



The Challenge of Migration: Beyond Borders (Vincentian Approach)

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Abstract:

This paper explores the dynamics of global migration, emphasizing the significant differences between historical and contemporary migration patterns. The article highlights the economic privilege of today's global travelers from the North and contrasts this with the plight of migrants driven by dire circumstances such as economic instability, political corruption, and social violence. It delves into the harsh realities faced by migrants, including dangerous journeys and hostile receptions in host countries. The piece underscores the moral and ethical imperatives, particularly for the Catholic Church, to provide compassionate and coordinated responses to migration. By invoking the Vincentian tradition of service to the poor, it calls for a commitment to treating migrants with dignity and integrating them into society. The article also touches on the complex and often harsh political responses to migration in various countries, advocating for a more humane and inclusive approach.

Cet article explore la dynamique des migrations mondiales, en mettant l'accent sur les différences significatives entre les schémas migratoires historiques et contemporains. L'article met en évidence les privilèges économiques des voyageurs du Nord d'aujourd'hui et les oppose à la situation critique des migrants poussés par des circonstances désastreuses telles que l'instabilité économique, la corruption politique et la violence sociale. Il se penche sur les dures réalités auxquelles sont confrontés les migrants, notamment les voyages dangereux et les accueils hostiles dans les pays d'accueil. La pièce souligne les impératifs moraux et éthiques, en particulier pour l'Église catholique, de fournir des réponses compatissantes et coordonnées à la migration. En invoquant la tradition vincentienne du service aux pauvres, il appelle à un engagement à traiter les migrants avec dignité et à les intégrer dans la société. L'article aborde également les réponses politiques complexes et souvent dures à la migration dans divers pays, plaidant en faveur d'une approche plus humaine et inclusive.

Este artículo explora la dinámica de la migración mundial, haciendo hincapié en las diferencias significativas entre los patrones migratorios históricos y contemporáneos. El artículo destaca el privilegio económico de los actuales viajeros globales del Norte y lo contrasta con la difícil situación de los emigrantes empujados por circunstancias terribles como la inestabilidad económica, la corrupción política y la violencia social. Profundiza en las duras realidades a las que se enfrentan los emigrantes, incluidos los viajes peligrosos y las recepciones hostiles en los países de acogida. La obra subraya los imperativos morales y éticos, en particular para la Iglesia católica, de dar respuestas compasivas y coordinadas a la migración. Invocando la tradición vicenciana de servicio a los pobres, reclama el compromiso de tratar a los inmigrantes con dignidad e integrarlos en la sociedad. El artículo también aborda las complejas y a menudo duras respuestas políticas a la migración en diversos países, abogando por un enfoque más humano e integrador.



Keywords: Migration, Imago Dei, Hospitality, Compassion.

Introduction

Although the legacy and the legend of some continue to shape the present in profound ways, the archetype of the 15th to 19th-century explorers –driven either by scientific or colonial reasons- seems to be a relic of an increasingly distant past. Nowadays, global “discovery” is largely the province of economically privileged individuals who reside in the global North. For such individuals, the world today is infinitely smaller than it used to be. Nearly every corner of the globe has become a vacation destination to travel to on low-cost tours (roundtrip airfare, lodging, and meals included). Although the vast majority of the world’s people lack the economic capacity to do so, it is possible to travel almost anywhere on Earth in under 24 hours. For tourists, CEOs, and executives of big corporations, distance is nearly irrelevant.

The globalization alluded to above and that permeates everything is characterized, among other things, by recent manifestations of two closely related categories of ancient human phenomena: mobility and migration. “Mobility” is the category that best describes the largely elective journeys of contemporary adventurers, tourists, businesspeople, and the like. “Migration,” on the other hand, is the category that best describes what has evolved into a far less voluntary, far less joyful, considerably more dramatic, and almost always traumatic phenomenon. Economic instability, shortage of opportunities, political corruption, social violence, or widespread poverty experienced in many countries are pushing factors that propel millions of men and women to move to another latitude where they hope to find what their land seems to take away from them. Migrants, whether documented or not, make up the landscape of almost every city today, from Europe to Asia. For societies in general, and the Catholic Church in particular, they are both a challenge and a question that demands coordinated, committed, and compassionate responses. As Vincentians, we cannot afford to be bystanders to this age-old phenomenon of migration, which affects almost every society in the world, rather, we are called to respond in accordance with our tradition of service to the poor and vulnerable.

