

WELCOMING THE STRANGER REDEMPTORISTS MINISTERING TO IMMIGRANTS

Human Dignity in Peril- The Stranger's Journey

The Summer of 1992, three Redemptorists of two North American units arrived in Eastern North Carolina to begin a ministry to the Mexican migrant workers who came there every summer. This part of North Carolina has a small Catholic population but, when these migrant workers arrive in the summer, the Catholic population in the Diocese doubles. Thousands of workers travel hundreds of miles from their homelands, hoping to find a way out of poverty and misery. They embrace the “new” life in a foreign country with a sense of hope but, in short order, this hope often gives way to frustration and disillusionment. What the missionaries experienced in the “campos” of North Carolina is well captured by a reflection from an address given by Archbishop Stephen Fumio Hamao:

“When a person in need is in a strange country, where he does not understand the language and much less know its culture and legislation, he is in a very vulnerable position. Even in the country of arrival, where he had high hopes of a better life, he can easily fall victim again to the abuse of his human rights. Moreover, when survival is at stake, it is easy to give up one’s labor rights, especially if no one helps him/her to defend them. Migrants and refugees are in fact easy prey to exploitation, and, in extreme cases, also to human trafficking....They are therefore often victims of violence, maybe not always physical, but very often psychological and moral, as in cases of marginalization, discrimination, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. They are often made “scapegoats” for local unemployment or criminal activities.”¹

Archbishop Hamao speaks of “extreme cases” where human trafficking is involved. In the experience of many missionaries in North America, this human trafficking is not “rare” or “extreme” at all. It is the norm. Immigration laws are very strict and often unfair in the United States. As with many countries in today’s world, to legally immigrate involves a cumbersome process which is very intricate, exhausting and slow. People who are poor, hungry and desperate cannot wait for just changes to be made in societies, laws and economic structures. Therefore, they have no option but to immigrate illegally. This is the case for most immigrating to North America.

“Come and Look at My Brother in His Coffin”

Jose Luis Hernandez Aguirre tried desperately to find work in the maquiladora plants near Mexicali but was unable to do so. With a wife and two children, ages one and seven, Jose needed to find a job that would put food on the table. A smuggler told him of the high-paying jobs across the border and offered, for \$1,000, to take him there. Joined by his brother Jaime and several others, the group headed for the United States with hope. After one day, brother Jaime

¹ Archbishop Stephen Fumio Hamao, Problems and Challenges of Migrants and the Response of the Church, Inauguration of the Catholic National Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migration and Tourism in Sri Lanka (2003, March 7), Colombo, Sri Lanka.

called and reported to the family and Jose's sister, Sonia, that Jose was lost. Jamie could not make the trek in the desert, but Jose wanted to continue on the journey. He had to find a job for his family. Four days later, Jose's body was found in the desert. His sister Sonia borrowed a truck to retrieve Jose's remains. Upon her return, she encountered another group of migrants heading to the United States. "Why do you want to risk your lives like this?" she implored. "Come and look at my brother in his coffin."

Most undocumented migrants and immigrants arrive from South and Central America by way of human traffickers known as "coyotes". These human traffickers extort from the migrants/immigrants large sums of money to cross the "border" and these migrants/immigrants often remain in debt for many years. The challenges faced by those entering into the United States in North America are very real and serious, but sadly they are not unique. A "sign of our times" is the increase in the phenomenon of "human mobility". Human mobility has been a constant in human history but, as our world grows "smaller", its impact is more forceful. Numbers continue to rise, even though many agents attempt to halt the tide of human mobility.

A Complex Reality- Who is the Stranger?

Human mobility flows worldwide represents a very challenging topic to study and capture accurately. Forms of human mobility are many and varied. For the purposes of this presentation, it is not necessary to have an in depth study of these types and categories of human mobility. For our work here, let us use the simple categories offered to us by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People.

"The Council divides them into two groups: Migrants (migrants, refugees, international students) and Itinerant People (nomads, gypsies, circus and fair people, seafarers, air travelers and airport workers, road travelers and workers, people living on the streets, tourists and pilgrims.)²

A few more distinctions need to be made. There are immigrants, legal immigrants, migrants, undocumented immigrants, and refugees. A brief description of each will be given for clarity's sake.

Immigrant: a person who moves to another country to take up permanent residence.

