

1979

Letter to Card. Sebastiano Baggio, President of the Pontifical  
Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People

### **The Terrible Tragedy of Forced Migrations**

*Card. Agostino Casaroli*  
*Secretary of State*

22 November 1979

*We are pleased to open this second volume of the Report of the World Pastoral Congress on Emigration with the text of the Message addressed by the Holy Father, by letter of the Cardinal Secretary of State, to His Eminence the Cardinal President of the Pontifical Commission, for “Migrant’s Day” which is observed, from the first Sunday of Advent onwards, in the various countries at different periods of the liturgical year 1979-1980.* [922]

Your Eminence,

For the second time since the beginning of His ministry on the Cathedral of Peter, the Holy Father wishes to play His part in the observance of “Migrant’s Day” decreed throughout the world by the Episcopal Conferences for the purpose of calling the attention of their people to the needs of our emigrant brethren. As both ancient and contemporary history testifies, we are dealing with a lasting phenomenon which, in the various forms it may assume, cannot be a matter of indifference to Christians who must always recognise in their own kind that “higher value” of being, in each and every one, the living image of God.

So it is, then, that from proclaiming the greatness and dignity of man, every single man, as a creature of God, object of Christ’s redemptive love, brother of every other man, derives logically the dutiful solicitude of the Church and all its members towards those thousands involved, sometimes of their own free will but more often through the pressure of sorrowful circumstances, in the reality of migration. [923]

It is well known that the Church has, over a long time, built up a particular tradition in this very delicate field. Limiting ourselves only to modern migrations, it will be recalled that, during the first world war, Pope Benedict XV made special provisions for migrants and appointed an Ordinary in Italy with the care of refugees. Pius XI showed a special sensitivity to the needs of the numerous Russian exiles and for all emigrants of Slav rite, encouraging the Polish Episcopate to welcome and offer assistance to Eastern European refugees, whatever may have been their provenance or religion. And who does not remember the great pages of history written by Pius XII with his impressive programme of spiritual and material help from which people of every ethnic origin benefited in the dramatic fleeing of peoples caused by the last conflict. Your Eminence himself, at the opening of last February’s World Congress of the Pastoral Work of Migration, called to mind the assiduous efforts of Paul VI in support of the rights of the most needy migrants. [924]

This year, unhappily, an event of particular gravity in this area has confronted the entire world, that of the immense forced emigration, still going on, in south-east Asia; so that, on the occasion of the above-mentioned “Migrant’s Day», the Supreme Pontiff naturally regards it with the greatest concern. Even if instances of forced exodus have happened in almost every era, the tragic phenomenon taking place before our eyes is truly of alarming proportions and brings with it a woeful burden of human suffering of incalculable dimensions and consequence. Already during the first year of his Pontificate, our Holy Father John Paul II has referred with insistence to this dramatic problem, appealing with heartfelt concern for the collective intervention of public opinion, governments and international organisations but, above all, that of the Catholic communities and their pastors. [925]

The present happenings in south-east Asia have, in fact, threatened the most elementary right of man: the right to live, the right to survive. The Holy Father has, therefore, raised his voice many times, making it heard in the right quarters and, at the same time, has rallied the entire Catholic family to the cause. [926]

At the noonday meeting with the faithful on the first Sunday of last Advent, he issued a pressing invitation to prayer: “Let us pray for those Vietnamese who, having fled their own country, are suffering because they can find no-one to welcome them with feelings of humanity or who will help them in their misfortune and their needs. Hopeful that the appeal made by the Holy See through the United Nations may achieve its desired effect, I invite all of you to pray that the Lord will support and bless the efforts of all those who devote themselves to assisting these brothers of ours in their plight” (Osservatore Romano 4-5 December 1978). [927]

As a pilgrim apostle at Puebla, in one of the most significant religious moments of the new pontificate, the Vicar of Christ did not fail to manifest his concern in this matter. To the members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the City of Mexico, he said: “I am referring to the growing number of refugees scattered throughout the world and to the tragic situation which besets the refugees of south-east Asia. Exposed to the risks of a dangerous voyage, they are also seized with anxiety from fear that their request for asylum may not be granted, and from the fear that there may be a long delay before there is any possibility of them starting life afresh in any country prepared to receive them. The solution of this tragic problem”, warned the Holy Father, “is the responsibility of all nations, and I express the desire that the competent international organisations may, in dealing with this humanitarian problem, count on the understanding and help of the countries of every continent” (O.R. 28.1.79). [928]