1. The Harsh Reality: Facts and Figures

According to the 2022 Annual Report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the estimated number of international migrants (nationals of one country living and working in another) is more than 281 million, of which 135 million are female and 146 million are male. This may seem like a large figure, but it equates to 3.6 percent of the world’s population, so it is easy to conclude that the majority of the world’s population continues to live in their country of origin and only a small minority migrates across borders for one reason or another.

While this is true, to the 281 million migrants must be added another 55 million people who have been forced to move within their own country, 26.4 million refugees, and 4,1 million asylum seekers. Although the numbers are still small compared to the world’s total population, it is important to remember that behind these numbers are personal stories, lives, dreams and hopes, some fulfilled and many cut short. Lives, dreams and hopes like that of a baby girl who was found on a beach in Tarragona, Spain.

In mid-June 2023, some beachgoers found what they initially thought was the lower part of a doll. Realizing, upon closer examination, that it was human remains, they alerted

the Guardia Civil¹. After the police cordoned off the beach, a forensic team was called and determined, without much difficulty, due to the relatively early stage of decomposition, that it was an infant female. A week later, the Guardia Civil had successfully identified the baby girl. She was an eight-month-old who was traveling with her parents from Algeria in a dinghy that shipwrecked with 15 people on board in waters near the coast of the Balearic Islands. They were trying to reach Spain. There were no survivors. The Mediterranean Sea had returned some bodies, including that of the mother. The baby girl was buried beside her.

The Mediterranean Sea that separates Africa from Europe has become a dangerous border where thousands of people lose their lives annually. Pope Francis has denounced that a cry of pain, the stifled cry of migrant brothers and sisters, resounds loudly in our consciences, turning the Mediterranean Sea, the *mare nostrum*, the cradle of civilization, into the *mare mortuum*, the graveyard of dignity.²

But the Mediterranean Sea is not the only border that separates migrants from their dreams and puts their dignity and lives at risk. Other places are close behind, such as the border between Mexico and the United States of America, the territory where the so-called “coyotes”³ work. Susanne Johnson, associate professor of Christian Education at Southern Methodist University (Dallas, Texas), succeeds in capturing in a few words the anguish that many experience on their journey northward, dangerously relying on the assistance of these “coyotes”. “The treacherous journeys all too often end up with migrants drowning in the Rio Grande River; suffocating in overcrowded cargo transports; losing limbs from mishaps in jumping on and off moving train cars or falling off the back of insecure pickup trucks; dying from fatal dehydration or suffering permanent kidney damage; dying from hypothermia or hyperthermia; undergoing high rates of robbery, and physical and sexual violence en route; being abandoned in the middle of the desert; being subjected to inhumane conditions during mass incarceration in for-profit detention centers; and suffering many other life-and-death assaults on bodily integrity and human dignity. Thousands of migrants have died on the U.S. side of the border, and there are makeshift memorials scattered across the desert.”⁴

Among the more than 3,900 people who die or go missing each year while trying to migrate to another country (IOM estimation) are the little girl from Algeria and her parents, and all the crosses that can be found in the dessert between Mexico and the United States. These dramatic stories capture mass attention, touch our collective consciences, and create a state of empathetic solidarity –often and sadly short-lived- that calls for

¹ The Spanish Guardia Civil is a Public Security Corps of military nature and national scope that is part of the State Security Forces and Corps.

² Apostolic Journey of his Holiness Pope Francis to Marseille for the conclusion of the “Rencontres Méditerranéennes”. Final Session. See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/september/documents/20230923-marsiglia-rencontres-mediterraneennes.html>

³ “Coyote” is a popular term used primarily on the U.S.-Mexico border. It refers to individuals who transport migrants from one side of the border to the other for an enormous amount of money. They owe their nickname to the wild animal that inhabits semi-desert areas. As coyotes act in packs and mainly at night and on the sly, so do these human traffickers, whose belonging to organized mafias makes them true predators who feed on the desperation of their victims. The conditions in which this human trafficking takes place are inhumane and it is common for the coyotes to abandon these migrants to their fate in the middle of the desert when problems arise.

