

Day of intercession in memory of those who have died at the borders of the EU

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Information, Intercessions and Ideas

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To remember those who died at the border, their relatives and supporters inaugurated this small fountain in the village of Provatonas in the Evros region, Greece, in August 2011.

Foreword

In July 2009 the Conference of European Churches declared in Lyon: “As churches in Europe we commit ourselves to commemorate those who have died on their journey to find a dignified life in Europe through an annual day of prayer.” Around 20 June 2013, World Refugee Day, churches and human rights groups in different European countries will point to the lethal consequences of sealing off the external borders of the EU. Such sealing off takes place through technically sophisticated systems of border protection, through the extension of border protection measures to neighbouring and transit states of the EU, and through readmission agreements with neighbouring and transit states, even when they violate human rights. Churches and human rights groups in the United States of America, at whose border with Mexico countless migrants meet their deaths, are also taking part. Thus the general assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) agreed in July 2010 to join this initiative of the European churches.

Churches will remember in prayer the nameless dead who frequently disappear without trace in the sea or in the desert. Their lament, which went unheard by human beings, will be brought before God. What takes place at the borders - far from public scrutiny and control - will be brought to public awareness. Background reports will provide information about the situation of human rights at the borders. Politicians will be reminded of their responsibility finally to take effective measures to protect human beings and human rights.

The synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) in November 2010 called for the protection of human rights at the external borders to be further improved.

This means working towards, in particular:

- “the creation of mandatory guidelines for the operations of FRONTEX (the EU external borders agency),
- the identification of refugees and their access to international protection being part of the training of border officials,
- civil society organizations becoming more effectively consulted and involved in the development and implementation of training measures,
- the setting up of an independent monitoring system to monitor FRONTEX activities, in order to provide regular reports for the EU institutions about compliance with European and international law, particularly with fundamental and human rights.”

In the most fundamentally Christian way, we will remember in acts of worship those who have died fleeing across the Mediterranean.

As a date we suggest each year a Sunday around 20 June, World Refugee Day (in 2012: Sunday 24 June). There are also other regular opportunities: during the intercultural week in Germany, which includes Refugee Day in on 27 September; on the International Human Rights Day, 10 December; during Lent; or in November, when many churches hold peace weeks, and the church year offers a particular occasion to remember those who have died.

The fence of an informal cemetery at the Greek-Turkish border. An unknown number of nameless victims who died in the river Evros which marks the border are buried here.



A summary for newsletters or for church notices

Together with Christians in other European countries, in our intercessions on a Sunday around 20 June 2013 we remember in particular migrants and refugees who have died on their way to seek a life of human dignity in Europe. We deplore the lethal consequences of sealing off the external borders of the European Union. This is taking place through increasingly sophisticated technical systems of border protection, through the transfer of border protection measures to neighbouring and transit states of the EU in Africa and Eastern Europe, and through readmission agreements with neighbouring and transit states even when human rights are violated in these states. There are no exact figures of the number of people who have died en route to Europe. After examining media reports the human rights organization “Fortress Europe” came to the conclusion that in the period from 1988 to 26 October 2012, at least 18.567 people died at the borders of Europe. 13.733 persons died in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Sea in their attempt to reach Europe. In the year 2011 alone, 2.352 people lost their lives at European borders. The actual number of victims is much higher than this, since many deaths go unrecorded.

Ideas for worship

Read news and reports, and in between sing or speak words of the Psalms.

Silently remember the dead.

In some services we have put photographs of the trauma of boat people on a long black cloth, and each of us has had an opportunity to light a candle and to place it on the cloth while saying words of intercession.

Or small candles could be lit, and placed in a water bowl (font ...) while keeping silence or praying.

We have used Taizé liturgies and chants, to give form to our silent horror.

People have written intercessions and stuck them to a type of wailing wall.

Some people have put dinghies in their churchyards

Some have floated candles on water (rivers ...)

Some have organized processions of mourning.

Giving form to shame, naming fear and awakening consciences can be tasks in themselves.

At the start of the service

Respond to this call!

Let us in caring for our own future

and the future of our countries

not forget those who are fleeing,

on their way to us, on the way to Europe.

Let us, in the face of the huge changes in the Arab countries,

find a new policy that takes human rights seriously

and does not do deals with dictatorships for our own economic interests

nor raise up fences and security measures.

Let us remember those

who have perished while fleeing,

and those who die from despair in our own countries because of the cold and the indifference of others.

There will be a future in Europe only when we learn to share with each other,
with the stranger among us.

This is the promise of the Old and the New Testaments.

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

Let us prepare acts of worship, pray and light candles for the victims

who are among us and for the many who have no name.

Let us not forget those who have died as victims of our border security systems,

victims of our prosperity and egoism.

