

Papal spotlight: Migration is major theme of trip to Cyprus and Greece

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – Pope Francis will draw the world’s attention to migration once again as he visits Cyprus and Greece in early December.

The number of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers on the Greek island of Lesbos— where Pope Francis will fly on Dec. 5— is a fraction of what it was when he visited in 2016 and took 12 Syrian refugees back to Rome with him.

But people are still there, living in a temporary camp, often after surviving “pushback” attempts on the part of the Greek or Turkish military, supported by European Union policies.

And no one could say the situation is better on Cyprus, even if migrant arrivals there seldom make the international news.

Pope Francis will visit Cyprus Dec. 2-4 and Greece Dec. 4-6.

Since late 2018, Cyprus has received more asylum-seekers per capita than any country in the European Union, but has been slow to react to the influx, said Elizabeth V. Kassinis, executive manager of Caritas Cyprus. “Ninety-nine percent of our beneficiary population now are migrants.”

Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops’ overseas aid and development agency and a partner in the Caritas network, has given Caritas Cyprus a grant to help care for the asylum-seekers, many of whom are homeless, Kassinis told Catholic News Service Nov. 22.

Besides being an E.U.-member country geographically close to Lebanon and to Turkey – way stations for migrants – Cyprus is seen as a gateway particularly for those coming from Turkey

because there are no real borders to cross.

The migrants and refugees go by boat from Turkey to what only Turkey recognizes as the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus," the northeastern third of the island.

Cyprus has been divided between the Greek Cypriots in the South and Turkish Cypriots in the North since 1974. U.N. troops continue to patrol what Kassinis described as a very "porous" buffer zone between the two parts of the island, but since the government of Cyprus does not recognize the North as a separate country, it does not run border controls along the buffer zone.

"Incendiary" rhetoric is increasingly common, Kassinis said. Many people believe Turkey is not only allowing the migrants to cross the sea but may be encouraging the crossings. "They use terms like 'the third invasion' and make it seem like this is an orchestrated attempt by Turkey to change the demographic character of Cyprus," she said.

A big part of Pope Francis' visits to Cyprus and Greece will be meetings with the heads of the Orthodox Church in both countries, where Catholics are a small minority. However, in Cyprus the Maronite- and Latin-rite Catholics are recognized in the country's constitution and are seen as part of the fabric of a proudly multicultural society, Kassinis said.

Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said that Catholic-Orthodox cooperation in Cyprus is good, both in helping the poor and in helping each other. In fact, he said, "in some cases, the Catholic priest is authorized to use an Orthodox church for the celebration of the sacraments," something which is not common elsewhere.

In Greece, the situation is a bit more complicated, although no one expects there to be the kind of Orthodox protests of a papal visit that were seen when St. John Paul II went to the

country in 2001.

“Relations between the Holy See and the Church of Greece have grown ever closer down the years and are very good,” Bishop Farrell said. And despite the protests, after the visit of St. John Paul “more intense collaboration began between the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity and the *Apostoliki Diakonia* of the Church of Greece, a department of the Holy Synod that deals with pastoral, cultural and missionary issues.”

The visit in 2016 to Lesbos by Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens and all of Greece “showed how Catholics and Orthodox have common concerns and how important it is to work together in the service of the most needy,” he said. “As in all churches – including the Catholic Church – there are some voices opposed to any ecumenical openness. These voices represent a small minority, albeit a rather noisy one.”

When the refugee crisis began in Greece in 2015 – with some 1.2 million arrivals that year – Caritas Hellas, the Greek Catholic agency, mobilized and started to grow into a large, professional, stable relief agency that was no longer focused only on parish-based responses to people in need or to emergency responses to earthquakes and brush fires, said Maria Alverti, the director.

While most of the full-time employees are either Orthodox or Muslim, official relations between Caritas Hellas and Orthodox agencies are “not that great,” she said. Especially in smaller towns and villages, Catholics are looked at with suspicion.

But, Alverti said, Pope Francis is “an amazing personality,” and he makes the Catholic community proud.

Even Orthodox citizens listen to the pope, she said, “because he speaks to people’s hearts. He speaks about things we can all relate to. He speaks for the elderly, for the poor, he

speaks for refugees, he speaks for the excluded, and he does that in a very consistent and very persuasive way.”

Caritas Hellas hopes the pope will help the Greek government see that its increasingly “military approach” to migration – using the army or coast guard to push migrants back to Turkey – is not the way for a civilized society to respond to people in need, she said.

The Greek government has been working to distribute migrants and asylum-seekers throughout the country. In October 2020, it said, there were 18,872 asylum-seekers on Lesbos; as of October 2021, the figure was down to just 4,532, according to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

But more than five years after the influx began and with fewer than 5,000 migrants on Lesbos, most of them are housed in “temporary” camps far from towns, Alverti said. “Even in a five-star hotel, if you spend two years or five years in one room, psychologically how can you function after that?”