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## Pope issues call to Europe's Catholics to take in refugees

by [Anthony Faiola](#) and [Michael Birnbaum](#)

MUNICH — Issuing a broad appeal to Europe's Catholics, Pope Francis on Sunday called on “every” parish, religious community, monastery and sanctuary to take in one refugee family — an appeal that, if honored, would offer shelter to tens of thousands.

Francis delivered his call as thousands of asylum-seekers detained for days in Hungary streamed into Germany and Austria, and as a small but rising number of volunteers were offering to take some in. But although the pope's appeal was greeted with applause in St. Peter's Square in Vatican City, some Germans were asking how far their country could go in receiving more refugees.

The pope, who has thrust himself into polarizing debates over climate change and free-market economics, has again entered the fray, this time over how Europe should handle its largest wave of refugees since the Balkan wars of the 1990s. The majority of those coming are Muslims from Syria, Iraq and other nations, and Francis weighed in as anti-migrant politicians, including senior European leaders, were wielding religion as a weapon.

Viktor Orban, the prime minister of Hungary, where Roman Catholicism is the largest religion, last week proclaimed that what he called Europe's Christian identity is under threat because “those arriving have been raised in another religion, and represent a radically different culture.”

Slovakia has declared that it will grant asylum only to Christians. “We don't have any mosques in Slovakia, so how can Muslims be integrated if they are not going to like it here?” Ivan Netik, a spokesman for Slovakia's interior ministry, told the BBC last month.

Francis, a leader already known for mending the sometimes wobbly bridges between Catholicism and other faiths, delivered a direct challenge to such thinking.

“Facing the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees — fleeing death by war and famine, and journeying towards the hope of life — the Gospel calls, asking of us to be close to the smallest and forsaken. To give them a concrete hope,” he said. “And not just to tell them: ‘Have courage, be patient!’ ”

At Munich's sprawling train station on Sunday, German officials and well-wishers greeted arriving refugees as they disembarked from westbound trains looking haggard and clutching their meager belongings. One disabled boy without a wheelchair was carried through the station by a volunteer and taken to an emergency first aid station for treatment. Those arriving — most of

them Syrian asylum-seekers, but also some from Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere — were bused to processing centers for hot meals and temporary shelter.

Mohamed Hussein, a 21-year-old philosophy student from Aleppo who looked exhausted, approached the first aid station with a group of his friends. “We were arrested in Hungary and held for three days,” he said. “We were mistreated. We were hurt.”

But, he said, “I’m here now, and that is the past. I can’t think about yesterday, because it hurts. I want to think about tomorrow, and the day after.”

Despite Germany’s generosity, there were warning signs of the mounting pressures. Cracks opened in Chancellor Angela Merkel’s ruling coalition as allies questioned her decision to make Germany the most accepting country in Europe. Berlin expects 800,000 asylum-seekers this year, about 1 percent of the country’s population.

Leaders must stop the “mass influx of refugees coming only to Germany,” said Andreas Scheuer, the general secretary of Merkel’s southern German sister party, the center-right Christian Social Union, in an interview in the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper.

And in Austria, authorities said they planned to halt this weekend’s efforts to welcome refugees with special trains and speedy processing, a sign of the competing pulls in a nation that has been ambivalent about the refugee burden.

The inability of Europe’s leaders to forge a unified response has in some ways encouraged the flow of refugees and deepened the crisis. Thousands who have fled their homes have seen Germany becoming more generous as their routes to reach the country become more limited, especially since Hungary, which has become a main transit route, has begun sealing its borders.

From almost the beginning of his papacy, Francis has focused on the plight of refugees. His first trip after ascending to office was to the Italian island of Lampedusa, a major entry point for migrants crossing the Mediterranean. There he denounced a culture of “indifference” and called for a “reawakening of conscience.” Francis is credited with inspiring Italian authorities to launch a temporary but highly effective humanitarian operation to rescue migrants at sea.

On Sunday, the pope said refugee families would be offered shelter in the two parishes within the jurisdiction of Vatican City. The extent to which the pope’s call will provoke a response was unclear, but some heeded a message that seemed to echo the Bible verse “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Gudrun Lux, a Twitter user from Munich, where thousands of refugees are arriving on trains, tweeted: “The Pope is asking all parts of the #Church to take in refugees. My question to my parish . . . How shall we do it? What can I do?”

In Hungary, Orban on Sunday awarded the nation’s highest honor to a Roman Catholic bishop, Lajos Papai, an apparent coincidence that was a measure of the church’s deep influence there.

In their bid to build new lives in Europe, many asylum-seekers have turned to desperate means. The worst recent tragedy came late last month, when 71 migrants are believed to have suffocated in the back of a packed truck that was found on an Austrian roadside. Five suspected smugglers have been detained in connection with the deaths. Austrian authorities have since discovered hundreds of other migrants trying to enter under similarly dangerous conditions.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker is expected to propose plans Wednesday to resettle up to 160,000 refugees across Europe. That is four times the number projected in a proposal that was turned down earlier this year. Senior E.U. officials are scheduled on Sept. 14 to discuss plans for addressing the crisis, but they have been bitterly divided about quotas.

With Europe failing to come up with a single political plan to handle the influx, a growing number of individuals have been trying to fill the gap, an effort that is likely to be spurred by the pope's appeal. On Sunday morning, a caravan of 150 Austrian drivers set off for the border with Hungary to ferry arriving asylum-seekers to Vienna. The head of the Scottish government said she would take a refugee into her home.

But those measures were unlikely to address the full demand. The U.N. refugee agency has said that Europe needs to create as many as 200,000 spots for asylum-seekers.

Hungarian authorities relented Saturday after days of attempts to keep asylum-seekers from going farther into Europe, unleashing a torrent of people into neighboring Austria. About 17,000 were expected to enter Germany over the weekend.

On Europe's edges, the challenges continued Sunday. On the Greek island of Lesbos, where thousands of people have been arriving each day on makeshift boats from Turkey, scuffles broke out between authorities and asylum-seekers looking for passage to the mainland. Near Cyprus, the coast guard rescued 114 Syrians from a fishing boat, according to local media reports.

And on the Hungarian border with Serbia, a key transit point where authorities have constructed a long razor-wire fence, a new migrant registration camp opened, sparking fears about what it might mean for those trying to pass through. At one border crossing, volunteers offered refreshments, while border guards asked migrants to enter the fenced camp.

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