

Forced like Jesus Christ to flee



WORLD DAY
MIGRANTS

REFUGEES
27•IX•2020

ELEMENTS FOR THE HOMILY ON WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

27 SEPTEMBER 2020

Bible Reflection

The Word of God offered to us in the liturgy on this Twenty-Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, which is World Migrant and Refugee Day dedicated to the millions of internally displaced people in the world, presents important elements of reflection for the journey of Christians in a world that is characterised by human mobility. The main suggestion from the first reading of the prophet Ezekiel is that you cannot evaluate people starting from pre-established labels such as those who are evil are bad, while those who are righteous are good. Such labels are prejudices from which one must free oneself for at least two reasons: first, because they serve, for various reasons, to imprison people in airtight compartments that are impossible to escape; and second, because they deny that a path of conversion is possible. Reality teaches us that the person who is considered to be just can also commit acts of evil; and the person who is considered evil can also behave well and in line with the path of justice. What matters, then, are the practical actions of that person and not simply his or her statements, even if these are uttered with good intentions. Moreover, we should not forget that many “positive” statements are used to mask bad intentions.

This proposition is taken from the parable of Matthew in which Jesus addresses some of Israel's leaders to clarify how those who really carry out our Father's will do so by going beyond the initial proclamation. It is not enough to answer yes to the call of the master of the vineyard, because justice is not only an ideal, a declaration of intent. It also requires specific action, tangible signs that show that we are not just talking about it but are truly working in the Lord's vineyard. It is precisely for this reason that it will not come as a surprise to discover that “the publicans and prostitutes”, people who are normally considered evil and sinners, will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven before the so-called “righteous”. Beware, then, those in society and unfortunately also

in the Church who say that they support migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, but then do not follow their thoughtful words with practical actions that recognise and promote the rights and dignity of people on the move. Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating IDPs requires a process of missionary and pastoral conversion that does not end at words but demonstrates an effective engagement of the People of God with these particular groups of migrants.

In the passage of Paul's Letter to the Philippians, there are two themes to highlight that clearly connect the First Reading and the Gospel. The first is expressed in the sentence: "each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others". Those who are really committed to working in the vineyard of the Lord with internally displaced persons cannot simply "mind their own business", a characteristic that is unfortunately quite widespread in our societies where individualism often prevails. Seeking the interest, the good, of others is what defines Christians and is achieved in one of the six pairs of verbs that Pope Francis proposes to us in his message for this World Migrant and Refugee Day: to be close to IDPs in order to serve them. We must not forget that his message observes that these verbs cannot remain as mere ideas, words, but are things that "deal with very practical actions".

The second theme refers to being "like minded" in Christ, the Son who emptied himself to become a servant, to become like other human beings... and like IDPs. The aim here is to underline how Jesus identifies not only with humanity in general, but above all with those who are the least considered, namely foreigners (see Mt 25:31-46). Those who, through a journey of conversion, become "like minded in Christ" can no longer look upon IDPs merely as people to be helped and supported, but as companions on the journey of life, as co-workers and co-responsible for building the Kingdom of God which, as Pope Francis rightly observes in his message, represents a "common commitment". Even in these times rendered more uncertain due to COVID-19, this is a message worth proclaiming at every opportunity, as it is fruitful for those who are "like minded" in Christ.

Pastoral reflection

The Christian message that is contained in and springs from the Word of God goes beyond the simple dimension of information. It demands to be turned into action. The Word urges contemplation of God's work and presence especially at the peripheries of humanity. It motivates us to action by making the Christian and the Church the place where His Kingdom is built.

In the light of our biblical reflection, three paths of development for the Church's contemplation and action arise: to know, to convert and to share.

Knowing: Knowing is more than possessing information, which nowadays can often be a matter of endless oscillation between 'good news' and 'bad news' from sources tainted by opportunism and even ideological stances. It is a question of knowing in a more profound manner the identity, life, history, fears, challenges and hopes of the men and women who are forced to leave their homes and set out towards a place they consider safer, more viable, more promising. Their journey is towards a better future, and sometimes simply towards any future at all.

Often, even Christians and whole communities fall victim to communication traps that are full of prejudices, stereotypes, and negative stories that arouse alarm and even fear of "others", especially people who are migrants and refugees. When simplistic labels are applied to the often violent experiences of forced migration, it is easy to lose sight of the tragic human experiences underneath a definition or category.

True knowledge goes beyond the simple observation and tolerance of the existence of the other; it is true acceptance and genuine reconciliation. Welcoming the other and otherness is an exquisitely Christian, theologically and biblically-rooted attitude that aims to make room for the other, to "expand one's tent" and share one's living space with the other. This is an attitude of openness that also requires the recognition of otherness, in the sense that the other whom I encounter must be known and recognised for who he or she is, in his or her equal dignity, culture, particularity and uniqueness. This is why the simple observation of diversity is incomplete without the process of reconciliation: first of all, with one's own history and at the same time, with the history of the other. A reconciled identity no longer perceives otherness as a threat. For this reason, it becomes a gift, an exchange, an offering, valuing one's own originality and uniqueness as valuable resources and giving rise to feelings and attitudes of trust.

