



MIGRANTS REFUGEES

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CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION: THE OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND THE CHALLENGES

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With the Apostolic Letter *Humanam progressionem* on August 17, 2016, Pope Francis (2017a) established the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. It merged the Pontifical Councils 'for Justice and Peace,' 'Cor Unum,' 'for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People' and 'for Health Care Workers.' This new organization brings together the tools for promoting integral human development. However, the serious human emergency of increasingly frequent and consistent migrations caused by conflicts and natural catastrophes, has made it necessary to pay greater, specific and urgent attention to migration questions. For this reason, a special Migrants and Refugees Section has been set up within the Dicastery, which is led for the time being by the Pontiff himself.

The magnitude, complexity and urgency of the issues related to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the world, along with the significance and importance of the vocation of the Church to accompany them, are the real 'first premise' of the Migrants and Refugees Section, as well as of the guidance and supervision of the Holy Father. The Section is called upon to give convincing testimony and to undertake effective action for the good of migrants and refugees.

The Migrants and Refugees Section makes a fundamental aspect of the mission of the Church concretely clear: accompanying the people of God in all their joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties, especially of the poor and all those who suffer (Second Vatican Council, 1965). The main mission of the Section is that of supporting the Church – at the local, regional and international level – in the accompaniment of people in every

stage of the migration process, giving particular attention to those who, for different reasons, are forced to move or flee.

In my contribution here, I propose to briefly present the principal numbers related to contemporary migration, highlighting those related to forced migration. I will seek to demonstrate how, faced with every challenge posed today by migration, opportunities for growth also exist for all the actors involved. Challenges and opportunities will be explained following the scheme of the four verbs that the Holy Father chose to summarise the pastoral action of the Church in the migration context: welcome, protect, promote and integrate (Francis, 2017b). I will conclude my reflection with some social-pastoral considerations.

The Numbers of Contemporary Migration

Migration today is a global phenomenon, both in terms of the number of people involved as well as of geographical distribution. Indeed, if countries of departure, of transit and of destination are all considered, it is correct to say that no state exists today that is not a scene of human mobility.

According to estimates by the United Nations, in 2017 there were more than 258 million international migrants, a figure that grew proportionally slightly more than the global population (United Nations, 2018). In 2005, the United Nations estimated a global stock of 763 million internal migrants, or 11% of the global population (United Nations, 2013). More up-to-date data on this phenomenon does not seem to be available, but one can reliably suppose that this type of mobility has increased due to globalisation processes. Even just maintaining the same percentage of the global population as in 2005 would suggest more than 830 million internal migrants in 2017.

In the context of contemporary migration flows, special attention should be paid to forced migration, namely movements arising from pressing causes that are beyond the will of the subject. These can be ascribed to four major categories: persecution, conflict, natural disasters and climate change. From a Catholic perspective, it is difficult to not also add a fifth category of causes of forced migration, namely poverty and the lack of dignified life conditions. That position, however, has not yet found consensus within the international community.

The 1951 Geneva Convention requires special international protection for migrants who are fleeing from persecution or conflict and who request asylum in a state that is different from the one they belong to. These are commonly called refugees. In 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that the total number of refugees in the world was around 25.9 million. For a more complete picture, a further 3.5 million asylum seekers should be added to this total (UNHCR, 2019).

Migrants who have been forced to move within their own national territory are referred to as internally displaced. While being universally recognised as a highly vulnerable group, there is still no international treaty in place which ensures special protection or assistance for them. According to UNHCR, in 2018 it was reasonable to estimate 41.3 million people who were internally displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations (UNHCR, 2019).

It should be noted that conflicts, which represent one of the main causes of internal and international forced migration in recent years, are concentrated in two geographical areas. In fact, the 15 wars which obliged tens of millions of people to leave their place of origin between 2010 and 2014 mainly involved a few countries in the Near and Middle East and in Central Africa.

