

Hungarian priest welcomes refugees amid differing local views

by [Brian Dooley](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

In Körmend, a Hungarian town of 12,000 people about 160 miles and two train rides from Budapest, the community has been split by the decision of Zoltán Németh, the local Catholic parish priest, to shelter asylum seekers.

The refugee issue is a heated one in Hungary, with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government taking an increasingly hostile line against those seeking asylum in the country. In April the Hungarian authorities announced the detention of all asylum seekers, and state news outlets push a steady stream of xenophobic stories.

"It came as a surprise to public opinion that we took people in," said Németh, who lives next to his church, St. Erzsebet's. "The main reason we took them in was because they were in life-threatening danger."

One of the asylum seekers had emailed Németh asking for help. A few months ago he offered space in St. Erzsebet's to asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and elsewhere who were sleeping in tents on the outskirts of the town.

While some parishioners have been supportive, others have criticized him for allowing the dozen or so men to sleep in the church. People have shouted abuse at him on the street. Others have accused him of being a lackey of philanthropist George Soros, targeted by the Orbán government for his funding of various academic, rights-related, and charitable causes in Hungary. Or they've shouted the name of Jacques Hamel at him, referring to the French priest murdered by two ISIS recruits as he was celebrating mass in his Normandy church last year.

However, for some of those who have interacted with the asylum seekers, such as helping them prepare meals, the experience has helped overcome stereotypes about foreigners, Németh said.

He is encouraged by Pope Francis, who invited a dozen refugees from Syria to the Vatican. Although there had been appeals for Hungarian parishes to accept refugees, "there was really no reaction, no one took them in, and there was no

substantive dialogue within the church between bishops and priests,” he said. “Politics surrounding refugees in Hungary is not built on acceptance. That is why our followers became divided. Even among priests we can see the divisions.”

Németh made his choice after he was asked to help people living in the cold.

“This church doesn’t have a bishop at the moment,” he said. “And for that reason I came to the decision on my own.” —Religion News Service