The urgency and extensive consequences of the terrible tragedy moved the Supreme Pontiff, once again, to address himself to the whole of humanity with the intention of stirring the consciences of each and every person. His paternal plea was made, in resounding terms, during the Public Audience in Piazza San Pietro on the 20th June: “I appeal to the conscience of humanity, that all may assume their share of responsibility, peoples and governments, in the name of a solidarity which surpasses frontiers, races and ideologies” (O.R. 22.VI.79). Addressing himself in the same circumstances to the Church, the Pope, acknowledging the considerable work of charity already carried out, called for a more massive action from the grassroots up: “The Pastors in their dioceses will not fail to encourage the faithful, [929]

reminding them, in the name of the Lord, that every man, every woman, every child in need, is our neighbour. Parishes, Catholic organisations, religious communities and even Christian families will find ways of expressing their charity towards the refugees. Let each one commit himself personally to lend a practical hand to the full extent of his generosity and love-inspired creativity”.

From the tribune of the most representative and high-level gathering of peoples, [930] during his historic visit to the United Nations the Supreme Pontiff vigorously affirmed that the fundamental way of peace “passes through every man, through the definition, recognition and respect of the inalienable rights of persons and communities.” He also repeated these words during the Angelus meeting with the people on Sunday, the 28th October, giving special thought to the “sorely tried people of Cambodia, a country in which recent events have created hundreds of thousands of victims and refugees, whilst hunger and disease are rife amongst a people already fearfully depleted in numbers. International appeals”, said the Pope, “have been launched to help the refugees who crowd over the frontier between Cambodia and Thailand. Catholic charitable organisations continue to send generous and considerable help to the extent they can. Let us pray that the massacres may come to an end and that the scourge may be lifted from the back of those brothers of ours who, though for the main part non-Christians, are nevertheless our brothers and children of God like us” (O.R. 29-30.X.79).

The impulse which drives the Church was illustrated by the same Pontiff on the [931] previous day in his Discourse to those taking part in the plenary meeting of Cor Unum: the charitable action of the Church, he affirmed, derives from the well-spring of the Gospel, from the charity of Christ, from the compassion of Christ suffering for all suffering humanity (cf. O.R. 28.X.79). Those who, in the various ecclesial bodies, devote themselves to the care of migrants are daily aware, in terms of human cost, of every form of forced emigration for either ideological or economic reasons. It is they, more than others, who are able to measure the weight which presses so heavily on the humblest of people, on their families, and particularly on the women and children ».

The Holy Father, therefore, has full confidence in those who work in these [932] organisations, knowing that he will find in them the greatest and fullest readiness to deal, as far as possible, with this sad situation of south-east Asia, in which the concept of migrant tragically coincides with that of refugee.

Thus, under the impulse of the Episcopal Conferences and Commissions, the [933] liturgical rites and the various initiatives with which “Migrant’s Day” is observed, will acquire this year a character of more vital relevance and will be able to evoke new and practical responses to the heartfelt pleading of the Lord who, especially through the mouth of the south-east Asian refugees, repeats the ancient phrase: “I was a stranger and you brought me in!” (Mt. 25,35).

With corresponding faith, His Holiness expresses, in advance, his gratitude to all [934] those who will listen to his insistent invitation and, whilst his thoughts go affectionately to the migrants, especially the most needy among them, he imparts to all, as a pledge of strength, his heartfelt Apostolic Blessing.

I avail myself of the circumstances to offer Your Eminence my own good wishes and sentiments of highest esteem.

The Vatican, 22nd November 1979

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Secretary of State to His Holiness

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Source: *Letter from the Cardinal Secretary of State on behalf of John Paul II, to the President of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant People, "The Terrible Tragedy of Forced Migration."* *On the Move*, 9:27 (1979):1-6.

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