PRAYER SERVICE

The Mediterranean Sea: A Growing Graveyard for Migrants

CALL TO PRAYER: (Open with a short period of silence.)

Leader:
We praise You, God of Migrants,
Who hears the cries of the poor,
Who lifts up the weak and gives them strength.

We praise You, Bread of Life,
Who feeds the hungry
And satisfies the longing of those in need.

We praise You, God of Gentleness,
Who holds with tenderness the orphan and widow
And gives the stranger a land and a home.

We praise You, God of Deliverance,
Who brings an end to oppression and suffering,
And delivers those imprisoned with freedom and hope.
Amen.

Reader 1: The Mediterranean Sea is a growing graveyard for migrants in search of a better life in Europe. Thousands have died in recent years while fleeing poverty, violence, and war in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, fatal accidents are on the rise.

The journey made by migrants crossing from the northern coast of Libya to southern Italy is treacherous. It is made even worse by lack of proper search and rescue operations in the area. The rationale for lack of effort is the belief that more people will attempt the dangerous crossing if they think there is a good chance of being rescued. The vast majority of rescue operations and placement of these migrants have been conducted by the Italian government whose pleas for help to the other members of the European Union have fallen on deaf ears.

“There needs to be a united response to the question of migration. We cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a vast cemetery. The boats landing daily on the shores of Europe are filled with men and women who need acceptance and assistance.”
- Pope Francis

Materials needed:
- Small table to place candles that will be lit during the service
- Matches
- 14 candles of various sizes and colors
- 1 person to light the candles
- Leader will need to recruit 10 readers
Reader 2: Some have even called this tragedy a “new slave trade” facilitated by a growing number of human traffickers. The Prime Minister of the tiny island nation of Malta stated, “A tragedy is unfolding in the Mediterranean and, if the EU and the world continue to close their eyes, it will be judged in the harshest terms as it was judged in the past when it closed its eyes to genocides.” Last year, more than 100,000 migrants were rescued at sea, and with the continued frequency of these perilous journeys, this number will surely rise in 2015.

Reader 1: Pope Francis has called on European leaders to do more to help thousands of migrants risking their lives: “There needs to be a united response to the question of migration. We cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a vast cemetery. The boats landing daily on the shores of Europe are filled with men and women who need acceptance and assistance.”

SCRIPTURE AND OTHER REFLECTIONS

Reader 3: Psalm 69:1-4,19, 20, 29, 32-33

O God, save me,
For the waters are up to my neck!
I’m sinking into a deep swamp and can’t find a foothold!
I’m in deep, very deep water,
And its torrents are overwhelming me.

I’m exhausted from crying,
My throat is raw;
And my sight is blurring from looking for my God.

Those who hate me for no reason outnumber the hairs on my head.
So many would destroy me;
So many accuse me without cause,
And force me to restore what I didn’t steal!

You know my torment, my shame, and my dishonor;
You see how my enemies treat me.

My heart aches from their insults and I am helpless;
I look for sympathy, but to no avail; for comforters, but find none.
I am suffering and in pain—let your saving help protect me, God!

See and be glad, you who have nothing!
You who seek God, take heart!
For YHWH hears the poor;
God has not neglected those who are captives.

(Source: The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation, 2007)

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Leader: We pause now to listen to the words of a 16-year-old Somali boy who survived the April 19th migrant boat disaster that killed more than 800 people.
Reader 4: “My parents wanted me to get to Norway, where we have relatives. They put me in the care of Sudanese human traffickers in summer last year. After crossing the desert through Sudan, I was kidnapped by armed smugglers near the Libyan border and held prisoner for nine months until my parents paid the money the captors demanded. There were many other children on the journey who were badly treated. Many died in front of me because they didn’t have enough to eat and they became sick. We reached Tripoli and at 11 pm on Saturday [April 18, 2015], I was put in a rubber dinghy that took me and other migrants to the ill-fated fishing boat, anchored out at sea.

While getting onto the boat I heard the smugglers say that they were going to try to get 1,200 people onto the boat. They beat us to get us onto the boat. But they stopped at 800 because it was full. We couldn’t even move. There was no food or water. The people that were put below were locked underneath. Around 10 pm on Sunday (April 19, 2015), the smugglers put out a distress call and, as a rescue ship approached, everyone rushed to that side of the boat and it capsized. I am one of the few survivors fished out of the water. I’m still recovering from the ordeal but hope to reach Norway eventually, without resorting to illegal traffickers.”

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 5: Now, let us listen to the words of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, on Lampedusa and the “globalization of indifference.”

“The globalization of indifference makes us all ‘unnamed,’ leaders without names and without faces. ‘[Cain], where are you? Where is your brother?’ These are the two questions that God puts at the beginning of the story of humanity, and that He also addresses to the men and women of our time, even to us.

But I want to set before us a third question: Who among us has wept for these things, and things like this? Who has wept for the deaths of these brothers and sisters? Who has wept for the people who were on the boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who wanted something to support their families? We are a society that has forgotten the experience of weeping, of suffering with: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!

