

Migrants and Pilgrims as Our Ancestors – Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator SJ

A long tradition of theological reflection on migratory phenomena stretches from the Old Testament experience of exile to the gospel pericope of the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). “From Abraham’s departure . . . to the child in the manger, in its main lines the Bible is a story of people who depart, set out in search of bread, land and protection, wander about and return.”¹ Several theological uses have been made of this story of Israel in exile and Jesus in exile in relation to the contemporary crisis of migration and displacement. I recall an encounter with a catechist in a refugee camp in Tanzania who articulated his experience of displacement in theological terms: “Our experience of exile is like that of the Israelites in Egypt. God chooses them as his people. They belong to God who will lead them home. The goal and content of our hope is to return to Burundi.”²

Another axis of theological thought presents migratory phenomena as a time of grace, a sign of the times for Christians and the church, but one so rife with suffering, pain and injustice that it (re)presents an ‘evil’ to be confronted – just as God found the oppression of Israelites in exile abhorrent.

These theological axes or uses of the biblical story also specify the components of a Christian attitude towards people on the move. Taken as a whole they establish a theological pedigree from which we could generate an ecclesiological and pastoral appreciation of the crisis in Africa and elsewhere. Let me mention three firm convictions in regard to the crisis of migration and mobility in the 21st century.

First, this phenomenon represents a challenge to ecclesiology: it is “an ecclesial matter.” Religion, faith and community occupy a significant place in the lives of migrants and refugees. When people move, they do not leave their faith behind. The experience of uprootment, migration and displacement represents a spiritual condition and presents spiritual needs.

Second, from a pastoral perspective, the responsibility of accompaniment, care and ministry to migrants and people on the move hinges on the fundamental truth of an incarnational theology: “God has pitched tent among God’s people.” Such incarnational praxis sets a model and standard for the church in the context of the crisis of human mobility and migration.

Third, the experience and the context of mobility, migration, displacement, or exile generally, exemplify and intensify the ecclesial identity of migrants as “a living faith community in exile.” To be church in this context presumes a commitment “to create community with uprooted people.”³

¹Frank Crüsemann, “‘You Know the Heart of a Stranger’ (Exodus 23.9): A Recollection of the Torah in the Face of New Nationalism and Xenophobia,” in Mieth and Cahill, *Migrants and Refugees*, 96; see also Pontifical Council and Cor Unum, *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, 7. **Note:** On 17 August 2016, Pope Francis created the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, which took over the activities of the suppressed Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, and the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers.

²Cf. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 113, 229.

³WCC, “A Moment to Choose,” 7.

From these convictions originate specific pastoral options and practices incumbent on the church and religious congregations in countries of origin, transit and arrival. I will outline these options and practices in no order of priority.

First, in the context of mobility and migration, the community called church represents an *inclusive community*. Inclusiveness is the direct antithesis of any attitude that considers migrants and displaced peoples as a nuisance. Inclusiveness looks beyond the immediate needs of the local community, no matter how impoverished or limited, and reaches out to the migrants and displaced peoples. This idea of the church as an inclusive community in the context of mobility and migration correlates with the broader biblical orientation towards a universal assembly or community of the people of God (*ekklesia tou theou*), the primary purpose of which is to gather or convoke the dispersed people into the unity of God's household (cf. Ephesians 2:19; *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 1-17).⁴ Perhaps even more significantly, considering especially the praxis of Jesus, the New Testament widens the sociological demographics of the people of God. They would now *include* social outcasts, the marginalised, strangers and the poor (see Luke 14:15-24).

Thus, as the defunct Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People declared, the local church – and by extension all communities of faith – “should not view the new arrivals [migrants] as a threat to its cultural identity and well-being, but as an incentive to walk together with these new brothers and sisters who are themselves rich in particular gifts, in an ever-new process of forming a people capable of celebrating its unity in diversity.”⁵ To the extent that this principle is actualised, it could radically transform the community called church, particularly in its basic expressions. As St. Pope John Paul II declared on WDMR in 2001, “In its various expressions, the parish community can become a training ground of hospitality, a place where an exchange of experiences and gifts takes place.” In another message he makes the point that communities who welcome refugees and migrants “have new opportunities of living the experience of catholicity, a mark of the Church expressing her essential openness to all that is the work of the Spirit in every people.” (WDMR, 2002). This is a message that Pope Francis never tires to proclaim and to reiterate in his pastoral ministry to migrants and refugees.

Second, as I have mentioned, there is a strong awareness among communities of migrants and displaced peoples that they are the people of God in exile. They hold tenaciously to the view that uprootment, displacement and exile do not dispossess them of the presence and protection of God. This awareness constitutes an ethical imperative on the part of all people to create a *living Christian community in exile*.

A living community in exile generates the idea of a “*detrterritorialised ecclesiology*.” Although Roman Catholic ecclesial configuration lays a heavy emphasis on territoriality, it is not the case that where displacement has occurred boundaries have simply been breached. Rather, it is the church, in its original sense as the people of God, which has moved, is on the move and has been displaced. What might appear simply as a geographical (read: territorial) complication amenable to canonical legislation evolves into an ecclesiological and pastoral event. The people on the move are very much aware that they are the church, the people of God, here and now, not a stray segment of the home flock or an insufferable charge on the host

⁴Cf. Rodríguez, “Theological Method for Ecclesiology,” 152-155; Luigi Giussani, *Why the Church?* translated by Viviane Hewitt (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 81-84.

