

## **Church's 'National Migration Week' Seeks to Ease Path - Correction Appended**

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 **Correction Appended**

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### **Body**

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At a time when hostility to immigrants is on the rise in many parts of the United States, officials at the U.S. Catholic Conference are celebrating **National Migration Week**, hosting "multicultural" Masses to which recent arrivals have been invited to tell their stories.

When people get to know an individual immigrant, they often put aside their antagonism, said the Rev. Richard Ryscavage, who directs the conference's **Migration** and Refugee Services. "This is one tool the church can use to calm people in the country about immigrants . . . to take away the fear factor."

Near the close of a midday Mass at the conference's offices -- near Catholic University at 3211 4th St. NE -- a priest beckoned a slender young man to come up to the lectern and talk about how he came to the United States.

Habtom T. Gebremichael -- a soft-spoken, 29-year-old from Eritrea, in east Africa -- took a few minutes to tell a harrowing story.

This is what he said: He was jailed by the former Marxist military government of Ethiopia, was tortured and later forced into the army. He escaped, walked to the neighboring nation of Djibouti, then took a boat to Saudi Arabia, where he worked two years. He bought a passport to get him to Sweden, where he **sought** political asylum, but was deported to Sudan, where he was arrested. He escaped, lived in Sudan for two years and then finally hiked five days through the desert to Egypt, where he found a Catholic church and a sponsoring organization that sent him to the United States.

"He's such a survivor. . . . There's such a will to carry on, such an energy. And that's an incredible gift to this country," said Ryscavage, a Jesuit priest.

The Mass was the first of three to be held at the conference's offices. Today a wounded Bosnian Croatian soldier and a Bosnian Muslim woman will offer their testimony. On Thursday, a Vietnamese-born woman who fled her country by boat in 1984 will speak.

Ryscavage said the speakers were chosen partly on the basis of their availability and partly because the staff at the **migration** office wanted to highlight concerns about African and Bosnian refugees.

But he also said that because the Catholic Church "pre-dates the establishment of sovereign states," it does not make the same legal distinctions among immigrants that governments do. "Ultimately, for the church, a newcomer is a newcomer, particularly if they are in need."

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A statement deploring "the growing hostility toward immigrants," authorized in November by U.S. bishops, did not distinguish between legal and illegal immigration. Ryscavage said the church does not support illegal immigration, but believes that a "generous" provision should be made for allowing newcomers into the country.

"The church has such a solid moral ground to stand on, to say it's in the Gospel to welcome strangers," said Randy K. Glantz, spokesman for the bishops' refugee services.

At yesterday's Mass, the Rev. Tesfamarian Baraki noted that according to Scripture, Jesus's family was forced to flee for safety into Egypt shortly after his birth. He asked those present to remember "uprooted" persons everywhere.

After the Mass, Baraki, a priest in the Washington Archdiocese's Ethiopian and Eritrean Apostolate, said African refugees like Gebremichael face special difficulties. "As new immigrants, these people don't have a place in the black community or in the white community, so they are struggling."

Baraki, pastor of the Kidane-Mehret Ge'ez Rite Church -- which meets in the former high school All Souls, at 1001 Lawrence St. NE -- said between 30,000 and 50,000 Ethiopians and Eritreans live in the United States; about 5 percent are Catholics. Many came to this country with no family and are expected to send money home. It can be very stressful, he said.

"Just in December, we heard of three suicides . . . because these young people don't have any support systems. And they're trying to support their families back in their homelands," Baraki said.

At this point, Gebremichael spoke up, saying, "Well, I'm lucky. Some [Eritrean] refugees died in the desert. They couldn't find water." On the other hand, he said, he had been laid off on Friday from his job as a shuttle bus driver.

## Correction

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In an article Wednesday, the Rev. Tesfamarian Baraki was quoted incorrectly. He said that between 30,000 and 50,000 Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants live in the Washington metropolitan area.

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## Graphic

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PHOTO, HABTOM T. GEBREMICHAEL, A REFUGEE FROM ERITREA, TOLD A HARROWING STORY OF DIFFICULTIES IN FLEEING HIS HOMELAND. CRAIG HERNDON

## Classification

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