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At the Vatican, a missionary serves the world's displaced

by Clare Myers by Catholic News Service

Rome — Fr. Frans Thoolen has traveled to Sierra Leone to collect testimony from child soldiers and to South Africa to help make peace between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party. He once went on a two-week hunger strike in support of Moroccan immigrants seeking legal documentation in the Netherlands.

The Dutch priest, a member of the Society of African Missions, has dedicated much of his life to working directly with uprooted people, often far from public view.

"Taking up their cause ... it's not something you develop in a chair. You have to be touched by it," he said, then quoted an African proverb: "What the eye has seen, the heart never forgets."

Yet after years of service in the field, Thoolen left the front lines to continue his struggle from, of all places, an office chair. In 2001, he brought his passion for his mission to the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Travelers.

Now, Thoolen finally has the world's attention. Working with his colleagues behind the scenes, he has helped provide the foundation of the Holy See's response to the international refugee crisis.

As world leaders grow increasingly aware of the plight of displaced people, including victims of trafficking, the Holy See has become a pre-eminent moral authority on the matter. At the council's recent plenary assembly, Pope Francis appealed to the global community to treat migrants and refugees with dignity and respect.

"Their condition cannot leave us indifferent," the pope said. "Their flesh is that of Christ."

The urgency of the pope's appeal is reflected in the council's latest document, "Welcoming Christ in

Refugees and Forcibly Displaced Persons," released Thursday, which places a new focus on trafficking and argues that internally displaced persons (IDPs) deserve the same protections as refugees who have fled to a new country.

The document focuses on the very people Thoolen has spent more than 40 years serving, starting even before he was ordained a priest in 1983, and continues to serve at the Vatican today.

The priest laughingly recalls the brevity of his interview for his current post.

"They said, 'We have one question: If you are chosen, are you prepared to take the job?' "

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The council, established by Pope Paul VI in 1970, focuses on the needs of a wide range of "people on the move," including migrants, refugees, IDPs, victims of human trafficking, international students, pilgrims, tourists, sailors, civil aviation workers, nomads (including the Sinti and Roma peoples), and circus and carnival workers.

Thoolen and his colleague, Francesca Dona, head the section for refugees and IDPs, defined as those forced to leave their homes but remaining within the borders of their own countries.

The priest frequently travels to the United Nations in Geneva and visits refugees across the globe. But most of his days are spent in his office, compiling news and data, analyzing information and preparing reports.

He says his agenda is varied. One day the focus may be on raising awareness of the consumer's responsibility for ending forced labor. The next may involve drafting a proposal for requiring bishops to report their anti-trafficking efforts during their periodic *ad limina* visits to Rome.

Thoolen emphasizes that a Vatican council does not have the authority of a congregation, which can impose policies on local churches.

"We can start a dialogue with (the local churches)," he said, but "we cannot force our views on them."

The council's most recent document comes at a critical moment for refugees, especially those from the two-year civil war in Syria, whose plight has recently caught the international community's attention.

"We see Jesus suffering in the inhabitants of the beloved Syria," Pope Francis said in his Wednesday address to Catholic aid agencies. "We cannot turn our backs."

"It is a disaster," Thoolen said of Syria, yet observed that it is only one of many countries in desperate need: "Is it much different from the situation in Congo?"

Despite the range of global crises that his job requires him to think about every day, Thoolen remains optimistic.

He points to the wall of his office, covered with photos of refugees from all over the world.

"The most important thing is not the information," he said. "The most important thing is to see the faces of the people, to look into their eyes and to see, to hear, their hope."

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