⁵*Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, 21. Pope Francis argues that the arrival of “the migrant at our border challenges and changes our priorities,” *Let us Dream*, 115.

church. Pedro Arrupe has formulated this idea in the succinct principle that “if the People of God moves, the Church moves.”⁶ To say, then, that the church moves when the people move clearly suggests that *it* does not exist apart from the people: *extra populum nulla ecclesia*. It is in this sense, for example, that one could interpret the radical suggestion of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People that not only should priests and bishops visit their people in places or locations of displacement, but they should actually *follow* them into exile.⁷ If “church” is so closely tied to “people”, we could reasonably expect the theological locus of the former to shift when displacement occurs in the spatio-temporal locus of the latter. Bishops, priests and religious *follow* the people, not the other way round – in the beginning was the people.

I am reminded here of the imagery of nomadic life characteristic of many itinerant people, like Turkana in Northern Kenya which hosts refugees in Kakuma. It is the image of a church that is in constant movement; a nomadic church, displaced here and there. Tragic as this might seem at first sight, one could adduce theological warrants for regarding “ecclesial nomadism” as one manifestation of the essence of the church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 9). In this sense, one could argue that people on the move embody the meaning of the church as “pilgrim people”: “For the Church, the refugees are a constant reminder that the people of God is essentially a pilgrim people, never settled, always on the move, always searching, always reaching out further.”⁸ As St. Pope John Paul II stated in his message on World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 1999, migrants remind the church “of her own condition as a people on pilgrimage from every part of the earth to their final homeland.”

My third point follows from this preceding one: wherever it exists, indifference towards the plight of migrants and displaced peoples appears as an untenable pastoral option for the community called church. If we concede the argument that migrants and refugees are a reminder of the pilgrim nature of the church, at least two pastoral implications apply.

First, building a living pilgrim Christian community in exile presupposes *pastoral accompaniment*. Pastoral concern for migrants and refugees needs to be translated into reality, the most concrete and radical expression of which is that bishops, priests and religious would not only visit the displaced communities in camps, but also accompany them into exile. As former JRS director Mark Raper has argued, this act of pastoral accompaniment, or “being with” rather “doing for,” re-enacts the model of Jesus Christ and affirms companionship as an essential dimension of discipleship and the church in the context of migrants and refugees.⁹ Pastoral accompaniment enables the Christian community in exile to deepen the awareness of its identity as a living embodiment of the community called church rather than a mere reminder of its essentially pilgrim nature.

Second, pastoral accompaniment consolidates the church’s *presence* in the context of displacement. For *pastoral presence* to happen, pastors and leaders would need to *find* the community in exile, rather than compel it to appeal repeatedly for pastoral attention. Pastoral accompaniment and presence would not make sense from a distance. They require an

⁶*The Refugee Crisis in Africa*, 24; see also “Regional Refugee Consultation,” 14.

⁷*The Three Consultations of 1998*, 5, 21; see Pontifical Council and Cor Unum, *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, 21.

⁸JRS, *Everybody’s Challenge*, 71. This declaration, credited to a group of JRS regional directors in 1985, echoes the position of Vatican II on the church as a pilgrim people (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 6, 7, 9)

⁹“Accompaniment and Welcome,” 74-86.

unambiguous option for solidarity with the people of God in exile. This face-to-face and side-by-side approach is hugely significant for people afflicted by socio-political exclusion, loss of home and precarious marginal existence in a hostile environment: “The mere presence of a sister or a priest in a refugee camp is a sign to the refugee of the Church’s presence, walking that lonely path too; it is a sign that the Church cares.”¹⁰

To reiterate a point that I have already made, from a theological perspective, this ecclesiological option or pastoral strategy (of accompaniment and presence) is modelled on divine precedence. The experience of uprootment, displacement and exile do not diminish God’s presence among the people: “God, who walked with the refugees of the Exodus in search of a land free of any slavery is still walking with today’s refugees. . . .”¹¹ God’s incarnational option of pitching tent in our midst sets a pattern for the church in the context of migration.

Although the experience of displacement and exile may be temporary or long-term, the kind of pastoral accompaniment and presence envisaged here needs to be enduring. This enduring quality of the church’s presence is what distinguishes it sometimes from other NGOs and voluntary services. Similarly, building a living community in exile involves practical risks. It exposes the church to the same, often violent, vicissitudes of life as the migrants and refugees themselves. Yet, as Pope Francis has stated powerfully, “Migration is not a threat to Christianity except in the minds of those who benefit from claiming it is. To promote the Gospel and not welcome the strangers in need, nor affirm their humanity as children of God, is to seek to encourage a culture that is Christian in name only, emptied of all that makes it distinctive.”¹²

In the final analysis, I believe that Pope Francis has proposed the best solution that foregrounds the ethical and pastoral response to the phenomenon of human mobility in the 21st Century. As many in the audience may recall, Francis’ response is articulated by four verbs: *welcome, protect, promote and integrate*.

¹⁰Smith and Donders, *Refugees are People*, 24; see JRS, *Everybody’s Challenge*, 116; Arrupe, *The Refugee Crisis in Africa*, 33.

¹¹Pontifical Council and Cor Unum, *Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity*, 20; see JRS, *Everybody’s Challenge*, 84-92.

¹²*Let us Dream*, 119.