

1996

Message

The Circumstances of Migrants

For World Migration Day 1997

John Paul II

21 August 1996

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

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1. The circumstances of migrants and the painful misfortunes of refugees, sometimes insufficiently taken into account by public opinion, cannot fail to inspire deep sympathy and interest in believers. With this message for the World Day for Migrants and Refugees, in addition to expressing my constant attention to the often dramatic situation of those who leave their own homeland, I intend to invite Bishops, parish priests, consecrated persons, parish groups, ecclesial associations and volunteer groups to become increasingly aware of this phenomenon. The next World Day will afford the opportunity to reflect on the conditions of migrants and refugees and will be an incentive to identify their priority needs and to work out responses more in harmony with the respect of their dignity as persons and the duty to accept them.

The migratory phenomenon emerges today as a mass movement which largely involves the poor and needy, driven from their own countries by armed conflicts, precarious economic conditions, political, ethnic and social conflicts and natural catastrophes. But those who leave their country for other reasons are also numerous. The development of the means of transport, the rapidity of the spread of information, the multiplication of social relationships, more widespread prosperity, more free time and the growth of cultural interests have caused the movement of persons to acquire macroscopic and frequently uncontrollable dimensions, bringing a multiplicity of cultures to almost all the metropolises and giving rise to new social and economic conditions.

Then by mingling people of different religions in the fabric of daily coexistence, migration has made this one of the elements of social diversification. The countries in this category which have experienced the most tangible changes are certainly those in the West, with a Christian majority. In some of these the plurality of religions is not only widespread, but has also taken root, because the migratory flow has long existed. Some governments have already granted certain more substantial religious groups the status of a recognized religion, with the benefits that this implies in matters of protection, qualifications, freedom of action and financial support for cultural and social initiatives.

The Church, recognizing freedom of worship for every human being, is favourable to such legislation. Indeed, holding the members of the different religions in esteem and respect, she desires to establish effective relations of collaboration with them, and in a climate of trust and dialogue, she intends to cooperate to solve problems emerging in today's society.

2. The task of proclaiming the word of God, entrusted by Jesus to the Church, has been interwoven with the history of Christian emigration from the very beginning. In the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, I recalled that “in the early centuries, Christianity spread because Christians, traveling to or settling in regions where Christ had not yet been proclaimed, bore courageous witness to their faith and founded the first communities there” (n. 82). [134 1]

This has also happened in recent times. I wrote in 1989: “Often, flourishing Christian communities started out as small colonies of migrants which, under the leadership of a priest, met in humble buildings to hear the Word of God and to beg him for courage to face the trials and sacrifices of their difficult life” (*Message for World Migration Day, n. 2, Insegnamenti XII, 2. p. 491; L’Osservatore Romano English edition, 30 October, 1989, p. 8*). Many peoples came to know Christ through migrants who arrived from the lands evangelized in ancient times. [134 2]

Today the trend in migratory movement has been as it were inverted. It is non-Christians, increasingly numerous, who go to countries with a Christian tradition in search of work and better living conditions, and they frequently do so as illegal immigrants and refugees. This causes complex problems which are not easy to solve. For her part, the Church, like the Good Samaritan, feels it her duty to be close to the illegal immigrant and refugee, contemporary icon of the despoiled traveler, beaten and abandoned on side of the road to Jericho (cf. Lk. 10:30). She goes towards him, pouring “on his wounds the oil of consolation and the wine of hope” (Roman Missal, Common Preface VII), feeling herself called to be a living sign of Christ, who came that all might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). [134 3]

In this way she acts in the spirit of Christ and follows in his steps, at the same time attending to the proclamation of the Good News and to solidarity towards others, elements which are intimately united in the Church’s activity. [134 4]

3. However, the urgent need to go to the help of migrants in the precarious situations in which they often live must not hinder the proclamation of the ultimate realities on which Christian hope is founded. To evangelize is to account to everyone for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). [134 5]

The contemporary world, frequently scarred by injustice and selfishness, nonetheless shows surprising concern for the defence of the weak and the poor. Among Christians, in recent years, a longing for solidarity has been recorded, a longing which spurs to a more effective witness to the Gospel of charity. However, love and service to the poor must not lead to underestimating the need for faith, bringing out an artificial separation in the Lord’s one commandment, that invites us to love both God and our neighbour simultaneously. [134 6]

The Church’s commitment to migrants and refugees cannot be reduced merely to organizing structures of hospitality and solidarity. This attitude would impoverish the riches of the ecclesial vocation, called in the first place to transmit the faith, which “is strengthened when it is given to others” (*Redemptoris missio, n. 2*). At the end of our life we will be judged on love, on the acts of charity we have done to the “least” of our brothers and sisters (cf. Mt 25:31-45), but also on the courage and fidelity with which we have witnessed to Christ. In the Gospel he said: “So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32- [134 7]

33).

