

1980

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

**An Ever More Adequate and Enlightened Pastoral  
Service to the Emigrant Family**

*Card. Agostino Casaroli*  
*Secretary of State*

8 November 1980

Your Eminence,

[935]

In transmitting, through me, his message on the occasion of Emigration Day (which the Churches of the various nations celebrate annually on the most convenient date), the Holy Father wishes to recall the attention of the Episcopal Conferences to the theme of the recently concluded Synod. For the migrant family, like every Christian family, also has a mission to fulfil in the contemporary world: above all, it is and must be a domestic church (Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 11), a domestic sanctuary of the Church (Decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11).

1. The family is the basic cell of society, even though it has become today — especially in emigration — one of its most vulnerable parts. Apart from being afflicted by the general social crisis, the emigrant family runs the risk, precisely due to the phenomenon of emigration, of seeing its two basic mainstays weakened: stability and cohesion (cf. Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, 51). At the present time, emigration involves some fifty million people. This huge flux includes hundreds and thousands of emigrant husbands and wives who are obliged to submit to forced separation, even if one may note with relief that the reuniting of spouses and families is becoming an increasingly strong concern and interest in legislation and international agreements aimed at regulating or disciplining migratory policy. [936]

At the same time, however, as regards foreign labour, the end of maximum yield with minimum expenditure on infrastructures and social security contributions is still too often being pursued today. Instead of families, single men are preferred, herded together in collective housing estates, if not in mere huts. Single women, too, are wanted. To these men and women, forced under economic duress or by social circumstance to emigrate alone, often as seasonal workers, one must add the thousands and thousands of people who are forced to abandon their country through political and religious persecutions or ideological conflicts which disturb so much of social life today. [937]

Such a state of affairs can all too easily have disastrous moral effects which lead to the disintegration of family unity. There is, furthermore, the problem of children. Their integral education takes place within the family. It is only within the family that reciprocal exchange, open-mindedness, communion of sentiments, consultation and collaboration between spouses may, as regards so delicate a field as the [938]

education of children, be expressed in a spontaneous and natural fashion (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 51).

Now this primary mission is made extremely difficult if one or both parents are forced to emigrate and leave their children behind them at home, entrusted to the care of relations or social institutions. Emigration, in such cases, has profoundly negative repercussions which induce a genuine trauma both in parents and children. [939]

The child's physical, social, emotional and psychological potential, demands the support of the environment which may facilitate and accompany its development; and such an environment is essentially constituted by the presence of parents and family life with them. Parents, in turn, if forcibly deprived of the presence of their children and family life with them, are stripped of that interaction and communion which enables and enhances their mission, and feel that the sentimental and moral charge that sustained their commitment to married life is in the process of being extinguished. In parents, the bond of affections and interests is in fact developed and matured in its manifestations if they are committed to the challenge of the education of their children. The very sacrifices made to gain economic and financial security, especially with a view to ensuring their children of a better future, may as a result lose much of their sense in their eyes. [940]

2. Yet even the family which succeeds in emigrating without divisions between parents and children is not exempt from serious problems. [941]

In general, such a family emigrates from a rural environment, dominated by traditional moral principles, ideas and values, and not yet profoundly disturbed by the ferments of a secularized, if not actually de-Christianized society. On its arrival in the country of immigration, it often finds itself in an industrialized world which, by its very complexity, hampers its assimilation and tends to give it a sense of isolation. This phenomenon of isolation derives from a series of circumstances: inability to speak the local language, the different way of life with consequent difficulties of adaptation, frequently poor housing conditions, and so on. [942]

The overcoming of these difficulties in adaptation is further impeded by the family's heartfelt desire to return to its home country as soon as possible, once it has reaped the financial benefits which made it emigrate in the first place. [943]

Nor can we ignore the fact that the isolation of the emigrant family is not infrequently exacerbated by prejudice and discrimination. All these factors give rise, sometimes insensibly, to restraints in relations between husband and wife, between parents and children, with the imminent threat of the breakdown in communication. [944]

The family unit thus finds itself threatened by disintegration. On the one hand, the parents are, in spite of everything, prepared to endure toil, sacrifice, humiliation and psychological and emotional deprivation in order to, provide their children with an education and a future. On the other hand, however, the children themselves, in going to school, learning the local language and assimilating a different culture, are all too easily led to depreciate the generosity and self-sacrifice of their parents, [945]

whose values and principles they reject. The possibility of a happy and serene family life is thus transformed into the bitterest disillusion. Significantly, a reflection of this state of affairs can also be found in the message issued by the Bishops of Europe at Subiaco (L' Osservatore Romano, 29-30 September 1980).

