



MIGRANTS REFUGEES

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TRANSLATING THE CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER INTO ACTION¹

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Good afternoon, and many thanks for your welcome. Yes, I was born in Czechoslovakia. When I was two years old, my parents, my little brother, and I left—or rather, fled from—Czechoslovakia and settled in Canada. I have therefore had the experience of being a refugee and of growing up in a new culture.

As you probably know, the Roman Curia is going through a process of reform. Two years ago the Holy Father combined four Pontifical Councils into a new Dicastery, whose objective is to promote and better serve integral human development. The idea originated with Blessed Paul VI, who declared that “to be authentic, [development] must be well-rounded [integral]; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.”² *Integral human development* is the name that describes the full ambit and scope of our social ministry. Integral human development is what we desire for each and every person.

Thus, with the *Motu Proprio* of 7 August 2016, the Holy Father unified four Pontifical Councils, namely: Justice and Peace, the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Health Care Workers, and *Cor Unum*. The statutes stipulate that one Section of the Dicastery, the one specifically concerned with refugees and migrants, be placed *ad tempus* under the direct supervision of the Supreme Pontiff. I believe it is the first time in the history of the Church that this has happened.

Our small Section of Migrants and Refugees is there to serve you Bishops. We exist to help

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/100010663517810/videos/573708642994581/>

² *Populorum Progressio* § 14.

you, accompany you, and encourage you. We want to do everything possible to help plan concrete responses to the challenges presented by human mobility, and especially to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. And this requires a thorough, well-articulated understanding of what it means for the Church to accompany human mobility.

In February 2017, just as we were beginning our labours, the Holy Father provided us this basic framework: “Our shared response may be articulated by four verbs: **to welcome, to protect, to promote** and **to integrate**.”³—as we have seen in the short video.⁴ In the context of the pastoral planning now being done by the Mexican Bishops’ Conference, these four verbs are can surely be very relevant.

Starting from this base, the Section for Migrants and Refugees has developed 20 Points for Pastoral Action, which establish a working platform on which we can come together, review our experiences, and discern what the Lord wants of us.⁵ Those 20 Points form a simple but complete system or framework, one which can help to facilitate the work of planning and evaluating the pastoral response being offered by a local Church, a Bishops’ Conference, a diocese, or a parish. The framework can also be used in other contexts and by Catholic and non-Catholic organizations that want to work in this sector.

Since the Second Vatican Council, we are a Church *in* the world and sent *to* the world. The word we address to the world, with its values and priorities, is called the *social doctrine of the Church*. When the Church carries out pastoral action in the world, there are political consequences. Consequently, besides the pastoral version of the 20 Points, we have also stated them in political language, using the governmental vocabulary of the United Nations.

Since 1951 the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees is the basic law providing international protection to refugees and defining the obligations of nations with regard to them.⁶ In recent times, however, the responses of governments to refugees and to those seeking asylum have not measured up to what they deserve.

At a United Nations Summit in September 2016, the Member States agreed to adopt, by the end of 2018, two Global Compacts which will define a common response to the challenges presented by the mass movement of persons characteristic of our time.⁷ Thus were born two very important international processes, namely, the elaboration of two new Global Compacts, one on migrants and the other on refugees.

³ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Forum on “*Migration and Peace*,” 21 February 2017.

⁴ <https://youtu.be/dDlxrIY96ak>

⁵ <https://migrants-refugees.va/20-action-points/>

⁶ The Convention defines what persons are refugees and what rights they have, and it also establishes the obligations of nations with regard to them. The 1967 Protocol withdrew the geographical and temporal restrictions contained in the Convention.

⁷ Cf. *New York Declaration*, <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration>

The new Global Compact on refugees is needed, not as a reformulation of the Convention of 1951, but as a way to develop new mechanisms, based on that Convention, that will be better adapted to the needs, trials and sufferings of today's refugees.

But until now there has been no international agreement or convention on migrants in general.⁸ A sort of disorder reigns in this vast field. The international community, through the U.N., has only recently begun to attend to this matter in an orderly fashion.

What is expected to emerge is not a binding convention but a framework which will promote better collaboration among countries in order to make migration safe, orderly, regular, and responsible,⁹ as well as to avoid the tragedies which we have all witnessed. It would be a sort of *gentlemen's agreement*, a mutual consensus that expresses the positive willingness of governments to collaborate in resolving the most urgent needs of migrants. Although we talk of a global phenomenon, the migrants and their families are not themselves a "global concern" (as in the case of climate change, which is indeed something global). Rather, every migrant is a unique case requiring programs and actions that are appropriate, concrete, and local. The migratory reality requires personalized treatment of unique individuals.

Thus, an individual Bishop or Bishops' Conference can use the 20 Action Points, as stated in political language, for dialoguing with the government authorities charged with these matters.