The understanding of migration cannot be separated from the analysis of the numbers. All scientific disciplines make use of them to develop their assessments, visions and projections, in hopes of formulating more realistic, suitable, effective and long-lasting migratory and asylum policies. The Holy Father however, reminds us that “[...] we must never forget that migrants, rather than simply being a statistic, are first of all persons who have faces, names and individual stories” (Francis, 2016a). If we opt for a purely scientific perspective, the aridity of numbers risks obscuring the centrality of the human person who, according to the social doctrine of the Church, is the main inspiration behind any social action (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004:527).

Challenges and Opportunities: Welcome, Protect, Promote and Integrate

Since the start of his pontificate, Pope Francis has shown particular concern for migrants, displaced people and refugees, seeking to view contemporary migration as a ‘sign of the times.’ While recognising the negativity which often characterises the situations in which migrants find themselves living, the Holy Father also sees an opportunity in contemporary human movements to realise some essential principles of the doctrine of the Church: “While it is true that migrations often reveal failures and shortcomings on the part of States and the international community, they also point to the aspiration of humanity to enjoy a unity marked by respect for differences, by attitudes of acceptance and hospitality which enable an equitable sharing of the world’s goods, and by the protection and the advancement of the dignity and centrality of each human being” (Francis 2013a).

According to Pope Francis, current migration flows are an “[...] expression of that inherent desire for the happiness proper to every human being, a happiness that is to be sought and pursued” (Francis, 2017b). That desire has led human beings of every age to migrate, thus “[...] encouraging encounter between peoples and the birth of new civilizations” (Francis, 2017b). It is equally undeniable how the forced nature of the

large part of contemporary migration flows, as well as their concrete conditions, pose urgent challenges which demand that we respond in a coordinated and effective way. The result is a dialectic tension between opportunities and challenges which characterises migrations of today, as it marked those of the past.

The elements that make up the complexity of this dialectic tension can be described following the order of the four verbs with which the Holy Father articulated the mission of the Church toward migrants and refugees: welcome, protect, promote and integrate.

Welcome

With regard to the verb ‘welcome,’ the construction of new walls, the closing of borders and the refusal of aid lay bare the woeful logic of the ‘throwaway’ culture and the globalisation of indifference. In Lampedusa, the Holy Father launched a clear appeal: “The globalisation of indifference makes us all ‘unnamed’, responsible, yet nameless and faceless. ‘Adam, where are you?’ ‘Where is your brother?’ These are the two questions which God asks at the dawn of human history, and which he also asks each man and woman in our own day, which he also asks us” (Francis, 2013b). But the reality is also made up of hands outstretched, of doors open, of brave rescues and of generous hospitality. Thus it is that, in the migrants and refugees who undertake ‘journeys of hope,’ we can also see the opportunity to restore that solidarity which represents a duty of civility and at the same time a Christian imperative.

In the same way, the challenge constituted by the substantially negative migration narrative and by political manipulation of fear of foreigners cannot obscure the opportunity that, in a pronounced theological perspective, migrants and refugees help us to rediscover the supreme value of relationality and otherness desired by the creator as distinctive traits of every human being and conditions essential for their full realisation. “Since we are by nature relational beings, meant to find fulfilment through interpersonal relationships inspired by justice and love, it is fundamental for our human development that our dignity, freedom and autonomy be acknowledged and respected” (Francis 2014a).

Despite repeated attempts, the restrictive measures of control and containment of migration flows are proving to be essentially ineffective, and this gives the advantage to migrant traffickers. On the other hand, the current economy highlights the need for global governance of migration, with a farsighted approach and in the name of a truly global joint responsibility, because, as Pope Francis affirms: “Nor can we be indifferent or think ourselves dispensed from the moral imperatives which flow from a joint responsibility to care for the planet, a shared responsibility often stressed by the political international community, as also by the Magisterium” (Francis, 2017b).