3. In response to this situation of the family in emigration, the Holy Father wishes to urge the need for an ever more adequate and enlightened pastoral service. [946]

Pastoral workers should intensify their efforts to draw close to the emigrant family with the love and light of Christ, with esteem and with the desire to study and understand its problems, in full and vigilant respect for the values and models instilled in its heart and spirit, in order to offer guidance and counsel on the many anxieties, difficulties, cares and aspirations that oppress it. Only in this way may they find credibility in the emigrant family and convince it to view the harsh reality of emigration in the light of the faith, helping it gradually to overcome its problems, and to become or remain a truly Christian family, united, faithful and pledged to living the Gospel and embodying the example of the family of the Nazareth. [947]

Pastoral workers in the field of emigration cannot expect a rapid integration in the local environment, nor even in the religious manifestations of the host area: manifestations which the emigrant family often fails to understand as authentic and substantially conforming to its specific traditions: inculturation, in religion too, and perhaps especially in it, requires time, sometimes even the change of generations. We should recall, in this regard, the directives and guidelines that appear in the most significant documents of the Magisterium; *Exsul Familia*, *Christus Dominus* of Vatican Council II, *Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, *De Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, and *Church and People on the Move*. [948]

It is to these indications that the Holy Father recurs in speaking, during his many journeys, the Bishops, priests, members of religious orders and lay people engaged in the apostolate of emigration. It is enough to recall, in this regard, the message he addressed in Paris on 31 May to Polish emigrants in France. After praising the Polish priests for having helped the emigrants themselves to preserve their faith, identity, language and links with their homeland, the Pope — referring to the delicate problem of integration — expressed himself as follows: “Integration is undoubtedly a major problem for everyone and necessary. Today no one can enclose himself in his own ghetto. You should serve the country in which you live, work for it, love it, and contribute to its progress; in doing so, you will develop yourselves, what is in you and forms you, without distorting, without cancelling those lineaments which, traced backwards through your parents and past generations, perhaps many already, are rooted in a more modest and poorer reality than the one in which you live, but which are nevertheless great and precious.” [949]

The Holy Father's words testify to a long-matured experience: integration occurs all the more easily and authentically if it is achieved in freedom, and if immigrants feel themselves accepted and respected in their uniqueness, in their culture and tradition. Nothing, on the other hand, like freedom and the feeling of being accepted makes them love their country and society of adoption; and so integration becomes a source of enrichment for the local Church itself, to which it brings new “ voices ” [950]

and new stimuli. As directly concerns the family unit, moreover, the possibility of maturing and developing in the context of its traditional values, though enriched with the contribution of those it succeeds in absorbing in the new environment, ensures it of a stability and cohesion which would otherwise be jeopardized.

The Holy Father is glad to use this occasion to renew the expression of his appreciation for all those who so generously devote themselves to the service of emigrants and strive so unstintingly and intelligently to help them find appropriate solutions — both human and Christian — to the problems connected with their family life. In encouraging them to pursue so meritorious and urgent a pastoral mission with renewed zeal, he invokes on them an abundance of heavenly favours, as a pledge of which he imparts his heartfelt and propitiatory Apostolic Blessing, which extends with fatherly affection to all families involved in the great flux of modern migrations. [951]

I avail myself of this occasion to send you my kindest regards.

**Cardinal Agostino Casaroli**

Secretary of State

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Source: Letter from the Cardinal Secretary of State to Cardinal S. Baggio, President of the Pontifical Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People: "An Ever More Adequate and Enlightened Pastoral Service to the Emigrant Family." *On the Move*, 10:30 (1980): 4-9.

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