Let us remember together,

that we too have been refugees since time immemorial,

that in many of our countries, our own fate as migrants and refugees

has not been forgotten.

And let us measure the depths of our Christian faith

by how we remember, commemorate and take action.

This is not an action or a campaign.

This is a moment to pause and reflect.

Herein lies the power.

This is an act of worship,

a place where we struggle to hear the Word.

If we take this seriously,

Our words will have the power to heal.

Suggestion for a prayer of intercession for those who have died at the borders of the European Union

Lord,
we bring to you the weeping and wailing of the mothers of this world,
waiting for their children who have disappeared in the sea,
in the desert, in uncertainty:

Refugees,
men, women and children,
from the war zones of this world,
who are fleeing hunger and poverty,
in the hope of a better, more secure life.

We bring to you our lament for those who have died
stranded at our borders,
those who have died fleeing
through deserts, mountains and seas.
We call upon you and we join in the cry of those who
have died seeking justice and a better world.

Lord, we bring to you our shame
for turning away and remaining silent.
We have enough to eat in Europe - and do not see
that we also create the causes of hunger.
We are insatiable - and do not see that this is the cause of many wars.
We are silent, where we need to take action.

Lord, we bring before you political leaders,
who are not making decisions about mere numbers,
but about the fate of many individual human beings.
Sharpen their awareness of how things are interrelated.
Keep their consciences alert.
Let them develop rules that are guided by humanity and vision.

Lord, give us the strength to bear witness
to the suffering of your children on the run,
on their way to us,
at our borders,
in refugee camps and among us,
in detention, waiting to be deported,
in fear of the dangers that lie ahead,
in mourning for those who have died.
Help us, Lord.

A further suggestion for intercessions

Lord,
you were once a refugee
as the small child from the manger
fleeing to Egypt.

We pray for all those
who are fleeing persecution,
adversity and hopelessness.

Lord,
you led your people through the desert
for forty years.
We pray for all those
who have been abandoned to the desert
who disappear
in the no man's land between the borders.

Lord,
you called our fathers and mothers
to seek a new beginning
in a new, promised land.
We pray for all those
who have the courage
to seek a new beginning in a new land
where they hope to make their future.

Lord,
you rule over the raging of the sea;
you still the waves
when they rise up.
We pray for all those
drifting helplessly on the seas
and drowning in the waves.

Lord,
You divided the sea
to let your people pass through
and made the waters as solid as a wall.
We pray for all those
for whom the sea is a wall
because we do not let them pass through.

Lord,
You have enjoined us to see refugees
As our neighbours.
We pray for us all.
That we might take responsibility for them.

From: Church Office of the EKD, Kein Raum in der Herberge Europa? Zur Menschenrechtslage an den Außengrenzen der Europäischen Union, Materialheft für einen Gottesdienst zum Tag der Menschenrechte am 10. Dezember 2010, Hannover 2010 [No room at the European inn? The human rights situation at the external borders of the European Union. Materials for services to mark Human Rights Day on 10 December 2010, Hanover, 2010]

The only indication that this is a cemetery is the sign riddled with bullets that states: "Cemetery of illegal immigrants."



Suggestion for a prayer of intercession for those who assist

Lord, there is a terrible injustice that is happening and help is far away.
We who are helping often feel helpless and do not know how to deal with what we encounter day after day.

Some of us have grown up in protected environments. Never have we felt so close to misery and suffering and we are afraid.

No concept, no solution,
no political proposals in our country, in Europe.
Nothing that could be there and convince us that the suffering will have an end. A huge void, given that so many have died.
Shame and fine homilies.
No end to the lack of imagination.
We burn out at work and are afraid.
Many look away, do not allow themselves to be touched by what's happening.
There's almost nothing in the media - and what there is stokes only new fears.
Help us to remain open, to allow ourselves to be touched, and to remain steadfast.
Because we are witnesses to what is happening.
We are witnesses to the injustice experienced by the people who tell us their stories.
Lord, support us and help us
to maintain our stance in our society.
Help us to provide support and sanctuary to people who are fleeing.
Help us and them to live with their stories and to remain near to them.
Lord, be near to us.

Instead of a sermon: a meditation on a Psalm (Ps. 69)

Congregation: Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.

We remember today the people who have had to leave their homelands because they can no longer lead a decent life there. Many of them hoped to find refuge and a new home in Europe. They made use of everything they had and risked their health and their lives. Too many have died. This tragedy and this scandal have many aspects. There are the stories of the victims and their families. It is not just a question of a few individuals, however, but of unimaginably huge numbers of people. Their deaths were not inevitable, but in many cases were the result of deliberate action or the failure to render assistance. And finally, it's about what these deaths mean to us, and how we avoid becoming mere spectators.

