

## Europe: political vision for change

“Discussion and the search for solutions on migration issues must start by recognising its human aspects”, said Fr Michael Schoepf SJ, Assistant Director, JRS Europe, addressing a conference on ‘Migration in Europe: Political Vision for Change in European Societies on 21 October at Istituto Maria SS Bambina in Rome.

From 18 until 23 October, JRS International and the Europe office held a four-day seminar in Rome on the spirituality of accompanying refugees. The conference, to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary was addressed by Ms Angela Martini, European Commission Directorate for Justice, Liberty and Security, Mr Walter Irvine, Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for Italy and Malta, and Fr Schoepf SJ, among others.

Fr Schoepf was responding to Ms Martini who outlined current political visions of migration in the European Union. She described the emerging common EU asylum and migration policy as at a period of ‘monitoring and evaluation.’ In December 2004 the main thrust of the procedure to establish a common asylum and migration policy was agreed.

According to Ms Martini, the Hague Programme, as it is known, has three priorities: a clear consolidation of legal immigration, which would involve securing legal status for all regular migrants; a fight against irregular immigration involving the strengthening of European Union borders and more cooperation between migrants’ countries of origin and the EU member states; and a safe and generous asylum policy.

So far, the priority for EU asylum policy has been to ensure that EU member states respect minimum standards in the field of asylum policy. This involves a common legal definition of a refugee and the adoption of minimal standards in asylum procedures. This process is now complete, and will soon be assessed. Ms Martini outlined the advantages of a harmonised asylum system: to improve quality, reduce costs and time, to share the ‘burden’ of immigration fairly among EU member states and to avoid ‘asylum shopping’ where an unsuccessful asylum applicant moves to another member state and again applies for asylum. As part of this, the European Commission will work to establish effective border controls, and encourage the return of irregular migrants not in need of international protection to their countries of origin.

In the case of those fleeing persecution, the Commission hopes the future lies in a combination of *Regional Protection Programmes*, where countries outside of the EU are given money and support to strengthen their capacity to provide protection (a scheme that will be piloted in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus in the next year), and *Resettlement*, whereby applicants for refugee status would be assessed for eligibility to enter the EU. Ms Martini emphasised that these proposals “are complementary and in no way subsidiary to EU protection”.

However, while stressing that the future of asylum and migration policy was under construction and contributions from NGOs would be welcome, Ms Martini admitted that the “priorities of member states do not lie in a rights based approach. On a pragmatic level, it is concerns about illegal immigration and protection that dictate the policies at this stage”.

Mr Walter Irvine, Representative of UNHCR, after congratulating JRS on 25 years of service to refugees, concentrated on what he called the ‘asylum-migration-development nexus’, meaning the difficulty of distinguishing between migrants and asylum seekers, and the importance of working together with refugee producing countries on development policies to combat the reasons why people flee. He also saw integration of asylum seekers and refugees as important. To this end, he supported policies that allow asylum seekers to work.

JRS- UK’s Louise Zanre responded to Martini and Irvine’s speeches with concern: “Borders must have justice and compassion which is lacking. The asylum system is failing both those it aims to protect and governments. She cautioned that the creation of a common asylum policy risked the foundations of protection being dug lower. Addressing Ms. Martini, Zanre pointed out that minimum standards often did not translate into action on the ground, and are in danger of becoming empty promises.