

2001

Message

**The Pastoral Care of Migrants,  
A Way of Accomplishing the Mission of the Church Today**

*For The 87th World Day of Migration 2001*

*John Paul II*

2 February 2001

1. “*Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be forever*” [1460] (Heb 13:8). These words of the apostle Paul, chosen as the motto of the Great Jubilee that has just ended, recall the mission of Jesus, Word incarnate for the salvation of the world. Faithful to his task in the service of the Gospel, the Church continues to approach people of all nationalities to bring them the good news of salvation.

With this present Message, on the occasion of the World Day of Migration, I wish to [1461] reflect on the evangelizing mission of the Church with respect to the vast and complex phenomenon of emigration and mobility. This year, the following theme was chosen for the commemoration: *The pastoral care of migrants, a way to accomplish the mission of the Church today*. This is an area that many pastoral agents have at heart for they know quite well the numerous problems that are found there. They also know the various situations that make men and women leave their own country. In fact, mobility that is chosen freely is one thing; mobility caused by ideological, political or economic constraint is an entirely different thing. It is not possible to ignore this in planning and carrying out a suitable pastoral care for the various categories of migrants and itinerant people.

The Dicastery, which has the institutional task of expressing the solicitude of the [1462] Church for people involved in the phenomenon, summarizes all of human mobility with the aforementioned terminology. The term “migrant” is intended first of all to refer to refugees and exiles in search of freedom and security outside the confines of their own country. However, it also refers to young people who study abroad and all those who leave their own country to look for better conditions of life elsewhere. The migration phenomenon is in continuous expansion, and this poses questions and challenges to the pastoral action of the Church community. The II Vatican Ecumenical Council, in the Decree *Christus Dominus*, called for a “special concern . . . for those among the faithful who, on account of their way or condition of life, cannot sufficiently make use of the common and ordinary pastoral service of parish priests or are totally deprived of it. Among them are very many migrants, exiles and refugees” (no. 18).

In this complex phenomenon, numerous elements come in: the tendency to foster the [1463] political and juridical unity of the human family, the noteworthy increase in cultural exchanges, interdependence among States, particularly in the economic sphere, the liberalization of trade and, above all, of capital, the multiplication of multinational enterprises, the imbalance between rich and poor countries, the development of the

means of communication and transportation.

2. The interplay of such factors produces the movement of masses from one area of the globe to another. Although in varying forms and degrees, mobility has thus become a general characteristic of mankind. It directly involves many persons and reaches others indirectly. The vastness and complexity of the phenomenon calls for a profound analysis of the structural changes that have taken place, namely the globalization of economics and of social life. The convergence of races, civilizations and cultures within one and the same juridical and social order, poses an urgent problem of cohabitation. Frontiers tend to disappear, distances are shortened, the repercussion of events is felt up to the farthest areas. [1464]

We are witnessing a profound change in the way of thinking and living, which cannot but present ambiguous aspects together with the positive elements. The sense of temporariness, for instance, induces one to prefer what is new to the detriment of stability and a clear hierarchy of values. At the same time, the spirit becomes more curious and open, more sensitive and ready for dialogue. In this climate, people may be induced to deepen their own convictions, but also to indulge in superficial relativism. Mobility always implies an uprooting from the original environment, often translated into an experience of marked solitude accompanied by the risk of fading into anonymity. This situation may lead to a rejection of the new environment, but also to accepting it a critically, in contrast to the preceding experience. At times, there could even be a willingness to undergo a passive modernization, which could easily be the source of cultural and social alienation. Human mobility means numerous possibilities to be open, to meet, to assemble; however it is not possible to ignore the fact that it also brings about manifestations of individual and collective rejection, a fruit of closed mentalities that are encountered in societies beset by imbalance and fear. [1465]