In the Gospel we have heard the cry, the plea, the great lament: ‘Rachel weeping for her children . . . because they are no more.’ Herod sowed death in order to defend his own well-being, his own soap bubble. And this continues to repeat itself. Let us ask the Lord to wipe out [whatever attitude] of Herod remains in our hearts; let us ask the Lord for the grace to weep over our indifference, to weep over the cruelty in the world, in ourselves, and even in those who anonymously make socio-economic decisions that open the way to tragedies like this. Who has wept? Who in today’s world has wept?”

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Leader: The recent tragedy of April 19, 2015 is being called the worst maritime loss of life since World War II is not an isolated incident. There have been countless Mediterranean migrant disasters that have resulted in the loss of many lives. Let us open our hearts to these short readings. After each, we will pause for a moment of silence. A candle will be lit in memory of those whose lives were claimed by the sea.
Reader 6: On April 19, 2015, a fishing vessel packed with African migrants left the coast of Libya with an estimated 950 people aboard who were trying to escape war and poverty in their home countries. The overloaded vessel overturned when passengers on board the vessel rushed to one side of the ship when a rescue boat was sighted. According to passengers, there were an estimated 300 people locked in the cargo hold of the vessel. Only twenty-eight people were rescued from the capsized vessel. Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat described the tragedy as “nothing less than genocide.”

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 7: On April 15, 2015, Christian survivors from a boat of African migrants arriving in Palermo, Sicily, described to Italian authorities that Muslim passengers threw twelve migrants overboard to their deaths when fighting broke out on board.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 8: On February 8 and 9, 2015, an estimated twenty-nine died at sea and 300 people were reported missing after four boats become waterlogged in the frigid sea after leaving Libya.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 9: On September 10, 2014, an estimated 500 Syrians, Sudanese, Palestinians, and Egyptians were feared drowned after their boat was rammed by another boat of human traffickers off Malta. Survivors described this tragedy as “mass murder.”

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 10: On February 6, 2014, fifteen migrants from sub-Saharan Africa died while swimming from the Moroccan coast as they tried to reach the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Rubber bullets were fired at them.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 6: On January 20, 2014, twelve people, including nine children, drowned when their boat overturned near the Greek island of Farmakonis.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 7: On October 3, 2013, 366 people, mostly Eritreans and Somalis, died at sea as their boat sank off Lampedusa, Italy. 155 managed to survive the shipwreck.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 8: On August 10, 2013, six migrants drowned, and ninety-four were rescued some fifty feet off a crowded swimming beach in Catania.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 9: On December 2012, twenty-one people perished, and six are listed as missing after their boat sunk off the Greek island of Lesbos.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 6: On May 6, 2011, a boat carrying more than 600 migrants shipwrecked off the Libyan coast. Hundreds remain missing.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 7: On May 12, 2008, fifty migrants died off the coast of Sicily, including forty-seven who died on the boat after suffering from weather related exposure.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 8: On October 20, 2003, seventy bodies were found in the waters off Sicily.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

Reader 9: On Christmas day, December 25, 1996, an estimated 300 drowned in the waters between Malta and Sicily.

(Pause for a moment of silence.)

(Leader invite participants to take a few minutes to meditate on the reflection questions. Group sharing will then follow.)

REFLECTION AND GROUP SHARING

- You have heard of one tragedy after another. What are your thoughts? How are we called to protect the life and dignity of migrants around the world?

- What structures of injustice exist that contribute to the dangerous journeys made by migrants? What responsibilities do receiving countries have to migrants who seek a better life within their borders?

- Pope Francis shares his belief that the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep, making us a global community that has “forgotten the experience of weeping, of suffering with others?” Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Have you lost your ability to weep for the suffering of our world?

- What is Pope Francis calling on you to do?

“[M]igrants, many of whom are refugees, are desperate for a better future. We need to strengthen search and rescue operations, and stop the criminals who exploit the most vulnerable people. We need to address the roots of the problem.”

- UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon
“Come to me, all you who labor and carry heavy burdens, and I will let you rest. Take my yoke upon your shoulders and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart. Here you will find rest for your souls.”
- Matthew 11:28-30

CLOSING PRAYER:

Leader: Jesus, Traveler and Migrant,
We feel the pain suffered by our sisters and brothers
Who stagger under the weight of the cross of injustice.

We feel the anguish of those forced to abandon their families and homes,
Their cultures, and their countries of origin.

We feel the desperation of those who want a way out of their desolation,
And who seek a better future for their children and for themselves.

We feel the fear of those who have no other option
Than to place their trust in smugglers to transport them to safe destinations.

Jesus, Traveler and Migrant,
Our hearts are filled with the longing to comfort
Those whose lives have been uprooted by famine, violence, and war.

Turn our hearts to them in prayer and acts of compassion and justice.

Sorrow overwhelms us as we remember
Those who daily join the growing graveyard in the Mediterranean Sea.

As we follow you down the road to Calvary,
Guide us to become active participants in justice, not curious bystanders.

As we stand with the mourners at the cross,
Give us the love that can forgive those who inflict harm
On the most vulnerable of our world.

As we witness the new life given to us through your resurrection,
Empower us to unfasten our shackles of indifference,
And renew our baptismal call to welcome and protect migrants,
Those who knock on our doors seeking respite, food and shelter, acceptance, and assistance.

Inspire us with a genuine faith to act,
To promote what Pope Francis calls “a united response to the question of migration,”
And to make obsolete this “new slave trade”
Which is being facilitated by growing numbers of human traffickers. Amen.