⁴ Johnson, Susanne. 2018. “Feminist Practical Theology and (Un)Making Structural Violence against Immigrant Women and Families.” *Revista Pistis & Praxis* 10 (1): 83.

action. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the far greater number of relatively silent and less sensational, but no less heart-rending dramas unfolding in the lives of the myriad migrants who daily enter Spain or the U.S. or any other country through conventional ports of entry and who already live in our cities. They do not trigger such a broad stream of solidarity in our societies,⁵ nor do they spark such an active commitment. On the contrary, these migrants as bearers of values and attitudes that mold their lives and give them a unique identity often face uncomfortable tensions and unpleasant frictions with the local culture that are not always managed well.

Migration has radically transformed the demographics of once relatively historically homogeneous societies and turned them into complex multicultural landscapes often fraught with tension over if and/or how such diversity can cohere. As Pope Francis stated, “not infrequently, the arrival of migrants, displaced persons, asylum-seekers and refugees gives rise to suspicion and hostility. There is a fear that society will become less secure, that identity and culture will be lost, that competition for jobs will become stiffer and even that criminal activity will increase. The communications media have a role of great responsibility in this regard: it is up to them, in fact, to break down stereotypes and to offer correct information in reporting the errors of a few as well as the honesty, rectitude and goodness of the majority. A change of attitude towards migrants and refugees is needed on the part of everyone, moving away from attitudes of defensiveness and fear, indifference and marginalization – all typical of a throwaway culture – towards attitudes based on a culture of encounter, the only culture capable of building a better, more just and fraternal world.”⁶ Unfortunately, the current political reality towards migrants across the world contradicts Pope Francis’ wishful thinking.

Migration is a complex reality that gives rise to heated debates everywhere in which voices are increasingly raised in favor of limiting, if not preventing, migration through ever harsher and more restrictive border controls. For example, in Spain, the control of migration, especially illegal migration, is part of the social discourse of Vox, a political party that does not hesitate to whip up fear of the alien other in order to establish increasingly restrictive policies that impede the right of people to migrate in search of a better future. Border control, the naval blockade of migratory routes, and the expulsion of undocumented migrants are part of its electoral program. Vox is not the only political party in Spain calling for a strict control of migration, Alianza Catalana ran for the May 12, 2024 autonomous elections in Catalonia with a program restricting legal and illegal migration.

The United States, a country built by migrants from all over the world, is experiencing a growing backlash against immigration. In a 2006 survey, half of U.S. adults believed that immigrants were a threat to the country’s values and that the population should be protected from foreign influence. As a result, Arkansas and Arizona in 2010, and most

⁵ In this sense, Paul Slovic’s theory of “psychophysical numbing” is interesting. This theory argues that people hardly connect on a human and emotional level when people’s suffering is hidden behind large, anonymous numbers. On the contrary, such an emotional response always occurs when the big numbers of unseen faces give way to particular individuals with their own personal story. To know more about this theory, please see:

Slovic, P. (2007). “If I look at the mass I will never act”: Psychic numbing and genocide. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 2(2), 79-95. doi:10.1017/S1930297500000061

⁶ Pope Francis. 2014. “Migrants and Refugees: Towards a Better World.” Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html

recently Texas in 2024, approved various packages of measures and state laws against migrants with the support of a majority of the population. Also, the British Parliament has recently passed a bill to control migration, especially illegal migration. In addition to closing the possibility of access to asylum in the United Kingdom for any person who arrives irregularly, it also provides for the deportation, to Rwanda especially, of all those who are undocumented in the country. The examples could go on and on.

The recent increase in migratory fluxes can be explained by a combination of several factors, both external (wars, famines, political and religious violence, unemployment and economic poverty, lack of future prospects, global warming and climate change, etc.) and internal to the various receiving countries (migration policies focused on controlling migratory fluxes and externalizing borders). It is disturbing that the only policies to deal with this new stage of migration are more border controls and more deportations of migrants. These measures, that have proven to be ineffective, only lead to more vulnerability, more precariousness and more suffering for people in a situation of mobility/vulnerability. What are we called to do as disciples of Christ and of saint Vincent de Paul?