3. In her pastoral activity, the Church tries to take these serious problems constantly into consideration. The proclamation of the Gospel is directed towards the integral salvation of the human person, his authentic and effective liberation, through the achievement of conditions of life suitable to his dignity. The comprehension of the human being, that the Church acquired in Christ, urges her to proclaim the fundamental human rights and to speak out when they are trampled upon. Thus, she does not grow tired of affirming and defending the dignity of the human person, highlighting the inalienable rights that originate from it. Specifically, these are the right to have one's own country, to live freely in one's own country, to live together with one's family, to have access to the goods necessary for a dignified life, to preserve and develop one's ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage, to publicly profess one's religion, to be recognized and treated in all circumstances according to one's dignity as a human being. [1466]

These rights are concretely employed in the concept of universal common good, which includes the whole family of peoples, beyond every nationalistic egoism. The right to emigrate must be considered in this context. The Church recognizes this right in every human person, in its dual aspect of the possibility to leave one's country and the possibility to enter another country to look for better conditions of life. Certainly, the exercise of such a right is to be regulated, because practicing it indiscriminately may do harm and be detrimental to the common good of the community that receives the migrant. Before the manifold interests that are interwoven side by side with the [1467]

laws of the individual countries, it is necessary to have international norms that are capable of regulating everyone's rights, so as to prevent unilateral decisions that are harmful to the weakest.

In this regard, in the Message for Migrants' Day of 1993, I called to mind that although it is true that highly developed countries are not always able to assimilate all those who emigrate, nonetheless it should be pointed out that the criterion for determining the level that can be sustained cannot be based solely on protecting their own prosperity, while failing to take into consideration the needs of persons who are tragically forced to ask for hospitality. [1468]

4. Through her own pastoral activity, the Church tries her best not let migrants lack the light and the support of the Gospel. In the course of time, her attention towards Catholics who were leaving their country increased. Most of all towards the end of the XIX century, huge masses of Catholic migrants left Europe and navigated across the oceans. Sometimes, they found themselves in conditions that endangered their faith because of the lack of priests and structures. Not knowing the local language, and therefore unable to take advantage of the ordinary pastoral care of the adopted country, they were abandoned to themselves. [1469]

Thus, migration was in fact a danger for the faith, and that caused concern in many pastors who, in some cases, even reached the point of discouraging its practice. Later on, however, it became clear that the phenomenon could not be stopped. Thus the Church sought to introduce adequate forms of pastoral action, foreseeing that migration could become an effective way of spreading the faith in other countries. Based on the experience made in the course of the years, the Church later developed an organic pastoral care for emigrants and emanated the Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia Nazarethana* in 1952. Referring to migrants, it affirms that *it is necessary to see to it that they receive the same pastoral care and assistance enjoyed by the local Christians*, by adapting the structure provided by ordinary pastoral care for the preservation and growth of the faith of the baptized faithful, to the Catholic migrant's situation. [1470]

Subsequently, the II Vatican Council tackled the migration phenomenon in its various expressions: immigrants, emigrants, refugees, exiles, foreign students, put together, from the pastoral point of view, into the category of those who dwell outside their own country and therefore cannot take advantage of ordinary pastoral care. They are described as the faithful who, because they live outside their own country or nation, need specific assistance through a priest who speaks their own language. [1471]

We move on from considering the faith that is in danger to more aptly considering the right of the emigrant, to the respect for one's cultural heritage even in pastoral care. From this perspective, the limit placed by *Exsul Familia* of giving pastoral assistance only up to the third generation no longer holds, and the right of migrants to receive assistance as long as real need continues to exist, is affirmed. [1472]

In effect, migrants do not represent a category comparable to those that make up the parish population – children, youth, married people, laborers, employees, etc. – who are homogeneous in culture and language. They belong to another community, which should receive a pastoral care that bears similarities with that in the country of origin in terms of respect of the cultural heritage, the need for a priest of the same tongue [1473]

and the need for permanent specific structures. It is necessary to have a stable, personalized and communitarian care of souls, capable of helping the Catholic faithful at a time of emergency, up to their incorporation into the local Church, when they will be in the position to take advantage of the ordinary ministry of priests in the territorial parish.

