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

Migrants' Culture Must Be Protected

Card. Agostino Casaroli
Secretary of State

21 September 1981

Your Eminence,

[956]

On the occasion of the annual “Migrants’ Day” which is to be celebrated on a convenient date in the various nations, the Holy Father wishes to make his presence once again felt by one of his messages and to united himself, at the same time, with the prayers of the individual local Churches. Referring to what he had occasion to write last year on the problems of the family in emigration, he would now like to recall the attention of the Episcopal Conference to the important question of the cultural identity of migrants, whose respect and development demands the commitment of an adequate pastoral service.

In tackling this vexed problem of the relation between the cultural identity and pastoral care of migrants, some telling remarks, so rich in inspiration and luminous in guidance, made by the Holy Father in his address to the UNESCO General Conference on 2 June 1980, spring to mind: “Man lives a truly human life thanks to culture; ... culture is a special way of ‘existing’ for man; it is, in fact, what enables man to become more man, what enables him to enter more fully into being and into his own being”. In other words, culture is the manifestation of man’s personal – and thus spiritual and transcendent – identity; it is the specific sign of his vocation of liberty and his destiny of immortality. [957]

Since the end of the Second World War up to our own times, many millions of emigrants and refugees have been uprooted from their homelands, their families and their local Churches, and have transferred their culture to new countries abroad: in so doing, they have often been subjected to discrimination and marginalization, due to their race, ethnic origin and religion (cf. Octogesima Adveniens, 16). They represent a large slice of humanity embodying in our own day sufferings and hopes; anguish and expectation, to which the Church, in her maternal solicitude, intends to respond by proclaiming the mystery of the Father and his love in Christ (cf. Enc. Lett. Dives in Misericordia, I, 1). [958]

A pastoral service aimed at proclaiming the Gospel message and discovering the mystery of God and of man cannot fail to take account of the cultural peculiarities of the people to which both characterize their spirit and provide the key to the deepest and most closely-guarded secrets to their life (cf. John Paul II, Discourse to the Diplomatic Corps, 12 January 1981). This is a heritage which must be recognized and fostered, just like the individual himself who is its bearer, both in [959]

respect for the dignity of the person and in conformity with the very nature of the Church's pastoral service.

1. Meaning and value of culture

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Every man, at birth, is received into a cultural world which is absorbed indissolubly into his personality. This absorption is destined to be developed by means of multiform relations with others; it becomes the concrete mode of man's existence, with its sum of feelings, affections, thoughts and experiences.

Man has a right to be respected in this complex personal heritage. The Second Vatican Council emphasized this by affirming: "The scope of public authority extends, not to determining the proper nature of cultural forms, but to building up the environment and the provision of assistance favourable to the development of culture, without overlooking minority groups in the nation... In this way all the individuals and social groups of a particular people will be able to attain a full development of their cultural life in harmony with their capabilities and traditions" (Past. Const. *Gadium et Spes*, 59, 60).

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This respect has often been lacking in the past and even today it cannot be claimed to be invariably recognized and practiced. It may, however, be noted with some satisfaction that the public authorities and competent international organizations are making increasing efforts to ensure that migrants, refugees and exiles are offered the chance of maintaining and reinforcing their links with their original culture, for it is only by doing so that migrants are able to contribute to social and cultural enrichment.

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The essential components of the cultural identity of migrants also include the way in which they express their faith and practice their religion. The various ethnic groups express their identity in characteristic religious practices which are at the same time the sign and manifestation of their faith, both at the individual and community level. The Church, in defending and promoting the right to cultural identity, also recognizes and includes the expressions of this right in the religious field. In fact, "migrants bring with them their own way of thinking, their own language, their own culture and their own religion. All this constitutes a spiritual patrimony of thought, tradition and culture which will endure even outside their homeland. This patrimony must therefore be everywhere taken in to the greatest consideration" (*De Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, AAS, LXI [1969], n.4 and 11).

