

MIGRANTS AND PILGRIMS AS OUR ANCESTORS

Theology of Human Mobility in the 21st Century - 20-22 September 2021

From September 20-22, I had the opportunity to participate in a global conference on migration sponsored by the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), the Union of Superiors General (USG), and the Scalabrini Institute for International Migration (SIMI). Titled “Migrants and Pilgrims as our Ancestors,” it brought together international biblical scholars, theologians, and pastoral agents to present and discuss their research, and respond to the reality of current migratory movements.

Migrants and pilgrims like our ancestors (1 Chronicles 29:15)

In the context of the consecration of the first temple, according to the account of the biblical chronicler, King David makes a prayer of thanksgiving and offering to God. In this prayer, the King presents himself before God as one who recognizes the migratory history of his ancestors in Egypt and in the desert, his own identity, and God's love for migrants. He states: «We are migrants before you and pilgrims like all our ancestors!». Being a migrant, in David's perspective, is not only the socio-political status of the chosen people, but a fundamental part of their identity. Migration and pilgrimage are theological categories, evoking the call of God: «The land is mine; You are foreigners and tenants with me” (Lev 25, 23).

Migration and pilgrimage as theological categories are novel concepts promoted by various theologians and researchers. This is especially significant to us as Dehonians, and to Pope Francis, because we are united so significantly with migrants and their needs.

King David's prayer makes us reflect on the condition of human existence as a passage: no one has a fixed home on earth. Surely, we each have the experience of migration in our ancestral timelines. Because of this, David's prayer expresses a call to solidarity with migrants since migration is an inherent dynamic of human life.

Patriarchs and matriarchs in the Bible had a significant experience of itinerancy, that is, they were people capable of assembling and disassembling the tent. Without so many meetings or protocols or forms to fill out, they were itinerant pilgrims who followed the voice of God.

In this sense, the presenters urged us to regain the agility of being able to assemble and disassemble our lives more easily. They showed us that perhaps what we must learn from Global Climate Change is an ecological conversion, that is, that we are capable of protecting and accompanying humanity on this journey.

Lecturers encouraged participants to recover the concept of life biographies as part of the theological events in people's lives. We must listen to the stories of migrants, letting ourselves be affected, and then take action. We cannot just let an image in the media stand alone as a snapshot in time.

In every migrant's story, God meets us. Many stories are loaded with traumatic experiences; however, God in that story and in that sharing allows for the healing, the "repair" of migrants. The experiences of migrants help us to focus our attention on the reality of the many men and women who are forced to migrate due to social, political, economic and ecological conditions. Today it is clear that there is a great global refugee crisis. There is a danger in being trapped by a globalized and politically correct indifference. The issue of migrants at the borders is not a reality show.

Fr. Daniel G. Groody gave a clear image of how celebrating the Eucharist among migrants in the places they find themselves most deeply allows us to recognize the suffering body of Christ in the presence of migrants.

The Eucharist celebrated and shared with the migrants reminds us of the experience of a God who decides to become human, a God who becomes communion in a land that is not his own. The Eucharist celebrated with migrants is a sign of the reconciliation of humanity.

After the speakers' presentations, we met in language groups. I had the opportunity to dialogue with religious sisters who had worked in Cuba and with sisters who were part of an inter-congregational community who were present on the border between Algeria and Morocco, assisting migrants who were traveling to Europe.

The key themes from our discussions:

-We as religious must be open to move together with the migrants.

-Some congregational and ecclesial structures must be made more flexible to accommodate the reality of migrants (for example: schools on the border of Syria and Lebanon, an initiative of the Marists and Christian Brothers)

-We must work and advocate for the rights of migrants in a global humanitarian sense; we must train ourselves in humanitarian diplomacy (the Church has experience in this, but we must continue studying and training ourselves; there is a course for this, here is a link:

<https://www.fordham.edu/iiha>)

Hospitality, inclusion and advocacy were the clearest words that resounded during the three days of the conference.

-Br. Diego Diaz, SCJ