While listening to local Churches, the Holy Father sensed “[...] a deep unease about the massive influx of migrants and refugees. That unease needs to be acknowledged

and appreciated in the light of this moment of history, marked by an economic crisis that has left deep wounds. It has also been aggravated by [...] the general unpreparedness of the countries that receive them” (Francis, 2017d). This challenge also represents a substantial opportunity for growth and empowerment both for the migrants and for local communities. Even if aid and accompaniment programmes are launched to respond to migration ‘emergencies,’ they must always seek the involvement of all actors and have as an ultimate aim the well-being of all vulnerable people who share the same territory.

Looking at the world scenario, the challenge constituted by the limited sharing of the responsibility of welcoming migrants and asylum seekers among countries is obvious to everyone. Referring particularly to the situation in Europe, Pope Francis said that such an attitude is “[...] indicative of the limits of the process of European unification, and points up the obstacles hindering the concrete application of universal human rights and the expression of that integral humanism which is among the finest fruits of European civilization” (Francis, 2017d). On the other hand, the awareness of these limits constitutes the first step in a process of sincere verification and consolidation of the ideals that forged the United Nations. As Pope Francis recently said, “This vision of cooperation among nations can advance the narrative by upholding multilateralism, opposing both new nationalistic impulses and hegemonic policies.” (Francis, 2019).

Protect

The verb ‘protect’ applies to the challenge of the increasingly more complex differentiation between ‘economic’ migrants and forced migrants, which in some cases has reached the point of causing real discrimination in the recognition of fundamental human rights. But the complexity of human affairs offers the opportunity to rediscover the uniqueness and unrepeatability of every person, precious in the eyes of God. As Benedict XVI affirms, “[...] every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance” (Benedict XVI, 2009: 62).

One of the most dramatic pages of contemporary migration is written by the lucrative smuggling of human beings by unscrupulous criminal organisations, and worse still, by the trafficking of human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation or slave labour. Becoming aware of these vile acts should bring us back to our senses regarding the widespread ‘commodification’ of human beings. We need to restore the centrality of the human person, a centrality that has to be recognised in all our political and economic dealings. Benedict XVI reminded a group of local administrators about this: “A fundamental criterion on which we may easily agree in carrying out our different tasks is that of the centrality of the human person. As the Second Vatican Council said, ‘man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake’ (Gaudium et Spes, n. 24)” (Benedict XVI, 2008).

Contemporary human mobility is frequently made up of mixed flows; and it is not rare to find migrants who, to be able to realise their dreams, are prepared to present an asylum request while knowing that they do not meet the requirements. If on the one hand this represents a serious threat to the correct functioning of the international protection system, on the other hand it should be recognised that migration is often considered the only alternative to misery; yet the legal channels for it become more restricted and complicated every day. This challenge, however, can also be seen as an opportunity to begin reconsidering international protection on the basis of the conviction that the latter “[...] is not a static but an action-oriented commitment aimed at finding solutions so that uprooted people may restart their life with dignity” (Tomasi, 2008).

Among the migrants of the third millennium, we also find many unaccompanied minors. The challenges linked to migration of this especially vulnerable group are varied and complex. They are based essentially in several factors: the diversified composition of flows (nationality, age, migration status, etc.); the disappearance of many minors; difficulties in verifying migration intentions; the prevalence of smugglers and traffickers in the different phases of migration; and profound cultural differences that make the dynamics of custody more complicated. On the other hand, the calamitous experiences of these little ones impel us to forcefully reaffirm the sacred value of life at every age and to restate for every minor “[...] the right to a healthy and secure family environment, where a child can grow under the guidance and example of a father and a mother; then there is the right and duty to receive adequate education, primarily in the family and also in the school, where children can grow as persons and agents of their own future and the future of their respective countries” (Francis, 2016b).

Human trafficking with the aim of sexual exploitation, slave labour, the human organ trade and other forms of despicable exploitation constitutes one of the most urgent challenges posed by contemporary migration. The Holy Father did not hide his special concern for “[...] thousands of innocent men, women and children (who) are victims of exploitative labour and sexual abuse, and of organ trafficking,” recalling “[...] the duty to combat this abhorrent plague, a form of modern slavery” (Francis, 2014b). But awareness of the reach of the phenomenon can bring us to reflect seriously on the responsibilities of ‘consumers,’ namely the people who directly or indirectly derive an advantage from the various forms of trafficking. As Pope Francis observes, “[...] sometimes there also seems to be little will to understand the scope of the issue. Why? Because it touches close to our conscience; because it is thorny; because it is shameful. Then there are those who, even knowing this, do not want to speak because they are at the end of the ‘supply chain,’ as a user of the ‘services’ that are offered on the street or on the Internet” (Francis, 2018).

