

Pope Francis decries ‘globalization of indifference’

by [Alessandro Speciale](#)

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) In his first official trip outside Rome since his election, Pope Francis visited the tiny island of Lampedusa off the coast of Sicily on Monday (July 8), hoping to show solidarity to African migrants who risk their lives trying to immigrate to Europe.

Set only 70 miles from Tunisia, the Italian island of Lampedusa is the first port of safety for the thousands of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers who risk their lives every summer trying to reach Europe on small, rickety boats.

Francis said the frequent news reports on the deaths of the people who were trying to make the crossing had been like “a thorn in the heart” for him, and called on society to overcome what he called “the globalization of indifference.”

During Mass, the pontiff used a wooden chalice and cross made of wood carved from a migrant vessel.

“We have become used to other people’s suffering, it doesn’t concern us, it doesn’t interest us, it’s none of our business,” he said in the homily.

Earlier in his visit, he threw a wreath of flowers in the sea as he arrived in the island’s small port in a coast guard vessel, flanked by dozens of colored fishing ships, and met a group of migrants, many of them Muslim, wishing them well for the holy month of Ramadan.

According to a United Nations report, around 4,000 people have already landed on the island this year, a higher figure than last year but still well below the tens of thousands of migrants who arrived in the summer of 2011 at the height of “Arab Spring” revolts in North Africa. A boat carrying 165 migrants from Mali arrived

shortly before the pope.

The U.N. estimates that at least 40 migrants have died this year and that around 500 died at sea in 2012.

The 5,000-strong population of Lampedusa is often outnumbered by the arrival of new migrants, turning the whole island into a vast refugee center.