Legal Immigrant: a person who has been admitted to reside and work on a permanent basis in a certain country; admission is most commonly based on reunification with close family members or employment.

Migrant: A person on the move, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in the person's own country, internationally, or both. Unlike refugees, migrants are commonly considered free to return home whenever they wish because their lives are not in danger there.

² Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, *Flows of Human Mobility Worldwide: Consequences and Expectations*, Congreso Nacional sobre la Pastoral de la Novilidad Humana, (2003, March 10-14), Veracruz, Messico.

Undocumented immigrant: A person who is in a country without the permission of that country's government. Such persons are called "undocumented" because they lack the required paperwork.

Refugee: Any person, who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his or her habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (source: United Nations International Law).³

Most of the persons involved in human mobility that Redemptorists minister to throughout the world would fall into one of these categories. The reasons for this human mobility are varied but people tend to move "when their situation and that of their families are such that they can no longer live according to local norms of safety, dignity and well-being."⁴

It is important to understand the gravity of the challenges of human mobility and how this phenomenon calls for a response from the Church and from our Congregation. But before we reflect on the response of our community to this growing missionary challenge, let us consider some important facts in order to understand the scope of this emerging missionary field.

The Great Challenge of Modern Migration

The United Nations provides some important data so that we might understand the trends in human mobility. Their 2002 International Migration Wall Chart offers the following information:

"The United Nations Population Division reports 175 million people currently residing in a country different from their country of birth. They constitute about 3% of the world's population (ca. 5.8 billion). Sixty percent of these "migrants" (104 million) are found in developed regions and only 40% (71 million) in less developed regions. Europe hosts 56 million, Asia 50 million, and North America 41 million. On their part, Africa hosts 16 million migrants, Central and South America 6 million, and Oceania another 6 million. We could say that approximately one of every 10 persons living in the more developed regions is a migrant, while they are one out of every 70 in developing countries. Some 2.3 million migrants move from less developed to developed regions annually, or nearly 12 million individuals during the 5-year period from 1995-2000. However, the total migration picture shows that south-south movements are more than those going south-north."⁵

³ USCCB- Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, January 22, 2003.

⁴ Patrick A. Taran, "Human Rights of Migrants: Challenges of the New Decade", International Migration, Vol. 38, No. 6, Special Issue 2/2000, p. 13.

⁵ UN Population Division International Migration 2002 Wall Chart.

Human mobility represents a great challenge for our human communities and our Church community, as well. The fact is that we often do not see “foreigners” as our brothers and sisters. As a result, immigrants/migrants suffer, are rejected and, in some cases, tragically die. “Human rights are abused; families are kept apart; and racist and xenophobic attitudes remain.”⁶ International migration is generally viewed negatively and the effects of what is called “the September 11th syndrome” have made the rich industrialized countries tighten their security controls on their borders and make more severe immigration laws.⁷ As a response to this problem the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the following statement:

“The U.S. Catholic bishops acknowledge that immigration is an emotional and challenging issue which has engaged the American public, including members of the Catholic faithful. We have heard from Catholics and others of good will who both agree and disagree with us on how best to respond to the immigration crisis our nation faces today.

Each day in our parishes, social service programs, hospitals, and schools we witness the human consequences of an immigration system which is seriously flawed: families are divided, migrants are exploited and abused by smugglers and human traffickers, and, in some cases, men, women and children who attempt to come here in search of a better life perish in the American desert and on the seas.

Because of these realities, we believe that the status quo is morally unacceptable and must be changed. Since our nation’s immigration policy does impact the basic dignity and life of the human person, it needs to be reformed urgently to uphold human dignity and to protect human life.

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), we will continue to work with Congress and the President to enact comprehensive immigration reform legislation consistent with these principles. In the end, our immigration laws should be just and humane and reflect the values-fairness, opportunity, and compassion-upon which our nation, a nation of immigrants, was built.” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 15, 2006)”

Rejecting Christ in the Poor

In the face of heightened tensions throughout the world, peoples of many nations have forgotten the dignity of every brother and sister. The desire for development and increased wealth makes whole cultures treat their “neighbor” as “a means of production”, denying their dignity as a child of God with inalienable rights. Even religious communities, who over identify with socio-political struggles in their culture, side with agents and voices who would deny migrants the human right to migrate and the basic means for human survival. People of faith, swept up in the modern current of anti-Gospel trends of discrimination forget the call of Christ concerning the stranger, the poor, the sick and those in prison. (Matt. 25: 35-36) Local churches, that have lost their

⁶ USCCB- Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, January 22, 2003.

