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BEYOND BORDERS: THE ROLE OF PRIESTS IN MINISTERING TO MIGRANTS

Fr. Fabio Baggio, CS

Introduction

Filipino migrants' experiences encompass cultural adaptation, displacement, separation from loved ones, and often precarious living conditions. It is not easy for them to navigate complex immigration policies, cultural differences, and potential conflicts with host communities.

In such a migration scenario, it is important to promote social justice, dignity, and human rights for migrants, highlighting the transforming power of intercultural dialogue and solidarity. The Catholic Church is called to cater to them through a specific pastoral care aimed at promoting their integral human development as well as strengthening the faith of the Catholic ones.

The priests' role takes on a deeper meaning in providing them with spiritual, emotional, and practical support. It underscores the power of accompaniment, advocacy, and community building. By going beyond borders, priests extend their pastoral care and compassion to those on the margins, ensuring that migrants are not only welcomed but also embraced as valuable members of society.

My contribution will address three main topics. I will start by describing the phenomenon of migration, providing the main figures at the global level. Giving the geographical scope of this conference, special attention will be drawn to Filipino migration. Secondly, I will tackle the main challenges migration poses to the Catholic Church at the pastoral, ecclesial and missionary level, suggesting some possible answers. Finally, I will clarify the priests' role involved in migrant ministry according to the latest magisterial documents.

The Phenomenon of Migration

The Global Picture

In recent decades, the United Nations' interest in the phenomenon of human mobility has led to an ever-increasing commitment to collecting data related to migration flows. Scientific reports are issued on an annual basis regarding different migration categories and, despite their limitations, provide plausible and worthwhile approximations.

The most general category is that of international migrants. The international migrant is commonly defined as a person who moves «across an international border for more than one year irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate» (EMN 2022).

The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs is responsible for collecting data on international migrants globally. In its latest report (UNDESA 2020), it estimates that in 2020 the number of international migrants exceeded 281 million. In twenty years, the number has grown by over 108 million people. Even in percentage terms, the variation is significant: in 2000 international migrants represented 2.8% of the world population, compared to 3.6% recorded in 2020.

The same report highlights that more than half (52%) of international migrants, i.e. 146 million, reside in Europe and North America. This figure, however, does not necessarily indicate the massive intercontinental migrations occurring. In fact, almost half of international migrants have moved within their continent. For instance, 70% of European migrants reside in another European country, and 63% of sub-Saharan migrants moved within sub-Saharan Africa.

As migration continues to be costly in economic terms, it is not surprising that the Population Division report finds that 62% (177 million) of international migrants come from middle-income countries, while only 13% (37 million) come from low-income ones. The same document, however, underlines how departures from low-income countries have significantly increased in the last two decades, above all due to numerous humanitarian crises.

The second category under consideration is that of refugees. The 1951 Geneva Convention provides the fundamental definition of refugee:

[a person, who] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UN 1851: Art. 1A).

Over the years, international protection has been extended to other forced migrants experiencing similar vulnerabilities. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) represents the UN refugee agency and is concerned with collecting data worldwide on refugees and asylum seekers - i.e. people who have submitted a request for international protection but have not yet received a response - and preparing annual reports.

According to the latest data collected by UNHCR (2023), in December 2022 there were globally 29.4 million refugees and 5.4 million asylum seekers. In addition to them, approximately 5.2 million people were also in need of international protection. Almost 40% of refugees have found asylum in five different countries: Turkey (3.6 million), Iran (3.4 million), Colombia (2.5 million), Germany (2.1 million), and Pakistan (1.7 million). In 2021, 114,300 refugees were resettled, while 339,300 returned to their homeland.

The third category is made up of internally displaced persons (IDPs), i.e. those people who have been forced to move within their national territory. Despite being universally recognized as a highly vulnerable group, there is still no international treaty ensuring for them special protection or assistance. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) collects data on internally displaced people on behalf of the United Nations. According to the latest IDMC report (2023), in December 2022 there was a stock of over 71 million people displaced by armed conflicts or disasters.