5. These principles were included in the canonical regulations in force, which have incorporated the pastoral care for migrants in the ordinary pastoral care. Over and above the individual norms, and also as far as the pastoral care of human mobility is concerned, what characterizes the new Code is the ecclesiological inspiration of Vatican II underlying it. [1474]

The pastoral care of migrants has thus become an institutionalized activity, addressed to the faithful, considered not so much as individuals, but as members of a particular community for which the Church organizes a specific pastoral service. However, this service is, by its very nature, temporary and transitory, although the law does not set a definite time for its cessation. The organizational structure of such a service is not a substitution but is cumulative with respect to the territorial parochial care, which it is expected to join sooner or later. In fact, although the pastoral care of migrants takes into account the fact that a given community has its own tongue and culture, which cannot be ignored in daily apostolic work, it does not intend to make their preservation and development its specific objective. [1475]

6. History shows that in those cases wherein the Catholic faithful were accompanied during their moved to other countries, they did not only preserve their faith, but also found a fertile soil to deepen it, personalize it and bear witness to it through their lives. In the course of the centuries, migration represented a constant means of proclaiming the Christian message in entire regions. Today the picture of migration is radically changing: on one hand, the flow of Catholic migrants is decreasing; on the other hand, there is an increasing flow of non-Christian migrants, who settle in countries where the population is Catholic by majority. [1476]

In the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, I called to mind the task of the Church with respect to non-Christian migrants, underlining that by settling down, they create new occasions for contacts and cultural exchanges. These urge the Christian community to welcome, to dialogue, to help and towards fraternity. This presupposes a deeper awareness of the importance of the Catholic doctrine on non-Christian religions (cfr. Decl. *Nostra Aetate*), so as to be able to undertake an attentive, constant and respectful inter-religious dialogue as a means of mutual knowledge and enrichment. “In the light of the economy of salvation,” I wrote in the aforementioned Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, “the Church sees no conflict between proclaiming Christ and engaging in inter-religious dialogue. Instead she feels the need to link the two in the context of her mission *ad gentes*. These two elements must maintain both their intimate connection and their distinctiveness; therefore they should not be confused, manipulated or regarded as identical as though they were interchangeable” (no.55). [1477]

7. The presence of non-Christian immigrants in countries of ancient Christianity represents a challenge to the Church communities. The phenomenon continues to activate charity in the Church, in terms of welcome and aid for these brothers and sisters in their search for work and housing. Somehow, this action is quite similar to what many missionaries are doing in mission lands. They take care of the sick, the [1478]

poor, the illiterate. This is the disciple's way: he responds to the expectations and necessities of the neighbor in need, although the fundamental aim of his mission is the proclamation of Christ and his Gospel. He knows that the proclamation of Jesus is the first act of charity towards the human person, over and above any gesture of solidarity, however generous it may be. There is no true evangelization, in fact, "if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed." Ap. Exhort. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 22).

Sometimes, due to an environment dominated by growing religious relativism and indifference, it is difficult for the spiritual dimension of charitable undertakings to emerge. Some people fear that doing charity in view of evangelization could expose them to the accusation of proselytism. Proclaiming and bearing witness to the Gospel of charity constitutes the connective tissue of the mission towards migrants (cfr. Ap. Lett. *Novo millennio ineunte*, 56). [1479]

At this point, I would like to pay homage to the many apostles who have consecrated their existence to this missionary task. I would also like to recall the efforts that the Church has exerted to meet the expectations of migrants. Among them, I am pleased to mention the *International Catholic Migration Commission*, which will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of its foundation in 2001. In fact, it was instituted in 1951, by initiative of the then Substitute at the Secretariat of State, Msgr. Giovanni Battista Montini. It intended to offer a response to the exigencies of those involved in migratory movements, provoked by the need to re-propose the production machinery, which was damaged by the war, and the tragic situation in which entire populations found themselves. They were forced to move due to the new geopolitical order dictated by the winners. The association's fifty years of history, with the modifications adopted in order to cope better with changing situations, give witness to how various, attentive and substantial were its activities. Speaking at its inaugural session held on 5 June 1951, the future Pope Paul VI dwelt on the necessity to demolish the obstacles that prevented migration, so as to give the unemployed the possibility to work and the homeless a shelter. He added that the newborn International Commission for Migration's cause was the very cause of Christ himself. These words have entirely preserved their relevance. [1480]