2. Judging Migration through the Lens of God: Migrants as *Imago Dei*

According to data from the IOM World Migration Report 2022, Europe is currently the preferred destination for international migrants (87 million migrants representing 30.9% of the international migrant population), followed closely by Asian countries (86 million, 30.5%) and the United States of America (59 million, 20.9%). This immense flow of people often has no safe way to reach the countries of destination due to the lack of legal channels (i.e. lack of bilateral agreements, difficulties in obtaining work visas, residence permits, etc.), which leads them to seek alternative routes that are significantly longer and much more dangerous, putting their lives and those of their families in the hands of mafias. The increasingly strict border controls imposed by countries of destination and transit only lead to greater suffering, pain and death for all those who are willing to risk their lives to achieve the welfare, security and protection that their country of birth denies them.

Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi, a pastoral instruction issued in 2004 by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, considers “the present-day phenomenon of migration a sign of the times, a challenge to be discovered and utilized in our work to renew humanity and proclaim the gospel of peace.”⁷ In the light of this sign of the times, the Catholic Church has taken a step forward in the current emergency situation regarding migrants, supporting both the countries that are receiving larger numbers of people and the transit countries that have borne the brunt of receiving refugees in recent years. The Catholic Church offers a broad and generous accompaniment to migrants in countries of destination and transit, aimed at meeting both their material and spiritual needs. This is not only an altruistic option and a humanitarian response, but there is a whole theological understanding behind this approach as in every migrant we can recognize the face of God. They are, indeed, *Imago Dei*.

⁷ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 14.

The concept of *Imago Dei* is foundational in Christian theology and underscores the inherent value and dignity of every human being. Genesis 1:27⁸, the first creation account, provides the biblical foundation for Christian theology to affirm that every human being, regardless of race, nationality or any other characteristic, has been created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore possesses inalienable worth and dignity.

With *Imago Dei* as a theological foundation, the Old Testament contains several verses that emphasize the importance of treating migrants and foreigners with kindness, compassion, and justice, often reminding the Israelites of their own experiences as foreigners and strangers. God prevents Israel from mistreating or oppressing the foreigner, reminding his people that they too were foreigners in Egypt (Exodus 22:21). The foreigner residing in Israel must be treated as a native-born because of the same reason (Leviticus 19:33-34). Since God loves the stranger who resides among his people, providing them with food and clothing, the people of Israel are to do the same, they are to love those who are foreigners, for they were foreigners in Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). The custom of gleaning and leaving part of the harvest uncollected is an act of kindness so that the vulnerable ones, the fatherless, the widow and especially the foreigner, can benefit from it (cf. Deuteronomy 24:19-22). In troubled times, among other duties, the prophet Jeremiah reminds Israel that God asks them to do what is right, not to do violence to the stranger who resides among them (Jeremiah 22:3).

Imago Dei is deeply embedded in the biblical narrative of the New Testament as well and is extremely relevant to the treatment of migrants and foreigners. The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) illustrates the importance of showing mercy and compassion to all people, regardless of their background or nationality. The Samaritan, traditionally despised by Jews, demonstrates love and care for a stranger in need, reflecting the values of the Kingdom of God. Galatians 3:28, stating that there are no longer Jew and Gentile, slave or free, for all are one in Christ Jesus, highlights the equality and unity of all believers in Christ, irrespective of social distinctions. It emphasizes that the image of God is present in every individual, transcending cultural, ethnic, and national boundaries. Hebrews 13:2 invites Israel to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels. Galatians 5:14 remembers Israel that the entire law is fulfilled in keeping only one command: love your neighbor as yourself. Romans 12:13 is a call to practice hospitality, and 1 Peter 4:9 says how: without grumbling.

But perhaps the most relevant passage is Matthew 25:31-46. In the context of the final judgment, both sheep and goats are surprised to discover that Christ was in the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the hungry, the thirsty and also in the stranger. This passage teaches that whatever is done to them is done to Christ, that acts of compassion and kindness shown to others are ultimately directed towards Christ himself. Viewing migrants and foreigners as bearers of the image of God compels Jesus' disciples to treat the strangers among them with love, respect, and dignity.