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2. Pastoral approach to migrants' cultural identity

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The Church is, by its very nature, one and catholic. She is, in fact, the Body of Christ, and her unity is given by the Head: Jesus Christ who keeps her firmly unified with his vivifying Spirit, transcending all cultural differences. The Church, through the strength of the Spirit, "speaks every language, understand and embraces all tongues in charity, and thus overcomes the dispersion of Babel... Both Christ and the Church which bears witness to him transcend the distinctions of race and nationality, and so cannot be considered as strangers to anyone or in any place" (*Decr. Ad Gentes*, 4 and 8).

Each local or particular Church is catholic – a realization of the one Church of Christ. Migrants should not, in the practice of their faith, feel themselves to be strangers in any country or in any region in which the Church of Christ lives and works, and celebrates the Eucharist, the mystery of charity and source of unity; in the Eucharist all feel themselves to be brothers. [965]

It is from the catholic character of the Church which derives her unity from the ceaseless action of the vivifying Spirit and aspires to the unification of the human family in Christ that the directives for a concrete and effective pastoral service in favour of migrants – aimed, in multiplicity of forms, at a more convinced and real sense of brotherhood – proceed. These directives may be summarized as follows: [966]

a.)The local Church has the duty to respect, and indeed promote, the cultural identity of migrants who embody values rooted in the age-old experiences of their respective peoples – peoples which have given rise in the course of time to often admirable forms and expressions of civilization, art and religion which form the intimate structure of their personality. This is an attitude of brotherly charity which cannot fail to be an object of deep concern and which will facilitate the migrant’s heartfelt collaboration. [967]

b.)In safeguarding this cultural identity both as a whole and in its single constituent parts, the local Church will learn to appreciate their value and the positive role they can play, also in relation to the promotion of social stability in the host country. In fact, migrants often come into contact with a largely agnostic or indifferently religious society in which a “secularized” mentality prevails: a society whose widespread hedonistic and permissive implications do not consolidate, and sometimes threaten, the foundations of order, progress and true well-being. Now, if correctly evaluated at the operational level, the firm cultural and religious roots of so many migrants constitute a bulwark, a constant safeguard against the natural and recurrent temptations to succumb to a materialistic and secularized mentality. [968]

c.)At the same time, however, the local Church cannot fail to respond to the urgent need to ensure that migrants are thoroughly incorporated into the living fabric of the host nation and especially the ecclesial community. Only by so doing can tension and conflict be avoided, reciprocal interaction facilitated, and the phenomenon of immigrations enabled to become an enrichment to all through the contribution of the various cultures. [969]

In sum, the local Churches must offer immigrants a pastoral service which enables them in some sense to feel “at home” – in an environment, that is of understanding, harmony and reciprocal help. [970]

3. The migrant’s conduct in relation to his own cultural identity [971]

The migrant, too, must assume his own responsibilities towards his cultural identity through a positive and open attitude which demands awareness and commitment.

He is called to overcome his natural inferiority complex and eliminate his feeling of under privilege, in the mature consciousness of being the bearer of cultural and [972]

religious values which may contribute to the good of society in general and of the local Church in particular. Though forming part of his own “community of migrants,” assisted by priests of the same language and culture (cf. *Exsul Familia*, XLIV [1952], p.692; *Motu Proprio Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*, AAS, LXI [1969], n.12’ *Church and People on the Move*, AAS, LXX [1978], 4), the migrant must not feel himself exempted from participating with generous intention in the solemn liturgical celebrations, as in the cultural events, of the host people. He must make an effort to learn their language and understand their fundamental cultural endowments in order to identify and accept their authentic values. At the same time, the migrant must make an effort to approach with brotherly spirit the other immigrant groups present in the same country, coming from other peoples, cultures and religions, or other Christian confessions.

