

1997

Message

The Church Looks with Deep Pastoral Concern

For the World Migration Day 1998

John Paul II

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

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1. The Church looks with deep pastoral concern at the increased flow of migrants and refugees, and questions herself about the causes of this phenomenon and the particular conditions of those who are forced for various reasons to leave their homeland. In fact, the situation of the world's migrants and refugees seems ever more precarious. Violence sometimes obliges entire populations to leave their homeland to escape repeated atrocities; more frequently, it is poverty and the lack of prospects for development which spur individuals and families to go into exile, to seek ways to survive in distant lands, where it is not easy to find a suitable welcome.

Many initiatives aim at alleviating the hardships and sufferings of migrants and refugees. I express my deep appreciation of those who are dedicated to them, together with a cordial encouragement to continue generously supporting them, overcoming the many difficulties they meet on the way. In addition to the problems connected with cultural, social and sometimes even religious barriers, there are those associated with other phenomena such as the unemployment that afflicts even countries which have been the traditional destination of immigrants, the break-up of families, the lack of services and the precarious situation of so many aspects of daily life. Moreover, the host community fears the loss of its own identity because of the rapid increase of these "strangers" through their demographic growth, the legal mechanisms for reuniting families and clandestine enlistment in the so-called underground economy. When there is no prospect of harmonious and peaceful integration, withdrawal into self, tension with one's surroundings, dispersal and the waste of energies become real risks, with negative and sometimes tragic results. People find themselves "more scattered than before, divided in speech, divided among themselves, incapable of consensus and agreement" Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation et Paenitentia*, n.13).

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The mass media can play an important role, both positive and negative. Their activity can foster a proper evaluation and better understanding of the problems of the "new arrivals", dispelling prejudices and emotional reactions, or instead, it can breed rejection and hostility, impeding and jeopardizing proper integration.

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2. All this raises urgent challenges to the Christian community, which makes attention to migrants and refugees one of its pastoral priorities. From this standpoint World Migration Day is an appropriate occasion for reflecting on how to intervene ever more effectively in this sensitive apostolate.

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For the Christian, acceptance of and solidarity with the stranger are not only a human

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duty of hospitality, but a precise demand of fidelity itself to Christ's teaching. For the believer, caring for migrants means striving to guarantee a place within the individual Christian community for his brothers and sisters coming from afar, and working so that every human being's personal rights are recognized. The Church invites all people of goodwill to make their own contribution so that every person is respected and discriminations that debase human dignity are banned. Her action, sustained by prayer, is inspired by the Gospel and guided by her age old experience. [6]

The Ecclesial Community's activity is also an incentive to the leaders of peoples and international communities, institutions and organizations of various kinds involved in the phenomenon of migration. An expert in humanity, the Church fulfills her task by enlightening consciences with her teaching and witness, and by encouraging appropriate initiatives to ensure that immigrants find the right place within individual societies. [137 7]

3. In particular, she concretely urges Christian migrants and refugees not to turn in on themselves, isolating themselves from the pastoral life of the Diocese or parish that accepts them. At the same time, however, she puts clergy and faithful on guard against attempting merely to assimilate them, which destroys their particular characteristics. Rather she encourages the gradual integration of these brothers and sisters, making the most of their diversity to build an authentic family of believers which is welcoming and supportive. [137 8]

To this end it is good for the local community into which migrants and refugees are integrated to provide them with structures that help them actively assume their responsibilities. In this regard, the priest specifically assigned to the care of migrants is asked to be a bridge between different cultures and mentalities. This presupposes an awareness that he is fulfilling a truly missionary ministry "in the same way that Christ by his Incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the people among whom he lived" (*Ad gentes*, .10). [137 9]

Moreover, the fact that apostolic action for migrants is some times carried out in the midst of suspicion and even hostility can never become a reason for abandoning the commitment to solidarity and human advancement. Jesus' demanding assertion: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35) retains its power in all circumstances and challenges the conscience of those who intend to follow in his footsteps. For the believer, accepting others is not only philanthropy or a natural concern for his fellow man. It is far more, because in every human being he knows he is meeting Christ, who expects to be loved and served in our brothers and sisters, especially in the poorest and neediest. [138 0]

4. Jesus, the only-begotten Son made man, is the living icon of God's solidarity with men. Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Only a Christian community really attentive to others welcomes and carries on the legacy bequeathed by Jesus to the Apostles in the Upper Room on the eve of his death on the Cross: "Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other" (Jn. 13:34). The Redeemer asks for a love that is self-giving, gratuitous and disinterested. [138 1]

In this regard, the words of St James, who wrote to the "twelve tribes of the diaspora", probably Christians of Jewish origin dispersed throughout the Graeco-Roman world, [138 2]

sound more prophetic than ever: “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled’, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead”(Jas 2:14-17).

