

109TH WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

24 September 2023

"Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay"

Homily: Biblical Approach

Dear friends and pilgrims in Christ Jesus, as we celebrate the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2023, we are invited to reflect on the theme "Free to choose whether to migrate or stay."

Migration is a key issue of our Christian faith, in part because our ancestors in the faith were people on the move and needed protection and refuge while on the move or in diaspora. The theology of migration invites us to reflect on the imago Dei (image of God), which is a fundamental, unchangeable, irreversible aspect of human existence, regardless of race, ethnicity, citizenship, language, or migration status.

We believe people of all nations and tribes are made in the image of God. People do not forfeit their image bearer status when they are on the move, or when they have move from one land to the next, nor do they forfeit their image bearer status if they cross a land or water border without permission of the presiding government. (Genesis 1:27)

The Bible is filled with stories of migration, from the very beginning to the very end. From Genesis 1 when God creates humankind and tells them to populate the earth, we see story after story of human migration. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abram (Abraham) and Sarai (Sarah), Lot, Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac, Joseph, The Israelites, The Levites, Moses, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Naomi and Ruth, the Holy Family, Jesus and his disciples, and beyond.

Sometimes migration in the Bible occurs because God instructs the people to migrate, or because they are in search of God's blessing or providence. (Genesis 12, Genesis 47, Hebrews 11) Elsewhere in the Bible people are forced to migrate due to war, famine, persecution, being sold into slavery, or as a result of their unfaithfulness to God. However, it is clear that God does not abandon them during these difficult times (Genesis 3, Genesis 7 and 8, Genesis 12, Genesis 19, Genesis 46, Exodus).

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were a family on the move. Joseph's ancestors moved from Bethlehem to Nazareth, and Joseph returned to Bethlehem with a pregnant Mary for the census. After the birth of Jesus and later after King Herod's death, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph left Egypt and moved to Nazareth. Some of Jesus' most formative years on earth were spent on the move or living in diaspora. (Luke 2, Matthew 2)

"An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said: 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him'" (Mt 2:13). Pope Francis states that the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt was not the result of a free decision, nor were many of the migrations that marked the history of the people of Israel. The decision to migrate should always be free, yet in many cases, even in our day, it is not. Conflicts, natural disasters, or more simply the impossibility of living a dignified and prosperous life in one's native land is forcing millions of persons to leave.

We live in a world where citizenship dictates where we are permitted to travel or reside, and what rights, responsibilities and resources are afforded to us due to our citizenship. As Christians, we believe we are granted citizenship in Heaven, where we are citizens with the saints and other members of the household of God. This citizenship takes priority over any citizenship we have here on Earth. (Philippians 3, Ephesians 2).

The Bible calls us repeatedly to love and care for the stranger, because we, too, were once strangers. (Exodus 22, Leviticus 19, Leviticus 24, Deuteronomy 6, Deuteronomy 10, Psalm 105). Remembering that we were once strangers invites us into a deeper sense of empathy and understanding of what it means to “do to others as you would have them do to you”, including loving the stranger, the foreigner, and the sojourner (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 7:12, Luke 6:31).

The Bible goes further by stating that the foreigner should be treated the same as citizens of the land (Exodus 12, Leviticus 24, Numbers 9, Numbers 15, Ezekiel 47), and that foreigners in need, should be taken care of, whether they need a place of refuge (Numbers 35, Joshua 20) or food and other provisions to survive (Leviticus 19, Leviticus 23, Deuteronomy 14, Deuteronomy 24, Deuteronomy 26).

Pope Francis would state that to make migration a choice that is truly free, efforts must be made to ensure to everyone an equal share in the common good, respect for his or her fundamental rights, and access to an integral human development, thus, to offer to each person the possibility of a dignified and fulfilling life, whether individually or within families.

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We believe that the Bible calls us to be subject to ruling authorities and to follow the laws of the land (Romans 13, Titus 3, 1 Peter 2). This is true for obeying local, national, and international laws and policies related to migration as well. And yet, issues surrounding migration often highlight a lack of clarity, justice, mercy, and grace, both in the hearts and minds of those in authority and in the laws and policies that govern our lands.

Therefore, God’s call to care for the stranger, the foreigner, the sojourner, the orphan, the widow, the slave, the poor, and those who are persecuted must prevail in the hearts and minds of Christians and must be reflected in both the laws that rule our nations, as well as how we enforce such laws.

Our Holy Father would further state that the principal responsibility falls to the countries of origin and their leaders, who are called to practice good politics – one that is transparent, honest, farsighted and at the service of all, especially those most vulnerable. At the same time, they must be empowered to do this, without finding themselves robbed of their natural and human resources and without outside interference aimed at serving the interests of a few.



The Bible gives us several stories of people being blessed by showing hospitality to the stranger. In the words of Hebrews 13:2, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.” This shows the freedom of a migrant being respected and welcomed.

Matthew 25 instructs us both that the kingdom of God will be inherited by those who cared for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoner, and the stranger, for “truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” and that those who do not care for the hungry, thirsty, naked, prisoner and the stranger will reap eternal punishment.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, heeding to the message of the Holy Father let us work to ensure that in every case, migration is the fruit of a free decision, we are called to show maximum respect for the dignity of each migrant; this entails accompanying and managing waves of migration as best we can, constructing bridges and not walls, expanding channels for a safe and regular migration. In whatever place we decide to build our future, in the country of our birth or elsewhere, the important thing is that there always be a community ready to welcome, protect, promote and integrate everyone, without distinction and without excluding anyone. Let our parish, our community, our diocese and our society become a welcoming land to welcome the migrant Jesus. Amen.