As I give thanks to the Lord for the service it has rendered, I wish that the said Commission would carry on its commitment of attention and aid to refugees and migrants, with a vigor that becomes more and more concerned, the more difficult and uncertain the conditions of these categories of persons appear to be. [1481]

8. Today, the proclamation of the gospel of charity to the vast and diversified world of migrants implies a particular attention to the cultural environment. For many persons, going to a foreign country means encountering ways of life and thinking that is foreign to them, that produce different reactions. Cities and nations increasingly present multiethnic and multicultural communities. This is a great challenge for Christians, too. A serene reading of this new situation highlights many values that merit to be greatly appreciated. The Holy Spirit is not conditioned by ethnic groups or cultures. He enlightens and inspires people through many mysterious ways. Through various paths, he brings everyone close to salvation, to Jesus, the Word incarnate, who is "the fulfilment of the yearning of all the world's religions and, as such, he is their sole and definitive completion" (Ap. Lett. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, 6). [1482]

This reading will surely help the non-Christian migrant see his own religiosity as a strong element of cultural identity, and at the same time it will make it possible for him to discover the values of the Christian faith. To this end, the collaboration of the local Churches and missionaries who know the immigrants' culture will be useful more than ever. This means establishing links between the community of migrants and those of the countries of origin, and at the same time informing the communities of arrival regarding the cultures and the religions of the immigrants, and the reasons that have caused them to emigrate. [1483]

It is important to help the community of arrival not only in being open to charitable hospitality but also to a meeting, collaboration and exchange. Furthermore, it is opportune to open the way to pastoral agents who, from the countries of origin, come to the countries of immigration to work among their fellow countrymen. It would be very useful to institute for them centers of welcome that would prepare them for their new task. [1484]

9. This enriching intercultural and inter-religious dialogue presupposes a climate that is permeated with mutual trust and respects religious freedom. Among the sectors to be illuminated by the light of Christ therefore is freedom, particularly religious freedom, which is still at times limited or restricted. It is the premise and guarantee of every other authentic form of freedom. "Religious freedom" - I wrote in *Redemptoris Missio* - "is not a question of the religion of the majority or the minority, but of an inalienable right of each and every human person" (no. 39). [1485]

Freedom is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith itself, since it is not a transmission of human traditions, or a point of arrival of philosophical discussion, but a free gift of God, which is communicated with due respect for the human conscience. It is the Lord who acts efficaciously through his Spirit; it is He who is the true protagonist. People are instruments that He uses, to each of whom He assigns a singular role. [1486]

The Gospel is for everyone. No one is excluded from the possibility of participating in the joy of the divine Kingdom. The mission of the Church today is exactly that of giving every human being, regardless of culture or race, the concrete possibility of meeting Christ. I wholeheartedly wish that this possibility be offered to all migrants and for this, I assure my prayers. [1487]

I entrust the commitment and the generous intentions of those who take care of migrants, to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, humble Servant of the Lord, who lived the pains of migration and exile. In the new millennium, may she be the guide of migrants towards Him who is "the real light that gives light to everyone" (*Jn 1:9*). [1488]

With these wishes, I wholeheartedly impart to all agents in this important field of pastoral action a special Apostolic Blessing.

*From the Vatican, 2 February 2001*

**John Paul II**

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Source: *Message of the Holy Father for the 87th World Day of Migration 2001. "The Pastoral Care of Migrants, a Way of Accomplishing the Mission of the Church Today."* Available from Vatican's website:  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20010213\\_world-migration-day-2001\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20010213_world-migration-day-2001_en.html).

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