I want to place special emphasis on the Global Compact for Migrations because Mexico and Switzerland are its two co-facilitators. So at the international level, Mexico is highly identified with this process, and its leadership is much appreciated. An International Conference was held last December in Puerto Vallarta for the purpose of sharing all that had been learned during nearly a year of discussions and preparations. Now is perhaps an opportune moment for the Mexican Bishops' Conference to include the 20 Points in its dialogues with the Mexican government.

As Church we are committed to responding to the migratory phenomenon by practicing those four verbs: **to welcome, to protect, to promote, and to integrate**. Our mission as the Migrants and Refugees Section consists in supporting and helping the Bishops' Conferences and their Migration Commissions to share experiences, to learn from one another, and to work together in responding to the problems.

There is a first moment in the migratory process to which little attention is ordinarily paid: it consists in the terrible challenge of making the **decision** to leave everything and move elsewhere because, in one sense or another, life has become impossible. This decision is a very serious one, and it is practically irreversible. It is the decision that my family made 70 years ago. If you as pastors learn that a family is preparing to migrate, what do you tell them?

⁸ Except for the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

⁹ Cf. *New York Declaration*.

How can you accompany them? Should you try to discourage them and give them reasons to stay? Or do you encourage them and tell them what to expect? This critical moment when a person or a family decides to migrate is a very important one.

The second moment is the long **transit** of the migrants through one or more countries. It is not at all easy to accompany migrants during this difficult and dangerous process. I know that here in Mexico you have a good network of migrant centres and hostels all around the country. You set a good example for others. But consider this particular concern: how can we give good pastoral accompaniment to those who are passing through our country but do not want to stay or simply cannot? In this context, I want to highlight, commend, and encourage the cross-border dialogues that you are having with the bishops of Central America, Canada, and the United States. These dialogues are extremely important for seeking to remedy the maltreatment of migrants and the infringement of their human rights. Moreover, such collaboration constitutes an active and creative form of resistance to the absurd militarization and fortification of the borders, supposedly in the name of national security. Such international dialogue and cross-border cooperation are producing much fruit, and our Section wants to support such efforts here in Mexico and promote them in other parts of the world as well.

The third phase for the migrant is the **arrival**, the reception, and the subsequent process of integration. This is an area where the Church can do a great deal to help. We have a lot of valuable experience, and we need to share it among ourselves nationally, regionally, and internationally.

Finally, we have the tough topic of the **return**, which is especially relevant for Mexico today. Until now very little attention has been paid to this very difficult question. Far from being a moment of triumph, to return is usually experienced as a failure and gives rise to a new series of difficulties. For many who have had to abandon their country of origin and travel to a foreign land, returning is a genuine tragedy and a cause of great shame. What can we do to provide good pastoral accompaniment to those who return? How can we help them transform this “death” into new life?

I want to conclude my presentation by posing a question and offering three possible answers. The question is this: what might the Holy Father have had in mind when he stated in effect, “This topic of migrants, refugees, and victims of trafficking is so important for the Church that I don’t want to lose sight of it,” and decided to keep this Section under his direct supervision?

One answer might be termed *holy impatience*. Sensing that sometimes things move very slowly, the Holy Father may well have wanted to accelerate things a bit and see concrete results—quickly! This is a good answer and a valid one, because many people are suffering terribly.

A second answer involves implementing Church teaching or magisterium in our pastoral

work. Those four verbs constitute a magisterium that you Bishops can translate into pastoral strategy. The Migrants and Refugees Section exists for the purpose of articulating such an important step, of supporting efforts to put it into practice, and of making it available to all within the Church and to others as well. Thus the 20 Points for Pastoral Action represent possible ways of translating Church teaching into action. Since this area of human mobility is so important for the life of the world and of the Church, a more active and more explicit translation of the magisterium into pastoral policies and practices can be of great assistance to everybody. We hope that this will prove to be the case in your fields of action in Mexico.

The third answer is more speculative. Human mobility is not just a particular trait of individuals or of a family like mine, which actually fled from its home country and relocated in another one. We are many such, but we are a minority. The whole people of God, *all of us*, are caught up in changes and movements that are both rapid and momentous. So our manner of being Church may have to change and adapt to a whole human family experiencing radical change in all aspects of their lives, now more than ever.

In view of this, I pose my third question-and-suggestion: will our Church, having learned to accompany people on the move—such as migrants, refugees, and victims of human trafficking—be a Church who is better able to accompany the people of God undergoing a process of rapid transformation?¹⁰ Migrant ministry can be an excellent laboratory in which the whole Church can learn to be more adept and more capable in accompanying the people of God, today and in the future—a future which will probably be even more accelerated than the present.

Many thanks.

¹⁰ See “rapidification” in *Laudato si’* § 18.