
UK barge for asylum seekers. The Church's condemnation: “An affront to human dignity”

It's the latest horrifying example of a migration policy that has been repeatedly condemned by the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches. The "Bibby Stockholm", a large metal barge meant to accommodate hundreds of asylum seekers, has arrived in the south coast port of Portland, UK, in the last few days. In the same hours, the British government gave the final go-ahead to the controversial immigration legislation providing for the deportation to Rwanda of asylum seekers that crossed the Channel in small boats to reach the UK. The Catholic Church, the Church of England and leading Christian charities protested against the barge and the approval of the new law. “Write to your MPs and ask them to ensure that the government provides safe routes for asylum seekers,” urged Bishop **Terence Draine**y, president of the Caritas Social Action Network, which brings together the main NGOs in England and Wales: “We are deeply concerned that the Illegal Immigration Bill will become law because it lacks adequate safeguards against people smuggling and restrictions on the detention of children. It is a cruel and inhumane bill that is an affront to human dignity and a violation of our responsibilities for the common good and our obligations under international law.” “I think the use of this prison barge takes Britain back to its darkest moments in history,” said Professor **Francis Davies**, a professor at Oxford University and Saint Mary's University, London's only Catholic university. “Three times in our history we have used barges as prisons: during the Napoleonic wars, during the Northern Ireland conflict and when our prisons were overcrowded and unable to accommodate other inmates.

In all of these cases, our country was in a state of utter misery and the conditions offered to prisoners were disrespectful of their dignity. Furthermore, treating asylum seekers awaiting trial as terrorists or criminals is simply not right.

Clearly, the conditions are also inadequate. The rooms are small, the sanitary facilities poor, and the prisoners have no way to play sports and enjoy moments of recreation. They deserve to be treated with greater respect.” The same lack of respect was shown by the UK with the approval of the Illegal Migration Bill. This bill, announced by the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on April 14, 2022, provides for thousands of asylum seekers to be sent to Rwanda in exchange for an initial payment of £120 million (approximately €140 million) and drastically restricts the rights of so-called “illegal immigrants” to seek asylum in the UK. The law has never been enforced, i.e. no illegal migrant arriving in the UK has ever been deported to Rwanda, because every time the government has attempted to resettle them, the asylum seekers, often represented by NGOs, have appealed to the court, halting the process. This tug-of-war between judges and the government is set to continue. In fact, just last week the executive was authorised to appeal to the Supreme Court against the Court of Appeal's recent ruling at the end of June that the Illegal Migration Bill violated the Asylum Seekers Act. Cafod (the international development agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales), the Jesuit Refugee Service in London, the Methodist Church and the Quakers are among the signatories to a statement condemning the law, signed by 290 people. “The government has rushed through this unjust law in the face of widespread opposition,” the statement reads, “but our fight is not over. We will continue to press those in power to respect the UK's international obligations. The law has been the subject of widespread condemnation, most recently during a debate in the House of Lords, including from the Anglican Primate Justin Welby, the theological leader of the Church of England.”