

# Integration Centre for Working Migrants - Ecumenical Refugee Program (KSPM- ERP) of the Church of Greece

Athens, 7 December 2012

## *Fundamental Principles, Positions and Concerns of the Church of Greece on the “stranger” and the field work for the Protection of Refugees*

The Orthodox Christian Church is particularly sensitive to the *stranger*. For the purposes of our debate, the refugee, the internally displaced person and the stateless is perceived as a stranger. Besides, its Founder, too, our Lord Jesus Christ, began His life on earth as refugee, when the Holy Family resorted to Egypt to save itself from the threat of Herod (Matthew 2:13-15) and continued His earthly action as foreigner, having “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). According to our Orthodox Theology, respect for the human person, recognition of Christ himself in the person of every stranger and, consequently, rejection of every form of behavior which offends, debases, does no justice to or threatens the stranger, who is an image of God, are tantamount to the genuineness of our faith and to the assurance of the correctness of our course on the footprints of Christ, of the Disciples and of the Fathers and Saints of the Church.

The Lord taught us that the sole criterion for any faithful to be near Him, within His Church, inside that space of eternal and perennial exultation, is Love. More specifically, our Saviour taught us that we as Christians should feel the need to be sources of boundless love of our neighbor, of the person in distress, in particular, and most particularly of the stranger, whom we are called upon to “take in” and take care of (Matthew 25:35ff.). The Christian is not content with a merely passive toleration of the diversity of the stranger but goes beyond that to a dynamic assertion of his or her person, manifested in a communion of love. It is God’s commandment to treat the foreigner (the *proselytos*) coming to our land “as one born among us” and to love him or her as our very selves (*Leviticus* 19:33-34). In the Books of both the Old and the New Testament the teaching on the succour for the stranger and on the love of his or her person is omnipresent and dynamic. The

Gospels, the Epistles of John the Evangelist, of Apostle Paul, the teachings of the Fathers but also the acts of Saints instruct us all on the necessity of love of the “stranger”.

Wars, authoritarian regimes, civil conflicts, extreme forms of poverty and climate changes have increased mixed migration and in the decades to come the latter will increase even further. The Greek-Turkish border is one of the main points of mixed migration flows crossing into Europe. Amongst those irregular migrants, there is a significant number of persons in need of international protection.

The Orthodox Church of Greece proclaims its solidarity with all those who, because of unbearable political, religious, racial, ethnic or social circumstances, are forced to flee their countries, to abandon their families, their friends and acquaintances, their fortune and work, to seek the possibility of a new life in our country. We never forget that, behind the statistics and the numbers lie personal and family stories of fear, of pain, of dismembered families, of despair and suffering. No one leaves behind the native land and his beloved persons, to emigrate in peril of his or her life and in utter uncertainty about the future. We do not forget the conditions under which refugees take the road to their freedom, a road often leading them to lose their lives in dangerous routes, snowy mountains, and minefields or to get drowned in some rotten ship, victims of unscrupulous slave traders. Besides, when they arrive in the country of reception, they must overcome the innumerable obstacles to their registration as asylum seekers and to their granting of international protection status in conditions of deprivation and debasement, to end up eventually in detention centres or in refugee camps, which in most countries, if they have been set up at all, are not known for their comforts.

In the context of its commitment and approach to receiving and assisting '*strangers*', in particular refugees, in a community of love, respect and protection, the Church of Greece has been running since 1994 a special service for refugees, the Ecumenical Refugee Program (ERP). The ERP primarily provides social support as well as legal assistance and representation to asylum seekers and refugees **and is one of the main Organizations in this field in Athens**, namely the area that receives the largest numbers of aliens in need of International Protection in Greece. ERP addresses the situation on the ground and pays particular attention to the most vulnerable categories, such as unaccompanied children,

monoparental families, victims of torture, the elderly, persons with disabilities and detainees. ERP was present in the Mytilene detention centre "*Pagani*" for almost two years from 2008 to November 2009, in order to provide counselling, social support and legal assistance to detainees, new comers to the island and address the special needs for their protection.

Between 2001 and 2002 ERP was an implementing partner of UNHCR in administering, organizing and presenting training activities on refugee protection issues for the Greek police, coast guards and other legal networks. Since March 2011 has resumed its role as a UNHCR implementing partner in providing legal assistance and representation to asylum seekers and refugees in Greece as well as social and legal assistance to unaccompanied minors.

One of the main activities of ERP has been advocacy for the promotion and protection of the legal rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Greece, with special focus on promoting respect for the national and international legal norms which guarantee a fair asylum procedure, safeguards against the removal of persons in need of international protection and arbitrary detention. This includes the right to seek and apply for asylum, to receive minimum reception conditions, to abolish detention for asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors, to combat racism and xenophobia etc.

ERP is working very closely with other Greek, European and international, entities, bodies and NGOs which defend human rights, in particular of migrants and refugees and has participated in a significant number of international and Greek campaigns to this purpose. Some of these campaigns are the 2012 Greek campaign for access to the asylum, the European campaign on minimum detention safeguards and the international campaign to stop the detention of children. On the other hand, the Church of Greece and ERP have maintained a constructive dialogue with the national authorities and support official policies which aim to establish a new asylum policy and improve the reception conditions.

In this era of uncertainty, economic and social crisis, that has had a particular detrimental impact on Greece, and within a rapidly deteriorating external environment which affects negatively the whole population of the country new challenges arise, such as the need to combat discrimination against refugees and migrants, to

stop widespread xenophobic violence and racist attacks against migrants and refugees and promote mutual understanding between Greek citizens and aliens (refugees, irregular and legal migrants, stateless persons, new comers in need of international protection).

The Church of Greece does not forget the 'stranger' among us; it keeps alive the issue of migration and asylum protection and strives to secure its inclusion, together with other State policies, as a core concern of social policy (welfare) and in accordance with international standards; it renews its commitment of human rights principles; contributes to the improvement of comprehensive protection policies for refugees and migrants who are stuck in Greece with little possibility of being returned home; and continues to provide community services to migrants and refugees both through its parishes (food distribution, medical assistance, social services) and the ongoing provision of its specialized services (ERP) which monitor the asylum situation on the field.

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Text written under the care of Reverend Timotheos Anthis, Director of the Integration Centre for Working Migrants - Ecumenical Refugee Program (*KSPM- ERP*) of the Church of Greece and Ms Efthalia Pappa, Project Director of the ERP.