

109TH WORLD DAY OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

24 September 2023

"Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay"

Homily: Pastoral Approach

Today is dedicated as the World Day for migrants and refugees. The Holy Father, Pope Francis in his latest reflections, "Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay" writes that often we do not choose to leave our homes and our dear ones unless circumstances force us to do so. Persecutions, wars, unemployment and poverty can lead people to move permanently from one place to another. In the US, nearly 3.3 crores of 33 crores move from one place to another.

Migration is not a new phenomenon. People from European countries, African countries and even in the US comprise different ethnic groups from all over the world. In the US for example, the indigenous people, the people who belong to the land are the Lakota people or what they are popularly known as Indians spread over the reservation in the South Dakota region, all the rest are migratory people. Migration is in fact a very complex and ongoing issue. Today thousands of people try to immigrate to the US and other countries, but why?

Different circumstances at different times, compel people to move from place to place either to sustain their lives or to escape harsh realities at home. Many times, countries are besieged with famine, insecurity, unemployment, unreliable political situation, and these are some of the factors that force people to migrate from place to place in search of better prospects. In the face of continuous conflicts, natural disasters or in search of a peaceful and dignified life they abandon their homeland. People who move from one place to a new one, invariably make it their home and generally contribute to the betterment of that place or region or country. Ruth told her mother-in-law, "Don't urge me to leave you, or turn back from you, where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay, your people will be my people and your God, my God too." (Ruth 1:16). It takes courage and fortitude to leave one's own place and country and adopt another place and people as one's own. There are so many instances we find in the scriptures, where God becomes their driving force.

Abraham was told by God to leave his country and people and to move to a new place which God was to show him. God had a plan for Abraham and his family and Abraham trusted in God's plan. When we wholeheartedly surrender our plan to God's plan, everything turns out according to His will. When Jesus was a little child, "the 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 till I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him (Mt. 2:13). So, it was under the command of God that Mary and Joseph went to Egypt. Migration does not happen with a free will all the time; circumstances and situations force people to go to unknown places, to meet unknown people and walk into uncertain future, even to the point of risking their lives, without envisaging the challenges which await them. What are we expected to do in these situations?





We, the disciples of Jesus, are to become people of mercy and compassion, having sensitivity to the sufferings and pains of the others. We are called upon to bring comfort to the despairing and give shelter to strangers. The words of the beatitudes of Jesus touch every fiber of our being. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt. 25:35-36). Each one of us is called to see Jesus in our neighbor, in those migrants who are around us. Nobody wants to put himself or herself into inconvenience and at unease. But as humans we are threatened and we naturally tend to react to unjust and unlawful situations.

When unknown people come near our backyard, we feel threatened, insecure and petrified. We complain and revolt. Well, reaction can come when there is unexpected influx of uninvited people. And we know they are untidy, uneducated, unskilled or trained, and the worse, that they could be carriers of diseases and sicknesses. As a result, a peaceful place can witness a sudden surge in crimes, thefts, violence and rapes. A town can be full of garbage and dirt and most often the blame is on the migrants. We presently witness this happening in our times. When these things happen, it becomes difficult to treat them as our own and make a place for them in our midst. We do not appreciate their presence, leave alone love them, honor them and assimilate them in our midst. But how long can we detest these people and hate them. One hard truth is that they are here to stay, merge into our ethos and culture and we need to accept this reality. Or what else do we expect from here?

It is from here that the journey of peace can begin. A new prospect for development can be possible only when we strive to work together hand in hand with people who have become a part of us, treating them with dignity and respect. During the time of Joseph the son of Jacob, a huge famine hit the land and people had no food to eat. It is then that the sons of Jacob went to Egypt to buy food and discovered that Joseph was still alive and had risen to great heights. It is only after his disclosure, that Jacob and all his family members moved to Egypt and settled down there (Gen. 46:6). It was difficult for them but they stayed 430 years in Egypt as immigrants.

Pope Francis says, "to make migration a choice that is truly free, efforts are to be made to ensure everyone an equal share in the common good and assuring due respect and dignity to all, this must be seen as his or her fundamental right, accompanied by chances towards integral human development. Only in this way, will we be able to help others live a dignified and fulfilling life." The first responsibility falls on the government and country from where they come. No one migrates without a reason. We are called upon to take responsibility to work beyond the boundaries of caste, religion, culture, color and beliefs and work towards a relationship, one that is transparent towards all, especially those who are vulnerable to discrimination, injustice and exploitation. Many a times, these migrants fall victims to nefarious designs by human traffickers and well established mafia, and their life becomes one of misery and sufferings.



The Jubilee year promises, that people who are scattered away from their homeland could return back to where they belong. They will have their property, justice, land and dignity restored and debts, if any, be cancelled and people will once again be able to live in peace (Lev.25:13). Has it been fulfilled? The Jubilee celebration must remind us all, that none of us must be forced to emigrate from our own homeland and our country. All have the fundamental right to live in peace and dignity in their own land. Everyone must strive to work towards its realization. Unless the developed and developing countries come together and strive to pool in their resources together and elevate poorer countries, the phenomenon of migration will continue to happen throughout the world. If this continues, people with vested interests will take advantage of this situation and will continue to exploit simple and vulnerable people.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis exhorts every Christian to let go off our selfish attitudes, and be transformed personalities to reach out to others in need. We are to bring Jesus into the lives of people; people must be able to see Jesus in our lives. Unless and until the change of our heart and mind takes place, the scourge of migration is bound to occur and re-occur throughout the world. If people live in happiness, peace and security, they would never migrate. Therefore, who are to be blamed? People, government or nature? Migration must be free and one's own decision. Giving them respect and dignity is our duty, and as Christians a witness value of our faith. It is also expected from us that we must teach them to do what is right and humanely correct them when they go wrong in a new situation. A kind gesture of love, patience and charity will make them feel, in their hearts, the happiness of being welcomed and taken care of. This is a way to let them know that we are disciples of Jesus who make no distinction. Let us ask for this grace today during this Eucharistic celebration.

