

**THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES
OF MIGRATION BASED ON *ERGA MIGRANTES*
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1. Migration, a sign of the times

In the 1960s, when the Second Vatican Council took place, the Catholic Church perceived in international migration (or better, in human mobility, in general), a “sign of the times” to be interpreted in the light of the Word of God and the Magisterium of the Church.

Recently, an ILO expert defined migration as a “dramatic sign of our troubled times”, a vast phenomenon that institutions and governments wanted to stop until they finally realized that it is a structural component of present-day society’s socio-economic and political reality^[1]. Then, they had to face the fact that it is useless to try to eliminate the phenomenon, but look at it in the face and concentrate their efforts in responding to the challenges and risks that it presents.

2. Today’s migration: the situation

Through the years, the geography and direction of migration have changed a lot. To have a general view let us look at some statistics.

IOM’s world migration overview in 2005^[2] states that in 2000, 175 million people were living outside their country of birth. They constituted about 3% of the world’s population. Of these, 49% were women. Sixty-three percent of all “migrants” (110 million) were found in developed regions and only thirty-seven percent (65 million) were in less developed regions. Europe hosted 33 million, former USSR 30 million, Asia 44 million, and North America 41 million. On their part, Africa hosted 16 million migrants, Latin America and the Caribbean 6 million, and Oceania another 6 million.

We could say that approximately one out of every 11 persons living in the more developed regions is a migrant, while they are one out of every 77 in developing countries. Most international migrants are concentrated in a few countries, with the United States of America heading the list (hosting 20% of all migrants).

3. Migration in Asia

Already in 2000, Asia accounted for 25 per cent of the world's international migrants. In particular, international labour migration from and within Asia expanded rapidly from 1970 onwards. Following the sharp increase in the oil price in 1973, the oil-producing countries of the Middle East accelerated the intake of foreign workers, initially for the construction of needed infrastructure. While in the 1970s migrant workers had mostly been received from other Arab countries, by the late 1970s they were being recruited from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, and soon also from several East and Southeast Asian countries, especially the Republic of Korea, the Philippines and, later, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

At present, Asia is the primary source of family and authorized economic migration of all forms in the world[3]. Almost one-third of all immigrants in Australia are from Asia, primarily from China, the Philippines and India. Similarly, 33 per cent of immigrants in Canada and 24 per cent of those in the United States are from Asia. Recently, Asian migration to Europe, especially from China, has also significantly increased. The nine largest Asian migrant sending countries are the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand, China, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. They contribute between one-half and two-thirds of all legal immigrants and refugees to the international migration stream.

4. Documents of the Holy See

What is the attitude of the Church in relation to this structural phenomenon? There has always been solicitude, on the part of the Church, for those who have left their homelands, or indeed who have none. The Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia* (1952) gives a brief review of what the Church has done in this area through the centuries. This historical review is recalled in our Instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*[4], which also pays special attention to the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council[5], whose teachings and directives in this regard were implemented by Pope Paul VI's Motu Proprio *Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, promulgating the corresponding Instruction *De Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, both in 1969.

Thirty-five years later, in 2004, in response to this sign of the times, – as we said – the Instruction *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* was issued by our Pontifical Council, a Dicastery of the Roman Curia specifically charged with pastoral issues related to human mobility. This document “urges us to look afresh at [the migrants’] problems”[6] and invites all Catholics “to respond to this challenge ...[for] it is not just a matter of good will or the personal charisma of a few”[7].

5. The Church's responses

The EMCC points out the responses that the Church offers to the challenges and risks presented by today's migration phenomenon. It is at several levels.

First of all, the Church wishes to be there where the migrants are, to share with them the joys and the hopes, as well as the grief and the pains of migration[8]. Humanitarian aid and solidarity, social action and advocacy, training and Christian formation are all part of the Church's ministry among those involved in human mobility. However, all these are but various expressions of its fundamental mission: the proclamation of the Good News that God is love and, out of love, He became man, and by His death and resurrection, He restored man's lost unity with God. In doing so, He also gave back to every person the dignity of

being a child of God and confirmed every human being's worth, by the fact that humankind received such a great Redeemer[9]. Hence there are profound links between evangelization and human promotion.[10]

a. Welcome and solidarity

Concretely, migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons or poor foreign students may find themselves in situations where they literally need food, clothing and shelter. They may need medicine and medical care. The Church seeks to offer them welcome, through the proper channels, by establishing a *culture of welcome* in its communities, and being in solidarity with them[11].

However, welcoming people on the move is not exhausted by “performing acts of fraternal assistance or even by supporting legislation aimed at giving them their due place in society while respecting their identity as foreigners”[12]. An authentic *culture of welcome* accepts “the truly human values of the immigrants over and above any difficulties caused by living together with persons who are different”[13]. As Christians, we are called to a truly fraternal welcome for “one another ... as Christ welcomed [us] ..., for the glory of God” (Rm 15:7)[14]. This sense of welcome must grow deeper in the Christian community, especially through religious instruction and catechesis[15].

For the Church, an authentic *culture of welcome* does not make any distinction among migrants, whatever may be their nationality, color or creed. Our welcome for migrants “is fully based on love for Christ, in the certainty that good done out of love of God to one's neighbour, especially the most needy, is done to Him”[16]. Of course, pastoral care is respectful of differences and, therefore, there is necessarily a difference in the kind of religious attention given to Catholics of the Latin and the Eastern rites, to members of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and to those who profess other religions[17].

b. Advocacy

When their rights are trampled on, the Church defends them, sometimes making use also of “advocacy”[18]. When human dignity is not respected and human rights are violated, the result is a moral suffering that harms the human family. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”[19]. Any inequality in this sense, therefore, must not be accepted.