Within the field of protection, a final challenge consists in the innocent ignorance of many migrants regarding migration laws, the risks of the journey and the actual opportunities in the land of immigration. That ignorance makes them easy prey to the tricks of the traffickers who profit from their dreams and hopes. On the other hand, the traumatic experiences of migrants can become an information treasure to share with the communities of origin by way of modern communication technologies. Those who have suffered due to their own ignorance can become the most credible witnesses for those who are preparing to leave, contributing to “[...] offering reliable and verified information before departure, and [...] safety from illegal recruitment practices” (Francis, 2017c).

Promote

Regarding the verb ‘promote,’ the first challenge is posed by detention centres, where large numbers of asylum seekers are gathered together and wait for a very long time for requests for international protection to be examined. All of this is damaging to dignity and causes unease and social conflict. But the presence of many migrants and refugees, perhaps who have arrived in an unexpected way, can also be viewed as an opportunity to initiate learning about insertion and active citizenship, which also involve locals, and among them the most vulnerable and the excluded. As Pope Francis says, “Promoting essentially means a determined effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees – as well as the communities which welcome them – are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all the dimensions which constitute the humanity intended by the Creator” (Francis, 2017c).

A second challenge is posed by the unemployment due to the last economic crisis and by competition, sometimes unfair, in the labour market posed by foreign workers. Seen from another perspective, the presence of many migrants and refugees who are young and entrepreneurial should also be an opportunity for the development of all. The knowledge and diversified skills that these brothers and sisters of ours often bring can contribute to revitalising some labour spheres that have been rather neglected, like for example agriculture, pastoralism, and craftsmanship. As John Paul II affirms in the *Centesimus annus* (1991: 27), “[...] human work by its nature is meant to unite peoples”.

A third challenge is the impoverishment of the countries of origin in terms of human resources. The departure of many capable and industrious young people constitutes a real threat for the sustainable development of many nations. On the other hand, contemporary migration offers the opportunity for channels of transnational development, thanks to which it is possible to launch “[...] programmes of international cooperation, free from partisan interests, and programmes of transnational development which involve migrants as active protagonists” (Francis 2017b).

The constant insistence on the size of migration flows risks fuelling fears of foreign 'invasion' which tend to resurface with vehemence in crisis situations. The excessive focus on national security as the paramount consideration, can lead to choices that are questionable, if not contrary to principles set forth in various international conventions. But this situation also offers an opportunity to reflect seriously on the centrality of the human person and on the contingency of political constructions that should serve everyone's full realisation. In this regard, Pope Francis explains how "the principle of the centrality of the human person, firmly stated by my beloved Predecessor, Benedict XVI, obliges us to always prioritise personal safety over national security" (Francis 2017c).

"The enormous gathering together of persons seeking asylum and of refugees has not produced positive results. Instead these gatherings have created new situations of vulnerability and hardship" (Francis, 2017b). The tendency to concentrate in big cities and in some particularly impoverished neighbourhoods often complicates the implementation of programmes of human and social promotion which are of great benefit to migrants as well as local communities. But the massive arrival of migrants and refugees can also be understood as a providential opportunity for societies which are experiencing a demographic winter (Francis, 2017e). For this reason, it is better to opt for widespread reception which privileges the small centres and rural areas, where the new arrivals can contribute to the revitalisation of agricultural work and pastoralism and recovery of many traditional jobs, which are unfortunately being lost.