The same report highlights how over 60.9 million new displaced people occurred during 2022. 28.3 million of them were caused by armed conflicts, while 32.6 million were affected by natural disasters. Their geographical location is highly significant: over 16.5 million new displaced persons occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, another 11.3 million in East Asia and the Pacific, and over 12 million in South Asia.

The fourth category refers to the victims of human trafficking, a phenomenon which found its official classification in the Protocol on trafficking in persons annexed to the United Nations Convention on transnational organized crime, signed by 121 States in Palermo in 2000. The Protocol clarifies that:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (UN 2000: Art. 3a).

In regards to this category, it should be immediately noted that there is a real difficulty in finding specific data due to widespread ignorance about this phenomenon, even on the part of institutions, as well as because of the hidden and mimetic nature of trafficking, which often does not allow a verifiable investigation, especially because victims are not very inclined to report the fact, either out of fear or shame (Baggio 2018).

Despite these difficulties, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has tried to gather reliable data on human trafficking, placing it within a broader phenomenon defined as modern slavery. According to the report entitled “2021 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery” and published by ILO in 2022, there were over 49 million people exploited in slavery, 22 million in forced marriage, and 27.6 million in forced labor. Of the latter, 17.3 million were employed in the private sector; 6.3 million in the sex trade, and 3.9 million in the public sector. Over 17 million victims of forced labor were women and girls, and 11 million of them were exploited in the sex trade and 6 million in other sectors. Geographically it should be noted that over 15 million victims resided in the Asia and Pacific region.

Filipino Migration

In 2020, UNDESA (2020) estimated a stock of 6,094,307 Filipino international migrants; 2,804,967 (46%) were males and 3,289,340 (54%) females. Although they were well distributed all over the continents, more than half of Filipino international migrants resided in Europe and North America (3,268,274). Their second preferred destination countries were located in Northern Africa and Western Asia (1,700,676), followed by countries in East and Southeast Asia (707,090). I have been informed that new official figures will be available very soon.

According to the official figures provided by the Philippine Department of Migrant Workers (2023), during the year 2023, 2,330,720 Filipinos were deployed abroad as contract workers. They are called Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). 508,089 were new hires (serving their employment contract on a new jobsite), while 1,244,005 were rehires (renewing their employment contracts with the same employer). As for the type of work, 578,626 were “seabased” (i.e. seafarers), while 1,752,094 were “landbased”(all other jobs). Their deployment is to be ascribed to the “contract workers system,” which entails a work contract overseas on a limited time (usually 2 years). Most of the time, the worker is bound to a specific sector or employer, and family reunification is not allowed. Such a system is quite common in Asia.

A survey undertaken in 2022 by the Philippine Statistics Authority estimated that OFWs between April and September 2022 accounted for 1.96 million. Regarding their gender composition, 1.13 million (57.8%) were females, while 828 thousand (42.2%) were males. 41.4% of all OFWs were in the age group 30 to 39 years old, and 22.7% in the 45 years and over. Almost half of OFWs (44.4%) were engaged in elementary occupations, meaning simple and routine jobs requiring the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort. In 2022, 80.8% of OFWs were based in Asia. Around 23% of all OFWs worked in Saudi Arabia, and 13.7% in the United Arab Emirates. (Philippine Statistics Authority 2022)

In the past 40 years the economic impact of the Filipino diaspora has been quite relevant. According to the World Bank, in 2022 Overseas Filipinos through legal channels remitted 38 billion US dollars, which constitutes data missing of the total Philippine GDP, marking a 4% increase compared to 2021 (World Bank 2023).

The Migrant Ministry: Challenges and Responses

Current migration flows, in all their complexity, pose various pressing challenges to the Church. And Filipino migration is no exception. In the next pages I will try to describe those challenges that I consider particularly urgent and worthy of special consideration involving three specific areas: pastoral, ecclesial, and missionary. Sourcing from the recent universal magisterium, I will also attempt to identify some possible responses to these very challenges.

