

2006

Message

The Migrant Family

For the 93rd World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2007)

Benedict XVI

18 October 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

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On the occasion of the coming World Day of Migrants and Refugees, and looking at the Holy Family of Nazareth, icon of all families, I would like to invite you to reflect on the condition of the migrant family. The evangelist Matthew narrates that shortly after the birth of Jesus, Joseph was forced to leave for Egypt by night, taking the child and his mother with him, in order to flee the persecution of king Herod (cf. Mt 2:13-15). Making a comment on this page of the Gospel, my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Pope Pius XII, wrote in 1952: “The family of Nazareth in exile, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, emigrants and taking refuge in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are the model, the example and the support of all emigrants and pilgrims of every age and every country, of all refugees of any condition who, compelled by persecution and need, are forced to abandon their homeland, their beloved relatives, their neighbors, their dear friends, and move to a foreign land” (Exsul familia, AAS 44, 1952, 649). In this misfortune experienced by the Family of Nazareth, obliged to take refuge in Egypt, we can catch a glimpse of the painful condition in which all migrants live, especially, refugees, exiles, evacuees, internally displaced persons, those who are persecuted. We can take a quick look at the difficulties that every migrant family lives through, the hardships and humiliations, the deprivation and fragility of millions and millions of migrants, refugees and internally displaced people. The Family of Nazareth reflects the image of God safeguarded in the heart of every human family, even if disfigured and weakened by emigration.

The theme of the next World Day of Migrants and Refugees— *The migrant family* — is in continuity with those of 1980, 1986 and 1993. It intends to underline further the commitment of the Church not only in favor of the individual migrant, but also of his family, which is a place and resource of the culture of life and a factor for the integration of values. The migrant’s family meets many difficulties. The distance of its members from one another and unsuccessful reunification often result in breaking the original ties. New relationships are formed and new affections arise. Some migrants forget the past and their duties, as they are subjected to the hard trial of distance and solitude. If the immigrant family is not ensured of a real possibility of inclusion and participation, it is difficult to expect its harmonious development. The International Convention for the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and members of their families, which was enforced on July 1st, 2003, intends to defend men and women migrant workers and the members of their respective families. This means that the value of the family is recognized, also in the sphere of emigration, which is now a structural phenomenon of our societies. The Church encourages the ratification of the international legal instruments that aim to defend the

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rights of migrants, refugees and their families and, through its various Institutions and Associations, offers its advocacy that is becoming more and more necessary. To this end, it has opened Centres where migrants are listened to, Houses where they are welcomed, Offices for services offered to persons and families, with other initiatives set up to respond to the growing needs in this field.

Much is already being done for the integration of the families of immigrants, although [1808] much still remains to be done. There are real difficulties connected with some “defense mechanisms” on the part of the first generation immigrants, which run the risk of becoming an obstacle to the greater maturity of the young people of the second generation. This is why it is necessary to provide for legislative, juridical and social intervention to facilitate such an integration. In recent times, there is an increase in the number of women who leave their countries of origin in search of better conditions of life, in view of more promising professional prospects. However, women who end up as victims of trafficking of human beings and of prostitution are not few in number. In family reunification, social workers, especially religious women, can render an appreciated service of mediation that merits our gratitude more and more.

Regarding the integration of the families of immigrants, I feel it my duty to call your [1809] attention to the families of refugees, whose conditions seem to have gone worse in comparison with the past, also specifically regarding the reunification of family nuclei. In the camps assigned to them, in addition to logistic difficulties, and those of a personal character linked to the trauma and emotional stress caused by the tragic experiences they went through, sometimes there is also the risk of women and children being involved in sexual exploitation, as a survival mechanism. In these cases an attentive pastoral presence is necessary. Aside from giving assistance capable of healing the wounds of the heart, pastoral care should also offer the support of the Christian community, able to restore the culture of respect and have the true value of love found again. It is necessary to encourage those who are interiorly-wrecked to recover trust in themselves. Everything must also be done to guarantee the rights and dignity of the families and to assure them housing facilities according to their needs. Refugees are asked to cultivate an open and positive attitude towards their receiving society and maintain an active willingness to accept offers to participate in building together an integrated community that would be a “common household” for all.

Among migrants, there is a category that needs to be considered in a special way: the [1810] students from other countries, who are far from home, without an adequate knowledge of the language, at times without friends and often with a scholarship that is insufficient for their needs. Their condition is even worse if they are married. Through its Institutions, the Church exerts every effort to render the absence of family support for these young students less painful. It helps them integrate in the cities that receive them, by putting them in contact with families that are willing to offer them hospitality and facilitate knowing one another. As I had the opportunity to say on another occasion, helping foreign students is “an important field of pastoral action... Indeed, young people who leave their own country in order to study encounter many problems and especially the risk of an identity crisis” (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 15 December 2005).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the World Day of Migrants and Refugees become a useful [1811] occasion to build awareness, in the ecclesial community and public opinion, regarding the

needs and problems, as well as the positive potentialities of migrant families. My thoughts go in a special way to those who are directly involved in the vast phenomenon of migration, and to those who expend their pastoral energy in the service of human mobility. The words of the apostle Paul, “*caritas Christi urget nos*” (2 Cor. 5:14), urge us to give ourselves preferentially to our brothers and sisters who are most in need. With these sentiments, I invoke divine assistance on each one and I affectionately impart to all a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 18 October 2006

Source: Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for the 93rd World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2007. *People on the Move*, 38:102 (2006): 45-47.
