper turned what seemed bitter “into sweetness of soul and body” (The Testament), the embrace of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters will turn the bitterness of xenophobia and fear into the sweetness of justice and peace.

For in welcoming and embracing those whom we consider the stranger and the least among us, we will be welcoming and embracing You. Amen.
Further Reading


We reflected on the Seven Last Words, knowing that God resurrected Jesus Christ. This faith encourages us in our commitment to advocate for and to protect the human rights of our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters, to bring hope in seemingly hopeless situations, and to work for positive change for those who still suffer.