

Pope Francis cites plight of migrants, children on Good Friday

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Pope Francis said migrants "find doors closed because of fear and hearts hardened by political calculations." (Reuters/File)

Vatican City: Pope Francis used a Good Friday ceremony to decry "all the crosses" of suffering in the world, including those borne by migrants who find doors closed due to "political calculations" and children who are harmed in their "innocence and purity," in a reference to pedophile clergy.

From a canopied platform on the Palatine Hill, Francis watched the traditional torch-lit, nighttime procession at Rome's Colosseum that solemnly recalled the crucifixion of Jesus.

Along with thousands of pilgrims, tourists and Romans, he listened to reflections that were composed by an elderly Italian nun, who for 25 years has gone out to the city's streets to bring comfort and hope to migrant women who were trafficked into prostitution.

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Then he touched on two issues heavily marking his papacy "how to promote the cause of often rejected migrants and to deal with a sea of scandals over Catholic clergy's sexual abuse of children.

Francis said migrants "find doors closed because of fear and hearts hardened by political calculations." He also decried the "cross of the little ones, wounded in their innocence and their purity."

The nun, Eugenia Bonetti, who works with many Nigerian women and other migrants who have fallen prey to human traffickers, spoke with Francis just before the start of the procession.

Bonetti told Rai state TV that "we are all responsible" for these women's plight, saying "indifference is the biggest reason these girls are still on the street."

In one of her meditations, read aloud as the faithful listened in utter silence, Bonetti said that "it is easy to wear a crucifix on a chain around our neck or to use it to decorate the walls of our beautiful cathedrals or homes."

Less easy is acknowledging "today's newly crucified: the homeless, unemployed youth, immigrants relegated to slums at the fringe of our societies after having endured untold suffering," the nun said.

Populist leaders in Italy and several other European countries have taken to holding a hard line against migrants, refusing to accept those rescued at sea from traffickers' unseaworthy boats. The US administration of Donald Trump is also determined to keep out illegal migrants.

Among those taking turns carrying a lightweight cross in the procession were a Nigerian woman and her daughter.

In his brief comments, expressed in the form of a prayer, Francis also spoke of the "cross of the church," which he said "feels continuously under assault from the inside and the outside."

The pontiff didn't elaborate. But staunchly conservative and more liberal factions among church hierarchy have been bitterly at odds during his six-year-old papacy. And eroding the church's moral credibility has been a flood of criticism from faithful and civil authorities in several countries over prelates' systematic shuffling of pedophile priests from parish to parish for decades rather than remove them from access to children.

Earlier, during an evening prayer service, in St Peter's Basilica, Francis kissed a crucifix held up in the centre aisle, then pressed his forehead for a moment against the wooden statue depicting Jesus. In another moment, he prostrated himself on the basilica floor in a sign of humility.

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