5. I am pleased to call attention here to the shining example of an apostle who was able to witness in a living and prophetic way to Christ’s love for migrants. I am speaking of Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini, whom I had the joy of beatifying today, 9 November. [138 3]

He was deeply moved by the dramatic exodus of migrants who, in the final decades of the last century, left Europe in large numbers for the countries of the New World, and he clearly saw the need to provide pastoral care for them through an appropriate network of social assistance. In this regard, he showed keen spiritual insight and sound practical sense in founding the Congregation of the Missionaries and Missionary Sisters of St Charles. He also strongly supported the introduction of legislative and institutional measures for the human and legal protection of migrants against every form of exploitation. [138 4]

Today in certainly different social situations, the spiritual sons and daughters of Bishop Scalabrini, who were later joined by the Lay Scalabrinian Missionaries, heirs to the same charism, continue to witness to Christ’s love for migrants and to offer them the Gospel, the universal message of salvation. May Bishop Scalabrini sustain by his example and intercession everyone throughout the world who works in the service of migrants and refugees. [138 5]

6. To offer a solid Christian witness in this demanding and complex sector, it is important “to gain a renewed appreciation of the Spirit as the One who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 45). [138 6]

How can we forget that 1998 is dedicated to the Holy Spirit, whose role was revealed in an extraordinarily effective way at Pentecost? I wrote in my *Message for the 16th World Day of Peace*: the descent of “the Holy Spirit caused the first disciples of the Lord to rediscover, beyond the diversity of languages, the royal road to peace in brotherhood” (n. 12; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 27 December 1982, p. 10). [138 7]

In ancient Babel pride had shattered the unity of the human [1388] family. The Spirit of Pentecost came to heal this lost unity with his gifts, re-establishing it on the model of Trinitarian communion, in which the three distinct Persons subsist in the undivided unity of the divine nature. All those who listened to the Apostles on whom the Spirit descended were astonished to hear them speaking each in his own language (cf. Acts 2:7-11). Unanimity in listening, then as today, does not jeopardize the diversity of cultures since “every culture is an effort to ponder the mystery of the world and in particular of the human person: it is a way of giving an expression to the transcendent dimension of human life”. Over and above “all the differences which distinguish individuals and peoples, there is a fundamental commonality. For different cultures are but different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence” (Address to the 50th General Assembly of the United Nations, 5 October 1995, n. 9; [138 8]

L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 11 October 1995, p. 9).

The year of the Holy Spirit therefore invites believers to live more deeply the theological virtue of hope, which offers them solid and profound reasons for their commitment to the evangelization and to their efforts for those who, coming from different countries and cultures, expect our help in fulfilling their human potential. [138 9]

7. To evangelize is to give an account to all of the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15). In this duty the first Christians, although a social minority, were boldly enterprising. Sustained by the *parresia* instilled in them by the Holy Spirit, they could give candid witness to their own faith. [139 0]

Today too, “Christians are called to prepare for the Great Jubilee of the beginning of the third millennium by *renewing their hope in the definitive coming of the kingdom of God*, repairing for it daily in their hearts, in the Christian community to which they belong, in their particular social context” (Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 46). [139 1]

The phenomenon of human mobility calls to mind the very image of the Church, a pilgrim people on earth, but constantly on her way to the heavenly homeland. Even in the innumerable hardships it involves, this path reminds us of the future world whose prospective image spurs us to transform the present, which must be freed from injustice and oppression in view of the encounter with God, the ultimate goal of all men. [139 2]

I entrust the Christian community’s apostolic commitment to migrants and refugees to Mary, who conceived the Incarnate Word by the power of the Holy Spirit and then in the whole of her life allowed herself to be guided by his interior activity.... Mary gave full expression to the longing of the poor of Yahweh and is a radiant model for those who entrust themselves with all their hearts to the promises of God” (ibid., n. 48). May she accompany with motherly concern all those who work for migrants and refugees; may she dry the tears and console all who have had to leave their own land and loved ones. [139 3]

May everyone also be comforted by my Blessing.

From the Vatican, 9 November 1997, the twentieth year of the Pontificate.

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