



POPE BENEDICT XVI

WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES 2013

13 JANUARY 2013

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, in the Pastoral Constitution ‘Gaudium et Spes’, recalled that ‘the Church goes forward together with humanity’; therefore ‘the joys and the hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts’.

The Servant of God Paul VI echoed these words when he called the Church an ‘expert in humanity’, as did Blessed John Paul II when he stated that the human person is ‘the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission... the way traced out by Christ himself’. In the footsteps of my predecessors, I sought to emphasise in my Encyclical ‘Caritas in Veritate’ that ‘the whole Church, in all her being and acting - when she proclaims, when she celebrates, when she performs works of charity - is engaged in promoting integral human development’. I was thinking also of the millions of men and women who, for various reasons, have known the experience of migration. Migration is in fact ‘a striking phenomenon because of the sheer numbers of people involved, the social, economic, political, cultural and religious problems it raises, and the dramatic challenges it poses to nations and the international community’, for ‘every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance’.

For this reason, I have chosen to dedicate the 2013 World Day of Migrants and Refugees to the theme ‘Migrations: pilgrimage of faith and hope’, in conjunction with the celebrations marking the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and the sixtieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution ‘Exsul Familia’, and at a time when the whole Church is celebrating the Year of Faith, taking up with enthusiasm the challenge of the new evangelisation.

Faith and hope are inseparable in the hearts of many migrants, who deeply desire a better life and not infrequently try to leave behind the ‘hopelessness’ of an unpromising future. During their journey many of them are sustained by the deep trust that God never abandons his children; this certainty makes the pain of their uprooting and separation more tolerable and even gives them the hope of eventually returning to their country of origin. Faith and hope are often among the possessions which emigrants carry with them, knowing that with them, ‘we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey’.

In the vast sector of migration, the Church shows her maternal concern in a variety of ways. On the one hand, she witnesses the immense poverty and suffering entailed in migration, leading often to painful and tragic situations. This inspires the creation of programmes aimed at meeting emergencies through the generous help of individuals and groups, volunteer associations and movements, parochial and diocesan organisations in cooperation with all people of good will. The Church also works to highlight the positive aspects, the potential and the resources which migrations offer. Along these lines, programmes and centres of welcome have been established to help and sustain the full integration of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees into a new social and cultural context, without neglecting the religious dimension, fundamental for every person's life. Indeed, it is to this dimension that the Church, by virtue of the mission entrusted to her by Christ, must devote special attention and care: this is her most important and specific task. For Christians coming from various parts of the world, attention to the religious dimension also entails ecumenical dialogue and the care of new communities, while for the Catholic faithful it involves, among other things, establishing new pastoral structures and showing esteem for the various rites, so as to foster full participation in the life of the local ecclesial community. Human promotion goes side by side with spiritual communion, which opens the way 'to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the only Saviour of the world'. The Church always offers a precious gift when she guides people to an encounter with Christ, which opens the way to a stable and trustworthy hope.

Where migrants and refugees are concerned, the Church and her various agencies ought to avoid offering charitable services alone; they are also called to promote real integration in a society where all are active members and responsible for one another's welfare, generously offering a creative contribution and rightfully sharing in the same rights and duties. Emigrants bring with them a sense of trust and hope which has inspired and sustained their search for better opportunities in life. Yet they do not seek simply to improve their financial, social and political condition. It is true that the experience of migration often begins in fear, especially when persecutions and violence are its cause, and in the trauma of having to leave behind family and possessions which had in some way ensured survival. But suffering, great losses and at times a sense of disorientation before an uncertain future do not destroy the dream of being able to build, with hope and courage, a new life in a new country. Indeed, migrants trust that they will encounter acceptance, solidarity and help, that they will meet people who sympathise with the distress and tragedy experienced by others, recognise the values and resources the latter have to offer, and are open to sharing humanly and materially with the needy and disadvantaged. It is important to realise that 'the reality of human solidarity, which is a benefit for us, also imposes a duty'. Migrants and refugees can experience, along with difficulties, new, welcoming relationships which enable them to enrich their new countries with their professional skills, their social and cultural heritage and, not infrequently, their witness of faith, which can bring new energy and life to communities of ancient Christian tradition, and invite others to encounter Christ and to come to know the Church.

Certainly every state has the right to regulate migration and to enact policies dictated by the general requirements of the common good, albeit always in safeguarding respect for the dignity of each human person. The right of persons to migrate - as the Council's Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes', No. 65, recalled - is numbered among the fundamental human rights, allowing persons to settle wherever they consider best for the realisation of their abilities,

aspirations and plans. In the current social and political context, however, even before the right to migrate, there is need to reaffirm the right not to emigrate, that is, to remain in one's homeland; as Blessed John Paul II stated: 'It is a basic human right to live in one's own country. However this rights become effective only if the factors that urge people to emigrate are constantly kept under control'. Today in fact we can see that many migrations are the result of economic instability, the lack of essential goods, natural disasters, wars and social unrest. Instead of a pilgrimage filled with trust, faith and hope, migration then becomes an ordeal undertaken for the sake of survival, where men and women appear more as victims than as agents responsible for the decision to migrate. As a result, while some migrants attain a satisfactory social status and a dignified level of life through proper integration into their new social setting, many others are living at the margins, frequently exploited and deprived of their fundamental rights, or engaged in forms of behaviour harmful to their host society. The process of integration entails rights and duties, attention and concern for the dignified existence of migrants; it also calls for attention on the part of migrants to the values offered by the society to which they now belong.

In this regard, we must not overlook the question of irregular migration, an issue all the more pressing when it takes the form of human trafficking and exploitation, particularly of women and children. These crimes must be clearly condemned and prosecuted, while an orderly migration policy which does not end up in a hermetic sealing of borders, more severe sanctions against irregular migrants and the adoption of measures meant to discourage new entries, could at least limit for many migrants the danger of falling prey to such forms of human trafficking. There is an urgent need for structured multilateral interventions for the development of the countries of departure, effective countermeasures aimed at eliminating human trafficking, comprehensive programmes regulating legal entry, and a greater openness to considering individual cases calling for humanitarian protection more than political asylum. In addition to suitable legislation, there is a need for a patient and persevering effort to form minds and consciences. In all this, it is important to strengthen and develop understanding and cooperation between ecclesial and other institutions devoted to promoting the integral development of the human person. In the Christian vision, social and humanitarian commitment draws its strength from fidelity to the Gospel, in the knowledge that 'to follow Christ, the perfect man, is to become more human oneself'.

Dear brothers and sisters who yourselves are migrants, may this World Day help you renew your trust and hope in the Lord who is always at our side! Take every opportunity to encounter him and to see his face in the acts of kindness you receive during your pilgrimage of migration. Rejoice, for the Lord is near, and with him you will be able to overcome obstacles and difficulties, treasuring the experiences of openness and acceptance that many people offer you. For 'life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by – people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way'.

I entrust each of you to the Blessed Virgin Mary, sign of sure hope and consolation, our 'guiding star', who with her maternal presence is close to us at every moment of our life. To all I affectionately impart my Apostolic Blessing.