The migrant’s primary commitment remains, however, that of deepening his own Christian faith, so as to be everywhere a serene and convinced witness to the Gospel, salt of the earth and light of the world, according to Our Lord’s commandment and in harmony with the compelling need of his own conscience, evoked by the force of truth. A life lived in conformity with his own faith, in the midst of a vast and institutable range of sufferings, anxieties and difficulties, if on the one hand it enables him to accept and sublimate the harsh reality of emigration, induces, on the other, the host populations to accept and respect his peculiarities of culture and tradition. [973]

4. The sense of catholicity and cultural identity [974]

In his homily during the Mass celebrated in the stadium of Karachi on 19 February 1981, the Holy Father, speaking of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Unity, described the Church’s sense of catholicity in the following eloquent words: “This great Sacrament which enables us to participate in the life of Christ, also unites us one with another, together with all the members of the Church, with all the baptized of every age and culture. Although we who belong to the Church are scattered throughout the world, although we speak different languages, have different cultural traditions and are citizens of different countries, because there is only one bread, we are many in a single body, precisely because we all partake of this one bread”.

The documents of the papal magisterium which propose the specialized apostolate for migrants to the Episcopal Conferences are all imbued with a sense of catholicity. They urge the understanding and diligent care both of the Churches from which migrants depart and those in the areas in which they re-settle. They also affirm that these particular Churches should, in the pastoral ministry of this sector, simultaneously inspired by unity and respect for different and varied cultural identities, be the embodiment and realization of the Catholic Church, whose redemptive action is born and extends from the one altar, for it is one Eucharistic sacrifice which found and builds up the Church. [975]

The Supreme Pontiffs, particularly from Pius XII onwards, have constantly pursued and expounded this objective, pointing out that the Churches in areas of immigration are developed and matured as Church also in proportion as they welcome into their midst the spiritual religious and cultural riches of migrants in a [976]

genuine ecclesial experience of universality.

John Paul II, in the apostolic pilgrimage accomplished with tireless resolve over these last three years, has not ignored the occasion to speak to migrants: he has presented the reality of their religious and cultural identity as a potential force for irradiating the faith and as a valid means of missionary action: a potential on which the Church has always drawn in the course of her two-thousand – year-old history of salvation to realize the incarnation of the Gospel in the various cultures. In this regard it will be sufficient to cite a passage from the discourse addressed by the Holy Father to Polish migrants in Germany on 16 November 1980. He began by quoting some significant passages from the solemn declaration addressed by the European Bishops to the world on the occasion of the jubilee year of St. Benedict, Patron of Europe: “Liberty and justice demand that individuals and peoples have sufficient scope for developing the values intrinsic to them. Each people, each ethnic minority has its own identity, tradition and culture”. The Holy Father then went on: “Everyone must therefore protect, review and develop whatever is in him, whatever is intrinsic to him, whatever is inscribed in his heart; he must remember his land and the heritage from which he has grown and by which he has been formed, and which constitutes an integral part of his psyche and personality. The man who is conscious of the identity bequeathed him by the faith and Christian culture of his forefathers and fathers will preserve his dignity, meet with the respect of others, and be a full member in the society in which he lives.” [977]

This means, as has already been said, that the Christian, no matter what country he should emigrate to, should feel himself to be a living member of the Church and not a stranger; and through the witness of his own faith he will incarnate the universal values of justice, peace and love which cannot fail to enrich the host country, contribute to its common good and promote its social cohesion. [978]

The Holy Father, therefore, urges the Episcopal Conferences and all those who, following their directives, carry out a generous pastoral service in favour of migrants, to pursue and extend a prudent and clear-sighted activity, inspired by the love of Christ, and responding simultaneously to the needs prompted by the most genuine respect for individual groups of migrants, and those deriving from the unity and catholicity of the Church. A union of spirits and practical intentions will thus be established between the local Church and immigrant communities: a union which, reflecting the reality of the primitive Church: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32), will inspire and diffuse the joy of brotherly love, as in the words of the Psalmist: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 132:1). [979]

With these vows, the Vicar of Christ, participating in the pastoral ministry of the individual Churches, invokes the light and comfort of divine assistance, in pledge of which he imparts his heartfelt Apostolic Blessing, with particular regard to all migrants and their families. [980]

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

Agostino Cardinal Casaroli
Secretary of State to His Holiness

Source: *Message from the Cardinal Secretary of State to Cardinal S. Baggio, President of the Pontifical Commission for the Spiritual Care of Migrants: "Migrants Culture Must Be Protected."* OR-EE (September 28, 1981):4-9