Pastoral Challenges and Responses

Despite few socio-cultural-religious variables, the challenges posed to the Church in the Philippines are not that different and often coincide with those experienced by many other Churches in their countries of origin. Such challenges have been highlighted by several magisterial documents.

a) Sound and certified information

Many problems faced by migrant workers – difficulties in adaptation, precarious living conditions, abuses, exploitation and even human trafficking - stem from a serious lack of accurate information before their departure. Such information is often incomplete, and the details regarding the conditions in the receiving society are mostly neglected. The migrants' knowledge about local labor legislations and obligations is also insufficient. Language courses taken in haste cannot fill the cultural gaps, which are often increased by discriminatory attitudes. Moreover, many recruitment agencies are used to selling cheap dreams, and their misinformation is quite common. In 2018 Pope Francis has invited all the concerned actors to engage in protecting all migrants: «Such protection begins in the country of origin, and consists in offering reliable and verified information before departure, and in providing safety from illegal recruitment practice» (Francis 2018).

Being one of the actors, «the Catholic Church is called to engage proactively in preparing people for displacement by providing sound and certified information. This can assist their migration decisions before departure, and enhance preparedness through personal and community empowerment» (M&R 2021:28). An effective preventive measure would be the organization of information campaigns at community, parish and school levels, before the decision to migrate is taken. Concerned about members of her “flock” who may become migrants, the local Church should be engaged in the forefront of such information campaigns. Once the decision is taken, departing migrants should be specifically formed to foster their integration into the destination societies and strengthen their resilience to face difficulties connected to their migratory experience.

b) Protection of migrants' rights

In the current global scenario, migration legislations (or their implementation) and policies are usually not migrant-friendly. Labor migration is perceived largely from an economic perspective, where people become mere service-deliverers. «The proper implementation of human rights becomes truly beneficial for migrants, as well as for the sending and receiving countries. [...] Promoting and respecting the human rights of migrants and their dignity ensures that everyone's rights and dignity in society are fully respected» (POHS 2015). In a holistic approach to pastoral care, advocacy work aiming to uphold migrants' rights should become an essential aspect of the regular apostolate. Church leaders and Church-based organizations are urged to be the voice of the voiceless migrants.

Aware that the concern for the protection and defense of migrants' rights is now a priority of many advocates, networking with other civil society groups and international organizations might be one of the best pastoral strategies. For effective advocacy, Catholic pastoral agents should be knowledgeable of international migrant conventions and treaties as well as magisterial documents (PCPCMIP 2004:6). Joint Bishops' statements and official documents, together with the proper use of media, might be key tools to uphold the dignity of migrant workers and promote their human development. The advocacy work should be always based on a fair and interdisciplinary comprehension of the migration phenomenon. In this sense, the local Church should promote studies and research on migrant issues, taking advantage of the expertise and resources of Catholic universities (PCPCMIP 2004:71).

c) Assistance to families left behind

Especially when family reunification is not possible, labor migration usually represents a threat to the integrity of family structures. Transnational families, where either the father or mother or even both parents are absent, are vulnerable and fragile. Families left behind struggle to adjust to the new condition, and the real socio-emotional costs of migration are not easily detectable. In the main areas of origin of labor migration, diocesan and parish pastoral plans should include special programs to assist migrants' families. Such programs should focus on fostering coping mechanisms in response to parental absence, exchange of parental roles, separation from the spouse and loneliness (PCPCMIP 2004:30). Moreover, the new family structures emerging, due to labor migration, challenge the traditional pastoral care (e.g. catechism, preparation to sacraments, liturgies), which is generally addressed to two-parent families. New forms of pastoral care should be developed with creativity and wise use of technological tools that can bridge distances.

d) Advice in managing remittances

Remittances coming from abroad can solve the economic problems of many families, but the beneficiaries are often unprepared to handle the extra-income, resulting in the mismanagement of money. Sometimes, the perception of becoming better-off may induce migrant families to assume discriminatory attitudes towards non-migrant families in the same community, worsening social injustice. Before departure, both migrants and their families should be advised on how to use remittances, taking into account their responsibilities for the family's self-sustainability and the local community's development. For this reason, the local Church should promote the implementation of special educational programs on remittance and family financial management at the community and parish levels. Such programs should also tackle the danger of becoming dependent on overseas remittances and the children's misperception of getting "easy" money abroad since the sacrifice of their overseas parents is not seen (Baggio 2008).