Jesus himself models an attitude of perfect hospitality that his disciples have to honor. Jesus' remarkable attitude towards others, as depicted in the Gospels, transcends boundaries of gender, religion, and social status, embodying a profound message of inclusivity and compassion. In Matthew 9:10-13, he shares meals with tax collectors and sinners, breaking societal norms to extend love and acceptance to those marginalized by society. His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 exemplifies his

⁸ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

disregard for religious and gender barriers, engaging in meaningful dialogue and offering her the gift of living water. Furthermore, in Luke 7:36-50, Jesus displays compassion towards a sinful woman, regardless of her societal status, affirming her faith and granting her forgiveness. His teachings consistently emphasize the importance of love, humility, and service to all, regardless of background or social standing, echoing his profound declaration in Luke 6:31, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Through his actions and words, Jesus exemplifies an unwavering commitment to embrace and uplift every individual, irrespective of their differences. In sum, Jesus is the paradigm of hospitality.

The lens of the word of God invites us to advocate for a different approach to migrants based not strictly on the law but on their dignity as children of God. All human beings, with no exception, have been created in the image and likeness of God and therefore have the same dignity, rights, and responsibilities, including migrants in host societies. Through the lens of God's word, migrants are not the different ones who come to jeopardize our lifestyle, disturb our peace, and impose their cultures on us. Migrants are mediators through whom God's blessings come to us.

Migrants, as *Imago Dei*, are a *Locus Theologicus* where God reveals his salvation plan. The Catholic Church has always contemplated in every migrant the image of Christ. "Their condition is, therefore, a challenge to the faith and love of believers, who are called on to heal the evils caused by migration and discover the plan God pursues through it even when caused by obvious injustices."⁹ Far from being a burden or a problem, migrants and the intangible treasure of culture that they carry within represent a gift to both society and the Catholic Church, they are channels of grace through which God's blessings come to us. In this context, we are called upon to integrate the concrete reality of the migrants living among us, "bringing the values of each one into communion, as all are called upon to build a Church that is concretely Catholic."¹⁰

Despite the uneasy tensions sometimes migration may cause, the Church's response cannot ignore this phenomenon; on the contrary, it must welcome and foster it, finding ways to make the Gospel present as a life-transforming and society-creating force. Seeing in every migrant the image of God, the Church's response must be to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and eradicate the hunger and thirst of so many brothers and sisters. There is no need to look at skin color or religious belief. Only when the material and spiritual needs of migrants are met, the Church will be a reflection of the Kingdom of God that welcomes in its bosom, like the tree in the parable, birds of various feathers and songs.

3. Vincentian Approach to Migration: Affective and Effective Love

Totus opus nostrum in operatione consistit
St. Vincent de Paul

In his reflection on Matthew 6:33, where Jesus said to his disciples that they should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, St. Vincent de Paul declared that Jesus Christ was the Rule of the Mission. For St. Vincent, such a thing simply means that Jesus Christ is the one who speaks, and whoever wants to imitate him must be attentive to his word and give himself completely to putting it into practice (XI, 429). To his

⁹ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 89.

confreres, he constantly insisted that they should pay special attention to be always dependent on the conduct of the Son of God, asking themselves honestly: Is this in accordance with the teachings of the Son of God? (XI, 239). In short, for Saint Vincent, Christ is the rule of the Mission and serves as the sole guide and inspiration for specific actions, situations, and personal behavior at all levels.

In asserting that Jesus Christ was the only rule for the Congregation, Saint Vincent emphasized a profound commitment to emulate Christ's compassion and selflessness. This declaration encapsulated his vision of a community wholly devoted to the teachings and example of Christ, guiding their mission of charity and service. For Saint Vincent, adherence to this principle ensured that their work remained grounded in the purest form of Christian love and devotion as seen in the previous section.

Saint Vincent de Paul is widely recognized for his compassionate actions and advocacy for the poor, encompassing migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The foundation of all his actions is intimately rooted in his reading and interpretation of the passage of the final judgment in Matthew 25, where Jesus says, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." Vincent interpreted these words as a call to serve those in need, including strangers and migrants, for in serving them, God himself is served.

