

**G20 Interfaith Forum, Cape Town South Africa**  
**Session on Sustainability: Religious responsibilities and Action**  
**Sr Alessandra Smerilli, FMA**

*Abstract: Climate change is a leading issue for the G20, with sustainability a central priority for South Africa's G20 agenda. The priority issues of financing action to mitigate and alleviate climate change are a continuing G20 focus. Of immediate and priority importance for Africa are effective responses to natural disasters, notably those linked to climate change, and thus disaster prevention, response, and recovery. This plenary will focus on climate imperatives, with a focus on actual and potential roles of religious actors. The wisdom and issues facing traditional communities will be one focus. The challenges of sustainability also involve conflicts and population movements, thus refugees and migration (and associated social tensions) and the growing links of these developments to climate change. The session will link issues of disruption of societies to challenges for religious freedom.*

To President Durham and the esteemed G20 Interfaith Forum organizing team, thank you for the invitation to participate in this Interfaith Forum here in Cape Town. The Forum's theme — *Ubuntu in Action: Focus on Vulnerable Communities* is a powerful call to create this sacred space where we can transform our deepest beliefs into tangible action.

Distinguished guests, friends, brothers, and sisters,

Our inspiration comes from Lampedusa, a small island in the Mediterranean, which has become a symbol of the global refugee crisis: an island of great paradox — a place of isolation and yet a crossroads of humanity, a point of despair and yet a beacon of hope, a fertile soil to testify that those whom human beings reject, God chooses as His very own.

In the summer of 2013, an overcrowded boat of migrants and refugees departed from the North African coast and launched into the open sea. Many were fleeing social unrest, political persecution, and human rights abuses in the wake of the Arab Spring, hoping to find shelter and protection on European shores, or another destination where they could live with dignity and in peace. Their vessel capsized *enroute*, however, and most of those seeking refuge drowned in the middle of the Mediterranean. Eight of them survived the shipwreck by clinging to fishing nets of

a nearby Tunisian-flagged boat. They pleaded desperately with those on board to save them, but when the fishermen saw the migrants holding on to their lines, they cut them loose to die in the ocean depths. One of those who heard about this story was the newly elected Pope Francis. Their plight moved him deeply and was felt by him, as he said, “like a painful thorn in my heart.” In response, he wanted to extend “a gesture of closeness” with people like these migrants, who are severed from the human community, and to challenge the conscience of the world, “lest this tragedy be repeated.” On July 13, 2013, he made his first pastoral visit outside of the Vatican to the small and isolated Italian island of Lampedusa, which is located in the middle of the waters between Africa and Europe, where many refugees still are losing their lives to this very day.

Shortly after arriving, Pope Francis celebrated the Eucharist near the island harbor, next to a “boat graveyard,” where the remains of many sunken migrant ships pile up. From the maritime remnants of the refugee journey, a local carpenter crafted the altar from a migrant boat’s hull, the lectern from ships’ rudders, and the chalice from driftwood of sunken vessels. During the liturgy, Pope Francis made an urgent plea both for those perishing at sea and for those “drowning” in a “globalized indifference” to the last and the least among us.

And with these reflections, I want to acknowledge the many scholars in the field of migration studies<sup>1</sup>, whose research and dedication have deepened our understanding of this complex issue with both intellectual rigor and deep compassion.

Building on this image of Lampedusa and Pope Francis’ response, it is vital to recognize that the root causes of crises like forced migration and social dislocation are complex and multifaceted. Migration, often framed solely as a problem, is in fact a symptom of deeper social, political, and economic imbalances—causes rooted in systems of inequality, conflict, and environmental degradation that threaten human dignity and community. This understanding brings us to the heart of this plenary’s theme: religious responsibilities and action.

To neglect these underlying issues diminishes the God-given humanity that is shared by all of us. Christian theology and Catholic Social Teaching (CST), particularly as articulated in the second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* (*On the*

*Church in the Modern World*), n.29, remind us that every human person is created in God's image, called to community and communion. Migration, often problematized or dehumanized, offers us an opportunity to see the profound human realities at stake. Ignoring these realities reduces persons to problems rather than recognizing them as integral members of the human family. It is this very call to recognize our shared humanity that leads me to speak about a journey: a journey of transformation, a journey that lies at the heart of our faith and our humanity. It's a journey from being a *nobody* to becoming a *somebody*, and ultimately, to recognizing our connection as *everybody*.

These migrants, often unseen and unheard, are the nobodies of our world. They are the ones fleeing conflict, persecution, and poverty, risking their lives in search of safety and dignity. These are the people the world often ignores, discards, and treats as if their lives have no value. As climate change and rising sea levels force the migration of more people from coastal areas, the widely accepted statistics predict that the number of refugees will reach approximately 200 million refugees in the coming decades.