First and foremost, we need to make room in our communities for migrants and refugees and their families. Their presence is not simply an enriching additional element; it is a constituent part of the Church itself. We need to build the journey of the community together while respecting cultural traditions and sensitivities, but jointly sharing the path and future destination.

Converting: Migrants and refugees are not simply the mission of the Church, they are first of all subjects of God's revelation: in a reflective way, as God also became a pilgrim, migrant and stranger to accompany humanity on every step of the way; and in an active way, as the migrant, in turn, reveals God and the Church.

Directing theological reflection and pastoral and missionary praxis to the phenomenon of migration clearly highlights the need for a new way of being and conceiving the Christian community itself. The Church is understood as a community that learns and is continually open to the breath of the Spirit. This requires a personal and collective conversion, an attitude that enables people to overcome their own boundaries -- they may even need to abandon exclusivist ideologies -- and to become attentive to the other, to the signs of the times, in the name of the Gospel that we share. This is a distinctively ecumenical learning, to discover a willingness and the ability to move from one's oikos to the oikoumene that embraces the world.

It is always possible that migrants and refugees might encounter the same dysfunctional and conflictual dynamics and relationships in a new Christian community that they experienced in a previous society, with elements of prejudice and even discrimination and the risk of manipulation or imposition of identities. For this reason, constant vigilance is needed with respect to pastoral action and the quality of relationships within the Christian community, and active steps taken to prevent negative outcomes and promote positive relationships. By virtue of its very vocation, the Christian community is called to be a school of coexistence and communion.

Sharing: Here, sharing goes beyond the simple expression of intentions, of good intentions, of statements of intent. It means solidarity with the life and destiny of the other, because the other is part of me. The Christian community has always been involved in human, anthropological and social challenges; it has always shared the burden of suffering but also the hopes of men and women from different ages and cultures. This solidarity is certainly not motivated by a supposed superiority, nor driven by mere curiosity or the desire to provide easy answers to complex questions. At its root is Jesus, true God and true man. The entire Gospel is traversed by elements that highlight the humanity of Christ, which is expressed through fatigue, tiredness, emotion, weeping and suffering, relationships: everything that shows him to be an authentic human person. The mission of the Church is born out of the life of Jesus, to be out in the world as his disciples were so that the Good News may be proclaimed. In so doing, the Church continues to offer new perspectives for understanding existence and history, including the most dramatic events that accompany all people on their existential journey.

Pastoral care respects the uniqueness and originality of each person. For this reason, we need to personalise and contextualise our actions so that the Christian message does not reach out to a generic individual, but to that particular man or woman on the move, who

is on the run or in search of meaning, who is living out a specific personal, social and faith experience.

The Christian community becomes the place that nourishes hope and heals wounds through closeness and accompaniment. The unavoidable phrase of Jesus: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” is what materializes as an evangelical imperative and turns into actions that promote solidarity with our migrant brothers and sisters.

Intentions for the Prayers of the Faithful:

1. For our Pope Francis and for our bishops who are pastors of local churches, so that the Spirit of Jesus, who emptied Himself to walk with humanity, might impel them to be prophets of a Church that welcomes, protects, promotes and integrates all people, especially the most vulnerable. Let us pray.
2. For all migrants and people on the move, especially for internally displaced persons to whom this World Migrant and Refugee Day is dedicated: may they feel the concern and proximity of the Church throughout the world. Let us pray.
3. For solidarity between peoples and nations: may we all become ever more aware of being one human family under the merciful gaze of God, especially at this time of global crisis due to COVID-19. Let us pray.
4. For all those who have been affected by or have died as a result of COVID-19, especially for internally displaced persons whose condition has been aggravated by this virus, to find comfort, compassion and support in the Christian community. Let us pray.
5. For an ever greater understanding of the situation of internally displaced persons throughout the world and in each of our nations, that the Lord may guide us to be attentive and open our eyes to the needs and sufferings of our brothers and sisters who are forced to move. Let us pray.
6. For reconciliation and solidarity between people and peoples, so that, with the help of the Spirit of peace, peaceful solutions can be reached to the armed conflicts that cause the forced displacement of millions of people. Let us pray.
7. For the missionary and pastoral conversion of every Christian and of all Christian communities: may the Spirit accompany us to be “like minded in Christ”. Let us pray.
8. For the Church, God's people with so many faces, that it may forcefully promote and build a new, just and supportive humanity in which migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons are active and preferential actors. Let us pray.
9. For all Christian communities to become agents and promoters of the cause of justice in situations of corruption, inequality, indifference and oppression. Let us pray.

10. For the protection of Creation given to us by God, that the people of God may be the attentive and caring guardians of our common home. Let us pray.