"In serving persons who are poor, we serve Jesus Christ. How true, Sisters! You are serving Jesus Christ in the person of the poor. And that is as true as that we are here. A sister will go ten times a day to visit the sick, and ten times a day she'll find God there. As saint Augustine says, what we see with our eyes is not so certain because our senses sometimes deceive us, but the truths of God never deceive. Go to visit a chain gang, you'll find God there. Look after those little children, you'll find God there. How delightful, Sisters! You go into poor homes, but you find God there. Again, Sisters, how delightful! He accepts the services you do for those sick persons and, as you have said, considers them as done to himself."¹¹

While explicit references to migrants in his documented conferences and writings may be sparse, his life, works, and teachings reveal a consistent commitment to supporting those on the move, underscoring his enduring compassion and solidarity with the most vulnerable members of society. From his words and deeds, we can distill the foundational principles that underpin Vincentian support for migrants, offering enduring inspiration for contemporary advocacy efforts.

- ***Service to the Poor***

Service to the poor is the most characteristic feature of the Vincentian ethos. As saint Vincent dedicated his life to serving the poor and marginalized, so his disciples must carry out the same mission and charitable works. Love for God leads to concrete love for our brothers and sisters in need, whom we are to love with concrete actions far from any empty spiritual sentimentalism.

"Let us love God, brothers, let us love God, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows; for very often many acts of love of God,

¹¹ Conference of February 13, 1646, "The love of vocation and assistance to the poor," in St. Vincent de Paul. Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. Vol. 9, pag. 199.

of devotion, and of other similar affections and interior practices of a tender heart, although very good and desirable, are, nevertheless, very suspect of they don't translate into the practice of effective love. By this, says our Lord, is my father glorified, that you may bear much fruit. We have to be very careful about that; for there are many who, recollected exteriorly, and filled with lofty sentiments of God interiorly, stop at that, and when it comes to the point of doing something, and they have the opportunity to act, they come up short. They flatter themselves with their ardent imaginations; they're satisfied with the sweet conversations they have with God in meditation and even speak of them like angels; but when they leave there, if there's a question of working for God, of suffering, of mortifying themselves, of instructing poor persons, of going in search of the lost sheep, of being happy when they lack something, or of accepting sickness or some other misfortune, alas!, they're no longer around; their courage fails them. No, no, let's not fool ourselves. Totus opus nostrum in operatione consistit.”¹²

- ***Hospitality and Advocacy for Justice***

Vincent de Paul saw the practice of hospitality and care for strangers as imitating the example of Christ himself. Jesus often reached out to those who were considered outsiders or marginalized by society, showing them love and acceptance. Vincent encouraged his followers to emulate this example by being compassionate and welcoming to all, regardless of their background. This would naturally extend to migrants and refugees displaced by armed conflicts and in need of shelter, sustenance, and support.

In 1635, France found itself embroiled in the turmoil of the Thirty Years' War, a conflict that wreaked havoc across the continent. Among the hardest-hit regions was the Duchy of Lorraine, where the landscape bore witness to the grim aftermath of battles—strewn with countless corpses, marked by desolation, and haunted by the specter of hunger. Alerted by the confreres in Toul, St. Vincent implored Cardinal Richelieu to intervene and halt the bloodshed in light of the suffering endured by the people. Recognizing the futility of his request, St. Vincent organized the double company (Congregation of the Mission and Daughters of Charity) to alleviate the ravages of war and extend aid to the displaced masses. Among the most remarkable figures in this endeavor was Brother Mathieu Regnard, who undertook 53 perilous journeys to deliver much-needed funds to those caught in the throes of conflict. On his return to Paris, he often brought with him a number of people he had encountered in terrible circumstances. In October 1639, Vincent wrote of him, “*Last month he has brought with him one hundred, among whom were forty-six girls, young ladies and others, whom he has conducted and fed to this city.*”¹³

When a new war engulfed Paris in 1652, St. Vincent spearheaded extensive relief efforts, organizing collections and providing shelter and sustenance for the displaced. Despite his humanitarian endeavors, his appeals to Cardinal Mazarin to cease the war were met with little success. Documenting the dire situation, Vincent's letters underscored the influx of rural refugees and the urgent need for assistance, particularly

¹² Conference on the love of God, in St. Vincent de Paul. Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. Vol. 11, pag. 32-33.

¹³ SVP I, 573.

for impoverished young women, leading to the establishment of housing initiatives in suburban areas (cf. SVP IV, 369).