Congregation: I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.

More than 18,500 people have died at the borders of Europe since 1993. Their deaths have been documented in press reports, and in reports from governmental and non-government agencies. What is not known is the number of deaths that have not been recorded or counted, the number of people who have disappeared without their names being known. They all sought a life in security and dignity, a life without fear and hunger. The doors of Europe remain closed to them forever.

Congregation: I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.

Most of the victims drowned in the sea or in the rivers that mark the borders. Others suffocated in containers, died of thirst in the deserts, were shredded to pieces by the mines on the border between Greece and Turkey, froze to death in the mountains, died in the undercarriages of planes, trains or trucks, or were shot by border guards. In the first half of 2011 more than 2,000 people died attempting to reach Europe from Libya and Tunisia.

Congregation: My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.

In August 2009, a boat that had lost power with 82 men, women and children aboard was drifting on the seas between the African coast and Sicily. Those on board came from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Nigeria. For 23 days, the refugees could only watch as ships passed by. Not one of them stopped. Not one of them offered help. No one informed rescue workers. One after another, the people on board died of thirst and starvation. Some threw themselves into the water. When finally a ship came to rescue them, 77 had died. Only five survived the tragedy.

Congregation: But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love, answer me, with your faithful help.

Let us listen to the voice of a grandfather from Eritrea, who lost his 22-year-old granddaughter in the tragedy: *The meaning of human existence ends where Europe's external borders and the closed-door policies of the European Union begin. The death of our children is an execution caused by Europe's closed-door policies. My granddaughter died a very painful death, although she could have been saved. Just 22 years old, her life was taken away from her. It is not only the horrific death of my granddaughter that moves and hurts*

me. I grieve for every single victim who has suffered such a painful death. Every morning, noon and evening I remember the victims and bid them farewell. And still I dream that the young people will return home one day. For our family, it means we cling on to hope. That's what hurts the most. These tragedies have to do with the fear and uncertainty of many Europeans about those who look different.

Congregation: Rescue me from sinking in the mire.

The grandfather continues: How can it be that for 23 days our children could be seen from several ships and still not be saved? This is just callous. I don't think many people in Europe these days possess civic courage, honour or morality. But when I think of the fishing and marine personnel who sailed past the people who were screaming for help and yet did nothing, because they feared for their own livelihoods, I have absolutely no sympathy ... This new dimension of indifference towards people is more dangerous than hate. If you hate someone, then at least you recognize they exist, that they are a thorn in your side. If you are completely indifferent to someone, then you don't even recognize they exist. This is dangerous, and indeed for all the continents of the world.

Congregation: Let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.

The grandfather from Eritrea offers us some advice: Therefore, we need to be clear, we who believe in human rights and humanity - whether we are Africans, Americans, Asians, Australians or Europeans - that each of us has the obligation to make known to the world the full extent of the tragedies in the Mediterranean. Those who do not condemn this act today, will not be able to look forward to a Europe fit for human beings tomorrow. The people who in the name of Europe are willing to accept the deaths of so many people, are those who betray Europe.

Congregation: Do not let the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me.

At the end, the man from Eritrea does not forget those who tried to help: I cannot overlook the positive example of some Europeans, such as the Italian lawyer and his assistant, and the German organizations, such as borderline-europe, who have continually accompanied us through these hard and painful times.

Congregation: Answer me, O Lord, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me. Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress – make haste to answer me.

The fact that so many ships passed by this and other refugee boats, is not only because of the indifference of the ships' crews. Some rescuers were taken to court and threatened with punishment because they were alleged to have illegally brought to land those who had been stranded on the sea. Even Germany and other European Union countries refuse to help. They are not prepared to accept the survivors from the ships' crews. They are also acting in our name. We're in the same boat as them if rescue is denied.

Congregation: Draw near to me, redeem me. O God, protect me.

And we pray to God:

Let us not give in to the temptation that we cannot achieve anything with our modest efforts. Help us to overcome our indifference. Let us do what we are able to do. We can pray. We can hold our intercessions. We can open our mouths for the dumb. We can do something to make sure that the dead are not forgotten. We can support those on the spot who are trying to help the refugees. We can work to ensure that refugees are welcomed into our churches. We can work to ensure that our governments set up admission programmes for refugees and take effective measures to rescue people stranded on the sea. O God, protect us. Amen.

(Slightly revised version of a psalm to mark the day of prayer and remembrance of those who have died at the borders of Europe on 26 November 2011, in the Ev. Holy Cross Church, Berlin Kreuzberg. The italicized text from the families of the victims was provided by Pro Asyl.)



One of the victims who died in the river that marks the border was the wife of Mr K. It was only a DNA test that after a year of hopes and fears provided the sombre certainty that Ms K had not survived the journey to reach her husband.