But Pope Francis reminded us that these nobodies are not invisible to God. He challenged us to see them, to hear their stories, and to recognize their inherent dignity as human beings created in God's image. He called us to help each refugee discover her or his dignity as a somebody. It is the Church's mission to reveal that they are in fact connected to everybody. The *imago Dei* (person created in the image of God) is inextricably linked and relational.

This journey from nobody to some-body is not just about providing material assistance, as described in Matthew 25:31-46, but it is also integrally connected to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is about offering compassion, solidarity, and recognition of our shared humanity. But the journey doesn't end there. As we come to recognize the dignity and worth of each person, we also begin to see our interconnectedness – the truth that we are all part of one human family. We are all everybody. Drawing from Ephesians 2:15-16, Jesus broke down the dividing wall and has made possible “one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” in order to bring “both groups to God in one body.” The call to conversion is a

process of narrative change that makes possible the connecting of the nobodies of society with everybody in the world.

This recognition leads us to the urgent reality of climate change, which is not merely an environmental issue; it is a profound social, economic, and ethical challenge inextricably linked to the plight of migrants and refugees. The changing climate is altering the very fabric of human communities and driving displacement on a scale we have never seen before. Are we prepared to welcome strangers, to build bridges instead of walls, and to recognize our shared humanity as everybody?

The escalating crisis of climate-induced migration compels us to confront the deeply intertwined issues of environmental degradation, social injustice, and global responsibility. The reality is that climate change acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities within communities already struggling with poverty, conflict, and lack of resources. As climate change intensifies, forcing displacement on an unprecedented scale, it demands a fundamental reevaluation of our ethical obligations and a commitment to proactive solutions. The images of inundated coastal communities, parched farmlands, and communities ravaged by extreme weather events are not just abstract representations of a distant threat; they are tangible manifestations of a present-day crisis, driving mass migration and shattering lives.

It is within this context that Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, emerged as a prophetic call to action, offering a transformative vision for ecological conversion and social renewal. *Laudato Si'* challenges the dominant paradigms of economic growth and consumerism, exposing their detrimental impact on both the environment and the most vulnerable populations. It advocates for an "integral ecology" that recognizes the interconnectedness of all creation, emphasizing the inseparable link between environmental degradation and social injustice. It calls for a radical shift in our relationship with the earth, moving from a mindset of domination and exploitation to one of stewardship and care.

And from this vision breaks through an inspiration: the *Borgo Laudato Si'* project — 55 hectares of extraterritorial land within the Gardens of Pontifical Villas in Castel Gandolfo, located in the Alban Hills southeast of Rome — a concrete manifestation

of the principles outlined in the encyclical, embodying a holistic approach to addressing the challenges of climate change and migration. This envisioned community serves as a haven for refugees, providing not only physical shelter and material assistance but also a supportive environment for healing, integration, and empowerment. Furthermore, it also provides centers for education, research, and advocacy, fostering a deeper understanding of the root causes of climate change and promoting sustainable solutions. The architecture, infrastructure, and agricultural practices within Borgo Laudato Si' are designed to minimize environmental impact and maximize resource efficiency, serving as a model for sustainable development.

Pope Leo XIV's homily at Borgo Laudato Si' on July 9, 2025, provides a powerful spiritual and ethical framework for understanding and responding to these challenges. His words resonate with a deep sense of gratitude for the beauty and bounty of creation, while also acknowledging the profound responsibility that comes with being stewards of the earth. The use of new prayers for Masses dedicated to the Care of Creation signifies a continuous effort to integrate environmental consciousness into the heart of our faith. These prayers draw a compelling parallel between the fear of Jesus' disciples while riding in a boat during a severe storm and the anxieties of contemporary society facing the existential threats of climate change and conflict; they remind us that amidst the turbulence, there is always hope in Christ and affirms that the healing and reconciliation is in remembering that the mission to care for creation is the mission of Jesus himself.

Moreover, the Holy Father Pope Leo challenges us to examine our own lifestyles and consumption patterns, urging us to undergo a personal conversion that leads to greater ecological awareness and responsibility. He emphasizes the importance of solidarity with those who are most affected by climate change, acknowledging the need to create welcoming communities and advocates for policies that protect their rights and dignity. By highlighting Borgo Laudato Si' as a "laboratory" for experiencing harmony with creation, Pope Leo offers a glimpse of what a more just and sustainable future could look like, a future where human flourishing and ecological integrity are mutually reinforcing.

In conclusion, the integration of climate action, social justice, and spiritual reflection, as articulated in Laudato Si' and exemplified by the Borgo Laudato Si'

project, represents a paradigm shift — an unbreakable interconnectedness and solidarity that transcends national borders. Thus, in the spirit of Ubuntu — *I am because we are* — we recognize our shared humanity as embodied in everybody. May this G20 Forum set the stage to urgently build bridges, obliterate the barriers that separate us, offer welcome and integration to forced migrants and refugees, and create a world where everyone is empowered, everyone is respected, and everyone can truly call it home. For, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:19, "So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

Thank you.