For the Christian, every activity has its beginning and its end in Christ: the baptized person acts, spurred by love for him, and knows that even the effectiveness of his actions springs from belonging to him: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). In imitation of Jesus and the Apostles, who follow up the preaching of the kingdom by concrete signs of its fulfilment (Acts 1:1; Mk 6:30), the Christian evangelizes by words and deeds, both the fruit of faith in Christ. Actions, in fact, are his “active faith”, while words are his “eloquent faith”. Since there is no evangelization without, in consequence, charitable actions, there is no authentic charity without the spirit of the Gospel: they are two intimately linked aspects. [134 8]

4. “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). The true pastor, even when he is harassed by enormous practical problems, never forgets that migrants have need of God, and that many seek him with a sincere heart. Like the disciples of Emmaus, however, their eyes are often incapable of recognizing him (cf. Lk. 24:16). They should therefore also be offered a presence which, guiding and listening to them, makes the Word of God resound, makes their hearts beat with hope and guides them to the meeting with the risen Christ. This is the Church’s missionary path: to go to meet women and men of every race, tongue and nation with friendship and love, sharing their conditions in an evangelical spirit, to break the bread of truth and charity for them. [134 9]

It is the apostolic style which shines through the missionary experience of the first Christian communities, in the account of Philip’s preaching to the minister of Candace, queen of Ethiopia, (cf. Acts 8:27-40) and in the episode of the Apostle Paul’s dream (cf. *ibid.*, 18:9-11). The latter, active in the city of Corinth whose population was largely composed of immigrants working in the port, is urged by the Lord not to be afraid, to continue to “speak and not to be silent” and to trust in the saving power of the wisdom of the Cross (cf. 1 Cor 1:26-27). [135 0]

The events of the Apostle Paul as told in Acts testify that, guided by the firm conviction that salvation is in Christ alone, he was totally dedicated to taking every opportunity to proclaim the Messiah. He lived this commitment as a duty: “For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). Indeed he was aware of the right of those whom he was addressing to receive the saving proclamation. In this regard, my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, said in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*: “Neither ... the complexity of the questions raised is an invitation to the Church to withhold from these non-Christians the proclamation of Jesus Christ. On the contrary the Church holds that these multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ riches in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find, in unsuspected fullness, everything that it is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth” (n. 53). [135 1]

5. John’s Gospel stresses that Christ’s death was ordained “to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn. 11:52). The same Gospel recounts that during the feast of the Passover, some Greeks approached Philip and asked him if they could see Jesus (cf. Jn 12:21). Philip, consulting with Andrew, spoke to the Lord who answered: “The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He [135 2]

who loves his life loses it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me ...” (Jn. 12:23-26).

They are the Greeks, that is, the pagans, who want to meet the Savior, and the answer, at first, seems to have no connection with the request. But in the light of what will happen on Calvary, we understand that the lifting up on the Cross is the condition for the glorification of Christ with the Father and with mankind, and that only the dynamism of the paschal mystery completely fulfils men’s desire to see him and to communicate with him. The Church is called to establish an intense dialogue with humanity, not only to transmit authentic values to them, but above all to reveal Christ’s mystery, because only in him does the person reach his truest dimension. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn. 12:32). This “drawing”, integrates us into the communion of charity and, making us capable of forgiveness and reciprocal love, achieves authentic human advancement. [135 3]

Aware of being the place where people must be able “to see Jesus” and experience his love, the Church fulfils her mission by striving to offer, in the logic of the Cross, an ever more convincing witness of the gratuitous, unlimited love of the Redeemer, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). [135 4]

1997 will be the first year of the triennium of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, during which Christians will be called to focus their gaze particularly on the figure of Christ. To each I renew the invitation to intensify communion with Jesus and, through charity, to make faith in him active (cf. Gal 5:6), with particular openness of spirit to those who are in need and difficulty. Thus the proclamation of the Gospel will be more eloquent and an ever living message of hope and love to the men and women of every age. [135 5]

With these wishes I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to migrants and refugees, and to all those who in love assume the burden of their difficult plight. [135 6]

From Castel Gandolfo, August 21, 1996

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http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/migration/documents/hf_jpii_mes_26081996_world-migration-day_en.html
