

# The pope, the Good Samaritan and the refugees

Pope Francis has rescued 12 refugees from the Greek island of Lesbos, offering them a home at the Vatican. He has been called a 'saviour' and a 'Good Samaritan' -- but is it an empty gesture?



**The blessed few:** The Vatican said the three refugee families had been 'randomly selected'. © PA

The head of the Catholic Church, one of the most influential men alive, was holding up a child's drawing. It showed a blue sea, a sinking boat, and five children drowning in the water, shouting for help. Watching over it all was a crying sun, its tears rolling down to the hills below. 'It will take time before these [children's] memories go away,' Pope Francis said. 'If the sun is able to cry, so can we. A tear will do us good.'

He was speaking to journalists on a plane, returning to Rome after a short visit to **Lesbos**. The Greek island lies at the heart of Europe's refugee crisis; it is currently home to around 4,000 migrants, and **850,000** passed through in 2015. But after the EU began returning migrants to **Turkey** in March, its Moria registration camp has become like a 'prison', said one of its residents.

In his speech on Saturday, the pope told the people not to lose hope. He laid a wreath in the ocean to commemorate those who had died crossing the Aegean Sea. But the most

important moment was saved until last: when he boarded his return flight, he was joined by a dozen extra passengers. The **Vatican** had offered refuge to three Muslim families.

'Francis gave us a new life,' said Wafa, one of the families' mothers. She explained how they had fled their home in Syria's capital, **Damascus**. Her son, six-year-old Omar, has 'barely spoken' since.

The pope described his act as a 'gesture of welcome', and its symbolism was felt around the world. Many compared it to Jesus's **parable** of the Good Samaritan, the story of a man who saves a wounded stranger when others passed by. Yesterday *The Times* observed that the pope had evoked the story to 'make clear' that the EU should 'not shun' refugees.

Pope Francis said that his decision was not political, but his words were still powerful. 'All refugees are children of God', he said on the flight home. His act was a 'drop in the ocean' – but he hoped that 'the ocean will never be the same again'.

## Empty gesture?

'Does it really mean anything?' ask the more cynical observers. Grand gestures make good headlines, but meanwhile there are still thousands of refugees in desperate need of help. Dealing with this crisis has proved to be very complex, and the EU's policy will not change because of this one act. It is **gesture politics** and no more.

Don't ignore the power of symbolism, say others. Pope Francis has been changing people's minds about the Church since day one: from washing prisoners' feet to living away from the grand papal palace, he insists on the core Christian messages of love and humility. Remember, when the Good Samaritan story was first told, it was only a gesture – but it has endured for 2,000 years.



## Q: Will the EU change its mind?

A: It's unlikely – the pope has been advocating fair treatment for migrants and refugees ever since he first got the job in 2013. Since the deal with Turkey began on March 20th, the

number of migrants crossing to Lesbos by boat has fallen sharply. However, the number of migrants taking the longer, more dangerous journey from Africa to Italy rose by around 173% earlier in April.

## Q: Then what was the point?

A: Even if he isn't able to change the EU's

policy, the pope is trying to change the way the world thinks about refugees. He is making the point that they are not just a problem to be solved, but human beings with their own stories, dreams and emotions – and they should be treated with as much dignity as anyone else, regardless of their faith or nationality.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Will the pope's symbolic gesture change people's minds about refugees?
2. Can someone be a Good Samaritan all the time?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you have been made pope for the day. The whole world is watching and listening. Write down five things you would do with your new-found influence.
2. Rewrite the parable of the Good Samaritan, set in the modern day.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

*'No-one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well.'*  
*Margaret Thatcher*

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## WORD WATCH

**Lesbos** – Although the island is just a few miles from the coast of Turkey, it belongs to Greece. This has made it one of the most popular routes to the EU, after which many travelled on to other countries and claimed asylum elsewhere.

**850,000** – According to the UNHCR. In total, 1.1m refugees arrived that year. Thousands more have arrived in 2016.

**Turkey** – The EU made a deal with Turkey that it would send back migrants whose asylum application had failed, in return for an equal number of Syrian refugees who had not made the illegal crossing to Europe.

**Vatican** – A city-state within Rome. It is the Catholic Church HQ and is home to just 450 people.

**Damascus** – One of the oldest cities in the world, Damascus has been at the heart of Syria's civil war since it began in 2011. It has

been heavily bombed, and remains a war zone.

**Parable** – A short story which is used to tell a moral message. Jesus told dozens of parables throughout the Bible, but the Good Samaritan is probably the most famous.

**Gesture politics** – A symbolic act which is designed to catch the public's attention but has no real effect.

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