

*Nowhere to lay his head :  
A Christian response to refugees and migrants*

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Before using the words, “*Nowhere to lay his head*”, the title of our panel, Jesus observes, “Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests” (Mt 8:20, Lk 9:58). To have our place and our people is normal. “Nil aon tinteán mar do thinteán fain” as they say around here, “there is no hearth/homefire as good as your own hearth/homefire”. All of us in this room, thank God, have a place that we call home.

Jesus himself, by contrast, has “nowhere to lay his head”. With this image, He identifies with asylum-seekers and vulnerable migrants. This had already happened at the beginning of his life. The Holy Family “had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod’s implacable violence. This last was an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless” (AL 30).

Towards the end of Jesus’ public life, in his solemn teaching about the universal judgment, Our Lord identifies totally with those forced to flee: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35).

Having a place is normal, even for highly mobile creatures like birds, foxes and human beings. Having no place is abnormal. But this abnormality, for us Christians, cannot be just a fact or someone’s bit of bad luck. Rather, having heard Jesus say “Welcome the stranger” as his Father kept insisting throughout the Old Testament, his is a decisive invitation. The Church is called to accompany forced migrants and refugees all along their journey:

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the terribly difficult decision to flee, the long voyage, the anxious arrival, the struggle to integrate, and perhaps another difficult decision to return ...

This touches most countries and societies nowadays. And the story changes. Ireland, for example, used to be massively a country of departure, and now it is a country of destination and return. With its Statue of Liberty, the United States used to proclaim,

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.*<sup>2</sup>

But the brave boast of the Mother of Exiles seems less to be taken for granted, now.

Our panel is a great opportunity to listen to those on the run. Listening to them in the light of *Amoris Laetitia* stimulates us to reflect deeply on the meaning of family in our community and society where we might take hearth and home, thintawn, for granted.

At this point, let's allow Pope Francis to give our session an important boost with his short video that articulates our response to vulnerable migrants and refugees and victims of human trafficking. The video has no title, so we can give it our own: "Today's families who *have nowhere to lay their heads.*"

Video (3½ minutes)

Clearly, we who have a home, a hearth, a den or nest are the subjects of the verbs. In the first person singular, I am called to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate vulnerable families on the move. So too for the first person plural: we are called to welcome, to protect and so on. "We" is

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, 1883.

my family, our community, our neighbourhood, our parish, our diocese, our catholic organizations. In fact, many an “I” representing many a “we” in this hall are already doing so, and I trust that the panelists will testify to the good practices already underway. For this we give thanks to God. Encourage one another: “Carry on!”

And many an “I” representing many a “we” in this hall are called to do more, to do better, to do differently, to do innovatively. For such resolution to do more, and for the inspirations we receive here, we also give thanks to God and encourage one another: “Go for it!”

But another, perhaps even more exciting lesson is also there in the video and in the teaching and leadership of Pope Francis. Vulnerable migrant families are not just needy and deserving of our misericordia. They are also “we”. These families switch from coming after to going before the verb, from object to subject, from recipient in need to compassionate protagonist. Thus: migrant families themselves also welcome, they can help protect the vulnerable, promote the integral human development of others, and might end up better integrating those who originally let them in.

Thus: migrant families themselves also welcome, can protect, and so on.

I experienced this switch as a youngster. Our family fled political danger in Czechoslovakia in 1948. Mother, father and two little boys, we were welcomed and assisted by our sponsors, another family in Canada – also mother, father and a young son. Not long after, my parents made space in our home for an older woman whose own family situation was precarious, and she stayed with us for three years. And less than eight years after our own arrival, there was the 1956 uprising in Hungary, and my parents took in a refugee, a stranger, for over six months.

And our Migrants & Refugees Section publishes a half-dozen stories every

day: many document how locals carry out the four verbs for newcomers, but quite a few tell the other story: how migrants and refugees activate the verbs on behalf of those among whom they are arriving.

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. Such as we are many, 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. Migration and seeking refuge are surely *signs of the times* to be faced and understood in terms of family life.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, our manner of being Church has to adapt to a whole human family experiencing radical change in all aspects of their lives, now more than ever.

May our Church learn more and more to accompany people on the move – such as migrants, refugees, and victims of human trafficking. May it thus become a Church ever better able to accompany all families undergoing a process of rapid transformation.<sup>4</sup> Migrant ministry is an excellent laboratory in which the whole Church can learn to be more adept and more capable in accompanying the whole people of God, today and in the future – a future which will probably be even more accelerated than the present.

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<sup>3</sup> AL 46, with reference to *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 8.

<sup>4</sup> See “rapidification” in *Laudato si’* § 18.