⁷ Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, Flows of Human Mobility Worldwide: Consequences and Expectations.

missionary zeal, reject the needy stranger who come to their temple doors, so that, they might preserve their temple unstained and unused. Often with no recognition and no remorse, Catholics and other Christians reject the suffering Christ in the disguise of the foreigner. Left unchecked, this emerging new form of selfishness, xenophobia and discrimination could irrevocably alienate our brothers and sisters seeking justice, equality and dignity. Catholics and other Christians cannot stand idly by and allow this alienation and injustice to occur. The Gospel of Christ will not allow it, nor the voice of Christ speaking through the social teachings of the Church. The Word of God and the Catholic social teachings it inspires are in agreement about the phenomenon of human migration and mobility. Both sources of Divine Revelation call us to examine and rethink our opinions and attitudes concerning our suffering brothers and sisters seeking a new life.

God's Word Defends Justice, Dignity and Love

The word of God reminds us that we are all a "pilgrim" people. As sons and daughters of God, we journey with a spirit of solidarity among us that is not extinguished by national boundaries. In a spiritual sense, we are all "migrants" moving towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. Just like our spiritual ancestors in the desert, we have a common heritage, promise and goal in our journey. The God who has made us his chosen people and his children demands that we care for one another and that we treat each other with love and respect. St. Matthew reminds us that the mysterious presence of Jesus can be found in the migrant and some day we will be judged according to our behavior towards the stranger. (Matt. 25) Pope John Paul II reminds us all of this common spiritual pilgrimage:

"The Church, "expert in humanity" (PP, 13), finds a further reason for being in solidarity with migrants in the fact that they, "in their variety of languages, races, cultures and customs, reminds her of her condition as a pilgrim people from all parts of the earth towards the definitive homeland" (John Paul II, 2.2, 1999)."

The word of God invites us to love all peoples and to see in each person a brother or sister loved by God. We form one family and no one is excluded from that communion of love, respect and dignity. Again, Pope John Paul II, inspired by the word of God, proclaimed this message:

"The 'unity of the human race' and 'all being one heart and one soul' clearly imply that God's love encompasses everyone. No one is excluded. It is not limited to the visible Church that Jesus Christ founded. It knows no bounds and reaches every man and woman, be he or she rich or poor, young or old, pleasant or unpleasant, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist or without any religious creed....Christ, in fact, died 'to gather together the dispersed children of God (cf. Jn 11: 52), to reinstate the marginalized and to bring close those who are distant, in order to integrate all into a communion that is not based on ethnic, cultural, or social membership, but on the common desire to accept God's word and to seek justice. 'God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10: 34-35)".⁸

⁸ Pope John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 1995 (WDMR 95).

A Faith Community That Welcomes the Stranger

The Church has a long and proud history of ministering to the immigrant/migrant. In her social teaching, the Church defends the rights and dignity of the immigrant and teaches her faithful to be Christ to the foreigner. Archbishop Stephen Fumio Hamao, of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant People, clarifies the Church's mission with migrants in this way:

“...the Church wishes to be there where the migrants are, to share with them the joys and the hopes, as well as the grief and the pains of migration. (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1) The humanitarian aid that refugees and migrants need, social action and advocacy to defend their human and labor rights according to the social doctrine of the Church, initiatives of training and Christian formation are all part of the Church's mission among those involved in the phenomenon of human mobility. However, all these are but various expressions of one mission: the proclamation of the Good News that God is love and, out of love, He became man, and by His death and resurrection, He restored man's lost unity with God. In doing so, He also gave back to every person the dignity of being a child of God and revealed every human being's worth, for he must be so important in the eyes of God to gain such a great Redeemer. (*Redemptor Hominis*, nos. 9-10.)”⁹

The Church has a rich tradition of church teachings with regard to migration. Our faith community has been a “voice” for the poor, suffering and downtrodden. The Church has consistently defended certain principles and rights that guide us in our view on migrant issues. These principles are contained in church teachings and can be summarized in this way:

1. Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.

