

Mussie Zerai, Nobel-nominated Eritrean priest, aids refugees

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue

Mussie Zerai was once a refugee.

Now the 40-year-old Roman Catholic priest from Eritrea runs a center that receives calls from distressed migrants who have fled their countries in hopes of a better life in Europe.

Through Agenzia Habeshia, the charitable trust he set up in 2006 to campaign for refugee rights in North Africa and to help others in Italy get asylum, Zerai has saved thousands of lives.

The little-known priest, now based in Rome and Switzerland, was among the nominees for the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize. (It was awarded in October to the National Dialogue Quartet, which helped build a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia.)

Zerai said in a telephone interview that being nominated was a reward.

“Above all, it is a recognition of the seriousness of the situation of the refugees coming from sub-Saharan Africa,” he said.

Zerai, who was born in Asmara, Eritrea’s capital, became a refugee at age 17 and migrated to Italy. There he became involved in human rights campaigns while studying theology and social morality.

In 2003, he gave his phone number to migrants after helping an Italian journalist interview refugees in prison in Libya. From then on, migrants have spread the word to call Zerai’s number for help.

When he receives the calls, the priest finds the GPS coordinates of the caller’s phone and then shares them with the Italian and Maltese coast guard in the Mediterranean Sea so that they can launch rescue operations.

Zerai is pushing for a “humanitarian corridor,” a safe route of passage for migrants so that they can obtain visas in European countries. He recalled an SOS he received in 2011 from a boat with 72 migrants that had drifted out to sea without food,

medicine, or water.

“It took 15 days for rescuers to arrive; by this time about 90 percent of the migrants had died,” said Zerai, calling it one of the lowest moments in his life. “I am still pursuing justice for these migrants, because I think it is NATO’s role to protect the migrants.”

African governments must also make greater efforts to protect children and grant more freedoms, he said.

“The migration will only end when there is more justice, less corruption, and [less] abuse of power that oppresses the masses for the benefit of [the] few in power or the rich who buy the power,” he said. —Religion News Service

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