



REFLECTION ON POPE FRANCIS’ 109TH WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES MESSAGE

“Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay”

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In this year’s World Day for Migrants and Refugees Message, Pope Francis focuses on the theme, “Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay.”

In the message he points out that for a healthy society there should always be “the freedom that should always mark the decision to leave one’s native land.”

Migration movements throughout the world continue unabated. The Pope insists that we should always be “ensuring that that freedom is a widely shared pastoral concern.”

We don't often reflect on this given our current understanding of refugees, but the Pope reminds us, once again, that there are Biblical examples of refugees. We think first of all of the experiences of the Holy Family - Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The Pope notes, "The flight of the Holy Family into Egypt was not the result of a free decision." He then insists that, "The decision to migrate should always be free, yet in many cases, even in our day, it is not." He reminds us of St John Paul II who stated that there should be a real commitment "to safeguarding first of all the right not to emigrate, that is, the right to live in peace and dignity in one's own country."

The other example given in the Pope's message is the flight of Jacob and all his offspring with him (Gen 46:6). Due to a grave famine in their land of origin, it necessitated them "to seek refuge in Egypt, where his son Joseph ensured their survival." We are all aware that "Migrants flee because of poverty, fear or desperation." The Pope makes the very important point that the country of origin must make a commitment which "begins with asking what we can do, but also what we need to stop doing." He cites the example of "the arms race, economic colonialism, the plundering of other people's resources and the devastation of our common home."

For migration to be truly a choice that is free, "efforts must be made to ensure to everyone an equal share in the common good, respect for his or her fundamental rights, and access to an integral human development." In anticipating the Jubilee Year of 2025, Pope Francis recalls the important dimension of jubilee years as "an act of collective justice." Here people are able to return to their places of origin with the intention of "the cancellation of all debts, restoration of the land, and an opportunity once more to enjoy the freedom proper to the members of the People of God." In other words the right not to be forced to immigrate is "the chance to live in peace and with dignity in one's own country."

The Pope concludes his reflection by reminding us again that "the migrant is not simply a brother or sister in difficulty, but Christ himself, who knocks at our door." We are to construct "bridges and not walls, expanding channels for a safe and regular migration."