Because St. Vincent de Paul understood hospitality in a very practical way, he encouraged his confreres to not only offer shelter and food to strangers but also to treat them with dignity and respect. This meant listening to their stories, understanding their needs, and providing support in whatever way possible. Through his unwavering faith and dedication, Saint Vincent de Paul not only transformed the lives of countless individuals but also established a lasting legacy of compassion and service that continues to inspire generations.

- *Compassionate Action and Effective Love*

Vincent de Paul considered love as the core virtue of his Mission. For him, charity was not just almsgiving but genuinely caring for others, especially those who were marginalized or in distress. This included extending hospitality to strangers, welcoming them with open arms, and meeting their immediate needs. In fact, his teachings emphasized the importance of compassionate action over mere words. Therefore, he encouraged his followers to actively seek out those in need and provide practical assistance, which would include migrants and refugees who often faced destitution and danger.

St. Vincent strongly encouraged missionaries to follow the example of God himself, who clearly shows his partiality for the underprivileged, the hopeless, and the helpless. The saint used to affirm that God is filled with love and compassion when he sees the state of abandonment in which his beloved ones find themselves, and that God's love for the poor will also reach those who love and serve them. *"Let us go, then, my brethren, and devote ourselves with new love to serve the poor, and even seek out the poorest and most abandoned; let us acknowledge before God that they are our lords and masters and that we are unworthy to offer them our little services."*¹⁴ The new love of which St. Vincent speaks is effective love, which "consists in doing the things that the loved person [Christ] commands or desires."¹⁵

Effective love materialized, for example, in the emergence of an innovative charitable network that took in foundlings or cared for the needs of galley slaves. The foundlings of yesteryear could well be the migrant minors of today who cross borders illegally or risk their lives in the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. The galley slaves that St. Vincent cared for physically and spiritually could well be the thousands of migrants today who, unable to pay for the journey of their dreams to a better future, become slaves to the human-trafficking mafias. In short, the state of the Mission is a state of effective love for the marginalized who, today as yesterday, are victims of the greed or violence of others.

Overall, Vincent de Paul's care for strangers reflect a deep commitment to the principles of love, compassion, and social justice, which continue to inspire individuals and organizations dedicated to serving vulnerable populations today.

4. Concrete Pastoral Actions

¹⁴ Cf. S.V. XI, 392-393; ES XI, 273.

¹⁵ Conference on the love of God, in St. Vincent de Paul. Correspondence, Conferences, Documents. Vol. 11, pag. 35

Every pastoral action with and for migrants is based on the concept that every human being is *Imago Dei*, *Imago Christi*, and therefore has a sacred dignity that no one can violate or ignore. For this reason, the Catholic Church encourages all her faithful to open their arms and hearts to migrants of all countries, races, and religions, welcoming them as brothers and sisters and providing for their needs. In light of the many challenges posed by migration, Pope Francis has written about what the Christian response to migrants should be. For Pope Francis, the Catholic response to the arrival of migrants can be summed up in four words: to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate.¹⁶ Under the umbrella of the principle of mercy,¹⁷ the pastoral guidelines presented in this article try precisely to embody those four actions that Pope Francis speaks about.

- *Creating Spaces for Encounter*

Pope Francis warned against the temptation to build walls, real or figurative, that prevent encounters between cultures and peoples. Those who protect themselves behind walls, believing they are safe, end up being prisoners of a suffocating space, incapable of having a different horizon “for they lack this interchange with others.”¹⁸ We need to create spaces of encounter in which an enriching exchange of gifts can take place. We need to be open to the gift of the other, the different, the alien, as a condition of possibility for personal growth and community renewal.

Creating spaces for encounter will mean, for instance, launching language and cultural exchange programs where migrants can learn the local language and share their own cultural heritage with the community, or promoting community integration initiatives through activities that promote interaction and friendship between migrants and the local community.

- *Creating a Safe Place*

If the first casualty of war is truth, the first casualty of migration is security. Migrants face a destabilizing experience that makes them vulnerable because it deprives them of their certainties and security systems. In most cases, the first steps in the host society can be discouraging: finding a job is not easy and often are 3D jobs, finding a place to live is not easy either, lack of legal documentation creates insecurity, the cost of living, and so on. Deprivation and rootlessness shatter the confidence of migrants. In such times, they need a safe place to turn to. We need to create safe places where migrants can feel comforted, accompanied, and protected.