All persons have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political, and social opportunities to live in dignity and achieve a full life through the use of their God-given gifts. In this context, work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need.

2. Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.

The Church recognizes that all the goods of the earth belong to all people. (Paul VI, *Pastoralis Migratorum*, no. 7, August 15, 1969) When persons cannot find employment in their country of origin to support themselves and their families, they have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.

3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.

The Church recognizes the right of sovereign nations to control their territories but rejects such control when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth. More powerful economic nations, which have the ability to protect and feed their residents, have a stronger obligation to accommodate migration flows.

4. Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.

Those who flee wars and persecution should be protected by the global community. This requires, at a minimum, that migrants have a right to claim refugee

⁹ Archbishop Stephen Fumio Hamao, *Problems and Challenges of Migrants and the Response of the Church*.

status without incarceration and to have their claims fully considered by a competent authority.

5. The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.¹⁰

The Church, while respecting the rights of sovereign nations and states, clearly defends the dignity of every person and the right of those persons to find the means to live a dignified life. No one should be denied the basic means to support their human needs and those of their family. Any attitude, behavior or agent that would deny these basic human rights is in error and should be challenged. The Church has consistently proclaimed a message of justice and conversion in regards to the sufferings of our brothers and sisters “on the move”. Our faith community accepts its call to serve and minister to these “pilgrim” people. As Pope John Paul II proclaimed: “The families of migrants . . . should be able to find a homeland everywhere in the Church.”¹¹

Agents of Conversion

The members of the Body of Christ here on earth, inspired by the Gospel mandate to love, embrace all of God’s children without distinction and commit themselves to seeing their Redeemer in the suffering lives and faces of their “foreign” family members. This holy and compassionate response to the sufferings of our brothers and sisters is laudable, but sadly not the response of all members of our Christian communion. Fear, greed, nationalism, and even hatred close the hearts of some to the “cry of the poor”. Thus, “agents of conversion” are needed so that Christian communities and others might live up to their God-given call. Spiritual leaders, advocates and persons of courage and compassion are absolutely necessary to enable us to embrace the “suffering Christ” in the lives of the poor. In their document, “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” Mexican and American Bishops write of the need for conversion:

“Faith in the presence of Christ in the migrant leads to a conversion of mind and heart, which leads to a renewed spirit of communion and to the building of structures of solidarity to accompany the migrant. Part of the process of conversion of mind and heart deals with confronting attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism; accepting migrants not as foreboding aliens, terrorists, or economic threats, but rather as persons with dignity and rights, revealing the presence of Christ; and recognizing migrants as bearers of deep cultural values and rich faith traditions. Church leaders at every level are called on to communicate this teaching as well as to provide instruction on the phenomenon of migration, its causes, and its impact throughout the world.”¹²

¹⁰ USCCB-Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, January 22, 2003.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, Message for World Migration Day 1993, Problems of the Migrant Family (August 6, 1993), no. 3, citing Familiaris Consortio, no. 77.

¹² USCCB-Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope, no. 40, January 22, 2003.

Redemptorists- Welcoming the Stranger

The leaders spoken of in this document include Redemptorists throughout the world. We have a special place and calling in this important Alphonsonian mission and field of evangelization. Redemptorists have a long tradition, as well as other “religious” in the Church, of ministering to and traveling with the immigrants. Historically, the poor who migrate have found in Redemptorists generous “brothers” of faith who tended to the many needs of those suffering in a foreign homeland. And these “men of faith” worked closely with the “local church” so that a “mission of mercy” would continue once they moved on. The role of the “local church” is extremely important. Redemptorists are called to help the local communities to accept their role in this mission as described by Archbishop Hamao:

“Allow me at this point to quote from the Instruction *De Pastoralis Migratorum Cura* (Chapter IV, B, 30. Sec. 3) which states: The spiritual care of all the faithful, and thus of the immigrant people, falls most especially on the shoulders of the pastors of the parishes within which they live. These shall one day give an account to God regarding the fulfillment of their duty. Let them bear this heavy burden in association and union with the chaplain or missionary if there is one present....This last point means that the local Church is always responsible for the care of migrants and refugees, but especially when there are no missionaries or chaplains explicitly for them. Migrants and refugees are part and parcel of the local Church, and the special care given to them is only because their condition is such that to participate in the life of the local Church, they need special attention. However, they are not outsiders of the local Christian community. To welcome, therefore, is not an extra act of benevolence. To welcome them is a duty of the local receiving community, as much as it is the migrants’ and the refugees’ duty to be fully Christian members of the community that receives them.”¹³

