

LEARNING TO RESPECT CULTURAL DIVERSITY

VATICAN CITY, DEC 9, 2004 (VIS) - This morning in the Holy See Press Office, Cardinal Stephen Fumio Hamao, president of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, presented the Holy Father's Message for the World Day of the Migrant and Refugee in 2005. Its theme this year is "Intercultural Integration."

Cardinal Hamao indicated that "when we speak about intercultural issues we tend to concentrate on the topic of different cultures and we forget about the condition of migrants who suffer social inequality." He underscored the need "to eliminate obstacles to social equality for migrants, while valuing the differences of people coming from different cultural contexts."

"Cultural diversity," he continued, "is above all an exchange among people of different cultural backgrounds and with legitimate, different points of view on society. ... It is a movement of reciprocity, a path taken with others towards others."

Referring to intercultural dialogue, the president of the dicastery said that its purpose "is not only to educate people about culture and getting to know other people, but especially to educate people about how others have learned how to do things, methods that they have adopted to understand the world, God, life, love and suffering."

Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the pontifical council, commented on the instruction "Erga migrantes caritas Christi" (The love of Christ toward migrants), published on May 14 of this year which referred to multiculturalism.

The document, he recalled, emphasizes that we find ourselves before "cultural and religious pluralism which has never been experienced before in such a conscious way." In addition, he said "we Christians are called to bear witness to the Gospel of charity and peace with respect and attention for the traditions and cultures of immigrants," as the text says.

Speaking about migration, ethnic and cultural pluralism and the unity of the Church, Archbishop Marchetto, citing the instruction, indicated that "migration brings to each local Church the opportunity to verify its catholicity which consists not only in accepting different ethnicities but also in making a community of these ethnicities. Ethnic and cultural pluralism in the Church is not a situation that should be tolerated as a temporary one but rather it should be seen as a structural dimension."

"One of the most difficult challenges in the third millennium," he concluded, "is to learn how to live united in diversity and multiplicity of cultures, ethnicities and religions. Respect and recognition of the different cultural identities must not be an obstacle but a basic condition to build up humanity, united in diversity."

Father Michael Blume, S.V.D., council under-secretary, spoke on the general vision of integration, and started by citing statistics on the 175 million people in the world who, as migrants, find themselves outside their native land. He noted that an estimated 56 million are in Europe, 50 million in Asia, 41 million in North America,

16 million in Africa and 6 million in both Latin American countries and the Caribbean and in Oceania.

He pointed out that the United States, as a country, has the highest number of migrants with 35 million people coming from an estimated 40 countries. Migrants in Germany come from 18 nations and Japan hosts people from at least 10 countries. Father Blume said that "these statistics tell us that today societies are comprised of people from various nations, therefore, from diverse cultures, traditions, languages, customs, religions, values, etc. ... Host countries cannot ignore the fact that they no longer have homogenous populations."

The under-secretary explained that "integration" is a complex phenomenon that involves both the host country and the arriving guests. Migrants must integrate themselves into the host culture by learning the language and customs and by adapting to social life, yet they must not lose sight of their own specific and valuable cultural legacy. If migrants "do not succeed in slowly opening themselves to the vaster reality of the society they now live in, they run the danger of forming a ghetto with subsequent marginalization."

He closed his remarks by noting how Christian communities can help in welcoming migrants and assisting in the true process of integration which "implies mutual esteem and sympathy, reciprocal appreciation in a climate of 'authentic understanding and good will'."