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Creating a World of Welcome, Dignity, Respect and Belonging for All

BY LILLA ROSS

Each September, the U.S. Catholic Church celebrates migrants with a week-long observance of World Day of Migrants and Refugees, which falls on Sept. 29 this year.

Every day, migrants come to this country to start a new life, either by choice or to flee persecution. They have been coming for centuries.

The Spanish migrants in the 16th century brought the Catholic faith to Florida, and thousands more have helped build the church in Northeast Florida, where Mass is celebrated in nine different languages.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Refugee Resettlement assists more than 600,000 migrants annually, including some of the 120,000 migrants designated as refugees by the United Nations.

Migrants receive refugee status from the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) because

they have been persecuted or fear persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. The process can take years.

The refugee receives a letter permitting them to settle in a particular country. Although the U.S. accepts more than 120,000 refugees, Turkey accepts the most – 3.6 million.

After receiving refugee status, the person has to be vetted by about eight federal agencies. That, too, can take a long time. But once it's done, the person can come to the U.S. and is assigned to a resettlement agency like Catholic Charities.

Between 400 and 500 people will come to Northeast Florida through Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Legal Services, which receives federal funding through the USCCB.

Other Jacksonville agencies – Lutheran Social Services, Church World Services, First90 and Muslim American Social Services – also provide services to refugees and immigrants.

Frances Luna, director of refugee resettlement and immigration for Catholic Charities, is currently resettling refugees from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Luna said the country of origin varies over the years. In the past, the office has assisted refugees from Iraq and Myanmar, formerly known as Burma.

"The Washington office notifies us that we are getting a family of seven, a single person or a couple. They will be arriving at 3 p.m. on Tuesday. We have no input in who we get," Luna said. "The case manager has 90 days to work with them."

The office also helps migrants – people who choose to come to the U.S. Typically, they can apply for a green card, get legal permanent residence and, after five years, become citizens, Luna said.

"We're seeing Ukrainians, who could come in as refugees, but now they go to some place like Mexico before coming here," Luna said. "They want temporary protected status either because they think the war will end soon, and they can go home."

Because Jacksonville is such a diverse community, many refugees and migrants can find support from people from their country who are already established, speak their language and know their culture.

"Recently, we got our first Cambodian, a single woman who might not have had a support group. Fortunately, a sizable Cambodian community in Jacksonville took her to the temple and the Cambodian stores. Luna said she has a job and is attending an English as a Second Language class.

"Some populations need more handholding," Luna said. "They are coming from a refugee camp, where they lived in a tent on 5 lbs. of rice and have never seen electricity or running water. Some are traumatized by war. They need more education about living here."

Case managers work with them, explaining how to flush a toilet, what to put in the refrigerator and not opening the door to strangers. They need instruction on using

the banking system or making doctor's appointments.

They also may need instruction about working – basic things like being on time, what to wear, making eye contact and shaking hands. Until they get a paycheck, they get a couple hundred dollars stipend to buy what they need. Only some people need that much assistance.


Some people, like Ukrainians and Afghans, might settle in quickly with language classes.

"We also get a lot of educated people who might have been a doctor or an engineer in their country, but they have to start over here. They may not speak good English or don't have the licenses they need to practice," Luna said. "We tell them your first job may not be ideal, but it gets you working toward self-sufficiency."

Luna said the office works with several employers who are always looking for workers and are happy to provide work for migrants with work authorization.

Catholic Charities also offers immigration and legalization services, funded by USCCB, for people who want to change their refugee status to legal permanent residents or apply for a work permit, asylum or citizenship.

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[USCCB COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION]**

"All these people are very hard-working and need an extra hand to help them make the best of the traumatic situations," Luna said. "It's our goal to get our clients self-sufficient as quickly as possible." 

The Diocese of St. Augustine is actively trying to dispel the myths Catholics have about the church's position on migration. The most asked question is whether Catholic organizations encourage unlawful migration by serving people who enter the United States without authorization. And are Catholic organizations contributing to the crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border?

To answer these questions and more, visit the USCCB website on migration by visiting <https://www.usccb.org/migrationministries>. The website provides several resources to help Catholics learn more about Catholic social teaching and migration, as well as the Catholic ministries serving migrants in the U.S. It's all about creating a world where immigrants, refugees, migrants and people on the move are treated with dignity, respect, welcome and belonging.



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