In light of the principle of the Samaritan Church, we should strive to provide migrants with basic services that meet their needs, while protecting their dignity as *Imago Dei*. In this regard, pastoral care and support service are priceless as they assist migrants in obtaining their necessary legal documents (i.e. residence permit, work permit, fair access

¹⁶ Cf. Pope Francis. 2020. Encyclical Letter “Fratelli Tutti.” n. 129. See: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

¹⁷ In this article, the principle of mercy is understood as the love of God in action, a specific, concrete, and practical love in the style of the parable of the Good Samaritan, a type of love that transcended boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, or social status. Thus, the principle of mercy relates to an attentive, compassionate, and close look at those who have been battered by life, a look that leads to a committed closeness that heals wounds and repairs suffering with concrete actions.

¹⁸ Pope Francis. “Fratelli Tutti.” n. 27.

to justice when needed, access to national social security and social services of the community and the municipality, among others). It is no less important to raise the awareness of the community on the issue of migration so that the entire parish community can adopt a positive welcoming attitude towards migrants, reduce prejudices, eliminate discriminatory attitudes, silence derogatory vocabulary, and fight against any form of racism or xenophobia. Workshops and seminars to educate the local community about the challenges faced by migrants, and advocacy for just and compassionate migration policies that protect the rights and dignity of migrants are key.

- *Creating a Place to Thrive*

Pope Francis called to make an “effort to ensure that all migrants and refugees –as well as the communities that welcome them- are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings in all dimensions.”¹⁹ This means recognizing the capacities of migrants and enabling them to use their talents to contribute to a more just society, a more diverse community. This also implies recognizing their resilience, accompanying them in processes of participation, leadership, and empowerment.

Creating places to thrive will imply, for instance, launching educational campaigns to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about migrants, fostering empathy, compassion, and a culture of welcome. Education and vocational training will help migrants integrate into society and find a job. This could include adult education programs, and workshops on job skills.

- *Creating a Place of Unity*

To welcome, protect, and promote must lead to integration, which is never easy though. The bond with Christ connects all those who comprise the community through an affective and effective love. This love becomes real and tangible when it is lived in unity, because as members of the Body of Christ, we are all co-responsible for one another, regardless of our country of birth.

To integrate implies efforts to recognize the richness of migrants, “bringing the values of each one into communion, as all are called upon to build a Church that is concretely Catholic. In this way there is brought about a unity in plurality in the local Church, a unity that is not uniformity but harmony, in which every legitimate diversity plays its part in the common and unifying effort.”²⁰ Integration will be real when migrants can contribute to building a community that is “a sign and instrument of unity in the prospect of a renewed humanity.”²¹

Creating spaces of unity with migrants will involve fostering an environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and included regardless of their background. We could achieve this goal, for instance, fostering dialogue and cooperation with other religious communities and faith-based organizations to address the challenges of migration collectively and promote mutual understanding and respect. Also, we could involve migrants in community activities, projects, and decision-making processes. This helps

¹⁹ Cf. Pope Francis. 2018. “Welcoming, Protecting, Promoting and Integrating Migrants and Refugees.” See: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html

²⁰ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*. n. 89.

²¹ *Ibid.*

them feel like active participants in shaping their new environment and fosters a sense of belonging. In the case of a parish, lectors, altar servants, choir members, music directors, catechists of Christian initiation, youth leaders, prayer leaders, finance and pastoral council members, and charity volunteers are some spaces among others where migrants can bring their gifts and thus contribute to the birth of a new ecclesial reality.

These are just some concrete actions that can contribute to welcoming migrants and helping them integrate into their new communities. By implementing these ideas, our Vincentian communities can play a vital role in creating new spaces that are welcoming, inclusive, and compassionate towards migrants, embodying the teachings of Jesus Christ to love our neighbors as ourselves. Vincent de Paul believed that hospitality and care for strangers should extend beyond individual acts of kindness to foster a sense of community and solidarity. He envisioned a society where people looked out for one another, offering support and assistance to those in need, including strangers and migrants. We are called to do the same.

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