What can we do

The first step is always to say what is happening and to reflect on it with others. Small groups can work together to collect information and reflect on how to be better informed about the situation.

Reading the Bible helps! There are many stories in it that are related to migration; it's good to know the movement of people has always been there. God is a God on the move whom we can meet in the stranger.

We can write to Members of the European Parliament, and invite them for a discussion.

Groups involved in "One World" work, and partnership groups that support projects, can exchange experiences with those involved in migration and refugee issues.

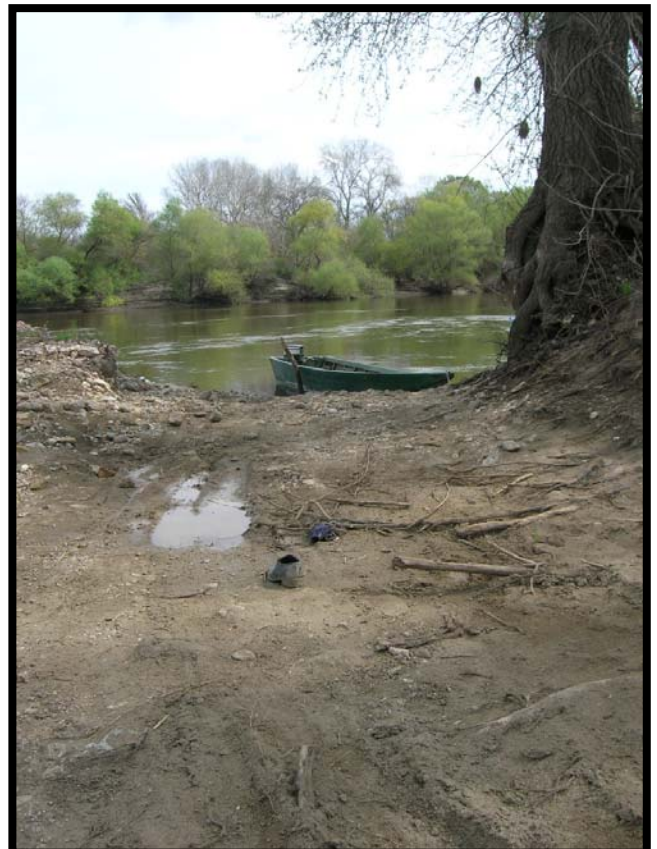
The situation in North Africa is new and affects all of us very directly.

What alternatives are there to refugee deterrence measures and what needs to be done to deal with the reasons that lead to people becoming refugees?

There are many church pronouncements and statements. It makes sense to fetch them out and to exchange views about them together.

If you don't know the situation facing refugees in your own church or church district join together to do some research. Open days and mutual invitations help to build bridges. Inviting refugees and giving them an opportunity to speak heals our own society.

In 2011, more than 55,000 people were detained in the Greek-Turkish border region, having previously crossed the Evros border river. On the Greek side, between 80 and 90 corpses are found each year.



Further information and resources

- Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org
- Borderline Europe: http://www.borderline-europe.de/downloads/borderline-europe_english.pdf
- Asyl in der Kirche: www.kirchenasyl.de
- Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), experiences at the external border of the EU: <http://www.ekd.de/bevollmaechtigter/newsletter/63227.html>
- Joint Statement of Churches and Civil Society: Humanitarian assistance for refugees and the displaced in North Africa (in German): <http://www.migration.ekbo.de/Webdesk/documents/Ekbo003-002/Aktuelles/2011+DS+2.1B+-+F%C3%BCchtlinge+Libyen+humHilfe+Anlage.pdf.pdf>
- Fortress Europe: http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/2006/02/immigrants-dead-at-frontiers-of-europe_16.html [English-language entry point]
- Frontexwatch (in German): <http://frontex.antira.info/frontexwatch>
- Pro Asyl, "Stop the Death" campaign (in German): <http://www.proasyl.de/de/themen/stoppt-das-sterben>
- Church Office of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) - Kein Raum in der Herberge Europa? Zur Menschenrechtslage an den Außengrenzen der Europäischen Union, Materialheft für einen Gottesdienst zum Tag der Menschenrechte am 10. Dezember 2010, Hannover 2010 [No room at the European inn? The human rights situation at the external borders of the European Union. Materials for services to mark Human Rights Day on 10 December 2010, Hanover, 2010] (in German): http://www.ekd.de/download/tag_menschenrechte_2010.pdf
- UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a02d9346.html>
- DVD "Like a man on earth", a moving documentary film about refugees who have come to Italy through Libya. Italian and English with subtitles in German, French, English, Spanish and Italian. May be ordered from: <http://likeamanonearth.blogspot.com>

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