Redemptorists- Preaching Justice as Servants of the Most Abandoned

Redemptorists have employed extraordinary preaching of the Gospel to change men’s and women’s hearts. This preaching has proved effective. However, this was not the only “tool” used. The witness of a Redemptorist community in the midst of those who were suffering served as a powerful sign of solidarity and evangelization that challenged the “lukewarm” hearts of others. Redemptorists, “ever attentive to the signs of the times”,¹⁴ have generously opted to serve the “suffering Christ” in the broken lives of the “stranger”. This has been our tradition and legacy in many places in the world, and, to be true to our charism, should remain so. Redemptorists, as “servants” of the most abandoned, cannot ignore their crucial role in the evangelization of the immigrant and of those who receive them. We must hear the “call” of the Church and “see” the signs of our times. Our faith community recognizes a special relationship between “consecrated persons” and the immigrant. We are encouraged to respond to this special calling:

¹³ Archbishop Stephen Fumio Hamao, *The Role of the Receiving Community in the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees*, Meeting with the Singapore Archdiocesan Commission for Migrants and Itinerants (2002, July 7), Singapore, Penang, Malaysia.

¹⁴ Redemptorist General Constitutions and Statutes, Constitution 2.

“Certainly it is a challenge for all the faithful, but especially for consecrated persons who in the pastoral care of migrants have always had a preeminent role, both because of the charism of the Congregations directed towards some specific sector, and for the personal contribution of individual consecrated persons or individual communities belonging to various Institutes of Religious Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The Church has and continues to trust greatly in their contribution to this specific pastoral care.”¹⁵

Many voices within the Church, and outside of her, are asking us to take our rightful place within this mission to the migrant. The Church’s voice and discernment are clear. The “suffering Christ,” who reveals Himself in the lives of our brothers and sisters, calls out to us Redemptorists to embrace Him in His poverty and loneliness. “When you did it for one of my least brothers or sisters, you did it for me.” (Matt. 25: 40)

In closing, it is important that we recognize the good work of those who continue the study and dialogue about this important missionary endeavor. We commend the good work of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and encourage all readers of this document to explore the many good sources that can be found on their website. We also wish to thank the various Conferences of Catholic Bishops around the world who help to shape and guide this ministry to the immigrant. May the Good Lord continue to bless and strengthen all those who lovingly reach out to the stranger among us.

STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

1. Promote in our Communities and Parishes ministry to Immigrants as a way to respond to this Global phenomenon.
2. We encourage our Communities and Parishes to embrace more fully the problems of Immigration; by listening to the voice of the struggling immigrants and responding to them with compassion, welcome and a spirit of solidarity.
3. We strongly encourage our Communities to be “centers of Welcome” for immigrants; and where possible, to offer space in our local communities and properties for them to meet.
4. We will reach out to immigrants pastorally; respecting their unique cultures and their customs, while having as our goal the incorporation of these brother and sisters into our Christian community.
5. We will form and sensitize our members and parishioners, so that they will be aware of and sensitive to the phenomenon of immigration.
6. Establish and promote in our communities, “centers” of welcome that truly embrace the immigrants responding to their needs to be heard, to be helped legally and to be cared for.

¹⁵ Joint Letter to the Superiors General of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Vatican City, 13 May 2005.

7. Encourage the development of a program of volunteers in every community and parish, whose purpose would be to reach out to and respond to the many needs of immigrants.
8. We encourage our Units to establish communities in the midst of these migrant communities.
9. Promote the collaboration of Units to deal with the challenging phenomenon of immigration, possibly creating International communities to respond socially and pastorally to this complex problem.
10. Support our confreres who have a special gift for working with migrant populations, as well as encouraging the development of organizations inside and outside of the Congregation whose purpose is to respond to the challenging situations of immigrants.
11. Promote among our communities of formation, the experience of working with immigrants, and encouraging the learning of new languages which will allow for more effective ministry.
12. The theme of Immigration should be considered in the context of issues that deal with Justice, Peace and Ecology.