Integrate

The word 'integrate' points to the difficult coexistence of very different cultural expressions and traditions. The growing differentiation of the source locations of migration flows has highlighted that difficulty, fuelling the fear among natives of losing their own cultural identity. But, from a more theological perspective, the presence of many migrants and refugees from different countries represents a concrete opportunity for intercultural enrichment. "Integration is not an assimilation that leads migrants to suppress or to forget their own cultural identity." Rather it is a "lengthy process that aims to shape societies and cultures, making them more and more a reflection of the multi-faceted gifts of God to human beings" (Francis, 2017c). Today's multi-ethnic coexistence contributes to the societies of tomorrow, interethnic and plural, that will conform better to the Kingdom of God as expressed within history. Comparison with other cultures and traditions stimulates people to rediscover and reaffirm their own identity, in the discernment of the 'non-negotiable' elements which constitute the core spirit of our Christian vocation.

Another challenge arises from the massive arrival of many people of different faiths, above all Muslims, to the point of generating widespread fears of invasion or 'Islamisation' of Europe. Pope Francis interpreted this reality in a different light. "From a missionary perspective, the current influx of migrants can be seen as a new

‘frontier’ for mission, a privileged opportunity to proclaim Jesus Christ and the Gospel message at home, and to bear concrete witness to the Christian faith in a spirit of charity and profound esteem for other religious communities. The encounter with migrants and refugees of other denominations and religions represents a fertile ground for the growth of open and enriching ecumenical and interreligious dialogue” (Francis, 2017d).

Some concluding remarks

Migration is a complex phenomenon that is in continuous transformation. From the national point of view as well as at the international level, its governability appears to be quite complicated, comprised as it is of a great number of causes, actors, variables, and consequences. In recent years, the international community has engaged in developing a joint response to migration issues in terms of international cooperation and shared responsibility. In 2017, the United Nations launched the process of putting together two Global Compacts, one for safe, orderly and regular migration, and one on refugees. The Holy See has decided to actively contribute to the two processes. The Migrants and Refugees Section (2017), after having consulted with various episcopal conferences and Catholic NGOs involved in the sector, prepared a document entitled: ‘Responding to Refugees and Migrants: 20 Action Points for the Global Compacts’ (Migrants and Refugees, 2017). These points, founded on the ‘best practices’ of the Church in its response to the needs of migrants and refugees, were approved by the Holy Father. They do not claim to fully encompass the rich teaching of the Church on migration and asylum, but they are a series of practical considerations that Catholic and non-Catholic actors can use, complete and deepen in their dialogue with governments with respect to the Global Compacts.

In the last five years, Pope Francis has often raised his voice in favour of migrants, displaced people, refugees, and victims of human trafficking. The Holy Father wanted to concretely show his closeness through his visits to Lampedusa and Lesbos. In all his journeys he never missed a chance to meet those who had to leave their own country to build a better future. The four verbs – welcome, protect, promote and integrate – have inspired countless initiatives and programmes launched in the bosom of the Catholic Church and elsewhere. His authoritative speeches in this field, marked by tireless reminders of universal values, were publicly applauded by various figures. Criticism has come, including from within the Church, toward stances regarded as too ‘generous’ and ‘do-good,’ if not naive and incautious in the face of the real risks that critics foresee in the latest migration flows. But a more attentive analysis of the pontiff’s calls only reveals their undeniable coherence with the teachings of Jesus Christ, who calls on his disciples to recognise his presence in the foreigner who knocks at the door (Mt 25: 35).

In this historic moment, which some scholars have defined as the 'Age of Migration' (Castle - De Haas - Miller, 2013), the phenomenon of migration is affecting a large part of humanity directly or indirectly, in every continent. Catholic communities, along with many other actors, play a fundamental role both in understanding the phenomenon and in responding to its challenges. In conforming to their mission of being "salt of the earth and light of the world" (Mt 5:13), they are called upon to stimulate a positive transformation that is capable of seizing the opportunities offered by contemporary migration. "We ourselves need to see, and then to enable others to see, that migrants and refugees do not only represent a problem to be solved, but are brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved. They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy, a more united country, a more fraternal world and a more open and evangelical Christian community" (Francis, 2013a).

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