In this context, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* points out that migrants are “often victims of illegal recruitment and of short-term contracts providing poor working and living conditions”. Often they are subjected to “physical, verbal and even sexual abuse” and are obliged to “work long hours, often without the benefits of medical care and the usual forms of social security”. The local population may regard them “with suspicion and even consider them a danger and a threat”, often provoking “manifestations of intolerance, xenophobia and racism”. [20]

In some cases, migrants are forbidden from forming “labor unions”. They are also in perennial danger of becoming “victims of the sad phenomenon of human trafficking, which no longer spares even children”[21]. Then, there are the problems linked with the increasing “feminization of migration”. Women and girls are increasingly part of the phenomenon, and

in many cultures, their dignity and rights are not safeguarded, if at all recognized. Women migrants' rights, therefore, need to be safeguarded twice: as migrants and as women.

At this point, it is also necessary to mention the human rights of migrants in an irregular situation. In spite of this condition, they, too, conserve their human dignity and rights. This is why the ratification or accession to the International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants Workers and the Members of their Families is of utmost importance[22].

c. Preparing potential migrants

The Church is also called to accompany potential migrants in their decision-making process and to prepare them for migrant life abroad. Naturally, the formation of a migrant starts very much before he/she decides to migrate: from the cradle at home, to his lessons at school, in catechism classes, in the parish, in the ecclesial groups, associations and movements he might choose to follow, etc. Already at this stage of the potential migrant's life, the Church wishes to be present, to serve.

Then when he/she starts toying with the idea of migrating, it is important to provide him/her with correct information regarding the possible destination countries: their laws, and not only labor legislation, their customs, religious traditions, the existing condition regarding freedom and democracy, etc. Since employment agencies or even relatives and friends are not always dependable or objective sources of information in this regard, it is important for the Church, through its networks, to be able to furnish reliable pre-departure data.

When a person finally decides to migrate, then it is necessary to direct him/her to the Church and its related structures and organizations in the destination country, where it is possible to avail of pastoral care, including social and legal assistance, if necessary.

d. Dialogue

Then, there is a need for dialogue. The intermingling of cultures, religions and customs caused by migration could be an enrichment, but it has also caused tension in the past, which has persisted, and considerably, in some cases. Antidote to this tension is dialogue at all levels: ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, as well as with those who do not have a religious creed, and inter-cultural dialogue. This is a process that leads to the recognition of values that are in common and an attitude of respect for differences [23] without losing one's own identity[24].

Certainly, the most common and most direct way of doing dialogue is through that of life, with simple everyday gestures of respect, solidarity, fraternity and love, among people who belong to different Churches and Ecclesial Communities, religions and cultures. This can produce an authentic change in interpersonal relationships, which is capital.

In his Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2005, Pope John Paul II affirmed the need "for a dialogue between people of different cultures in a context of pluralism that goes beyond mere tolerance and reaches sympathy" and to "encourage ... a mutual fecundation of cultures. This implies reciprocal knowledge and openness between cultures, in a context of true understanding and benevolence." [25]

However, he also said that “dialogue must not hide, but exalt, the gift of faith”[26]. A dialogue of welcome and mutual openness allows people to know each other better and discover that the various religious traditions often contain precious seeds of the Word of God (*Semina Verbi*)[27]. This could certainly be a way to enrich dialogue.

Thus, dialogue and evangelization are not opposed to each other. *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, in fact, recommends a “great respect and attention for the migrants’ [religious] traditions and culture”, that we are called to show as Christians. At the same time we have “to bear witness to the gospel of love and peace in our dealings with them and also to proclaim the Word of God explicitly to them so that the blessing of the Lord, promised to Abraham and his descendants for ever, may reach them.”[28] “There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ,” Pope Benedict XVI attested, and continued, “There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.”[29]

e. Cooperation

Furthermore, the response of the Church obviously requires cooperation among local Churches[30], a fundamental pillar of the guidelines expressed in EMCC. Thus, while it is the task of the Church in the destination country to offer pastoral care to all the faithful in its territory, it is important for migrants to be accompanied by priests and/or other pastoral agents who are from, have a cultural background linking them with, or have carried out missionary activities in their country of origin. This cultural and linguistic proximity is of great importance in helping them live and grow in the faith and face, as Christians, all the vicissitudes they encounter in their life in the destination country. This is indeed why close collaboration between the Church of origin and the Church in the host country is necessary.[31]

Such collaboration will also help migrants and refugees become part and parcel, little by little, of the local Church, where no one is a foreigner, where everyone is welcome, because Jesus Christ died for each and every person without any distinction. Then the Church in the destination country will also become a model of a truly inter-cultural society, where everyone is really an integral part, where differences are not a reason for conflict but an enrichment for all. Then, universal brotherhood, where all people are members of one family, and the earth is truly a home for all, will no longer be a beautiful dream but will start becoming a reality.

Conclusion

To conclude, let us hope that all those who are present here today may become more aware of and understand better the experience, and very often the drama, of those who live far from their homeland, and learn to serve them in their necessities, truly accepting them as brothers and sisters, so that today’s migrations may be considered a call, although a mysterious one, to the Kingdom of God, and an instrument of Providence to further the unity of the human family in peace.[32]