e) Reintegration programs

Migration experiences are not always successful, and migrants are forced to return to their household, which has not significantly benefited from their work abroad. Few jobs or business opportunities are offered to returnees, even if they have upgraded their skills; and the prospect of a second or third migration becomes a necessity. Furthermore, long-term migrants returning home may find it difficult to re-adjust to their original environment and they may feel alienated in their own homeland. They may need special counseling sessions to restore family relationships, which have been deeply affected by their long absence. Here is another challenge for the local Church, which is called to aid returnees and their families through special reintegration programs. At a more general level, Church leaders and Church-based organizations should be engaged in promoting better handling of the notable increase of human and financial resources resulting from large-scale migration. The Church should cooperate with national and local governments in generating possible investment and job

opportunities for returnees, with the aim of making labor migration a “temporary measure.” Ultimately, sustainable local development would transform migration into an option (Francis 2023).

f) Cooperation and Coordination

International migrants are moving from the territory of one particular Church to another, and usually it is not clear who has the pastoral responsibility of migrants. The instruction *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* (EMCC), issued by the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People in 2004, states: «To ensure that the pastoral care of migrants may be one of communion [...] it is essential that the Churches of departure and arrival establish an intense collaboration with one another. This begins first in the reciprocal exchange of information on matters of common pastoral interest» (PCPCMIP 2004:70).

As a response to the different challenges mentioned above, a wide range of good pastoral initiatives has been devised in recent years. They have been promoted by individual dioceses, parishes, religious congregations and Church-based organizations with praiseworthy success. Unfortunately, «Actions to assist migrants and refugees by different Catholic entities are often fragmentary and uncoordinated. This can jeopardize the effectiveness of the apostolate, cause internal divisions, and result in loss of resources. Similar deficiencies affect the work of other entities engaged in assisting migrants and refugees» (M&R 2022:31). While treasuring the expertise of many pastoral workers already involved in migrant ministry, local Church leaders are invited to wisely coordinate all pastoral endeavors, promoting shared reflections and coordinated actions. All actions should be included in diocesan, national, and regional pastoral plans.

Ecclesial Challenges and Responses

a) Exclusion vs. Inclusion

The Church is not immune to the challenge of exclusion. Local communities are vulnerable to the temptation to be not open to the other person, to the foreigner, even if baptized and a full member of the Church. There are still many incidents when cultural and national identity prevails over ecclesial fraternity, justifying exclusive priority and privileges offered to natives. This is certainly not a new challenge, as the Holy Father points out: «Throughout the history of the Church, there have been temptations to exclusivity and cultural rigidity, but the Holy Spirit has always helped overcome them by ensuring constant openness to others, viewed as a positive opportunity for growth and enrichment» (Francis 2017).

In the first century, the recurrent reference to the ancient privilege of the Jewish people gave rise to many discussions and clashes among early Christians. Openness to the Gentiles and the Hellenistic communities was the subject of harsh criticism and divisions which led to the need of a magisterial clarification in the Council of Jerusalem. The ghost of exclusivism continued, however, to torment the Church in the following centuries, causing painful separations, schisms and wars (Baggio 2005). And today it is ominously resurfacing thanks to «A tendency towards pre-packaged uniformity and nationalistic rhetoric within some local Catholic communities» (M&R 202:19).

Catholic communities are called to be, first and foremost, welcoming and inclusive: «The Catholic faithful are called to work together, each in the midst of his or her own community, to make the Church become ever more inclusive as she carries out the mission entrusted to the Apostles by Jesus Christ » (Francis 2021). As the Holy Father often underlines, as a Church we have the task of promoting the "culture of encounter", building bridges between local communities and newcomers. For this reason, our communities must be prepared and equipped for life-giving encounters with migrants and refugees. This preparation must be part of faith formation in all areas of parish life. Parish priests are then asked to create spaces for sharing experiences and celebrating cultural

diversity. All pastoral agents are called to get in touch with newcomers, inviting them to participate in parish life (M&R 2022). In particular, «men and women of the consecrated life, communities, lay associations and ecclesial movements as well as pastoral workers should feel above all the duty to educate Christians to welcome, solidarity and openness to foreigners» (PCPMIP 2004: 96).

b) Local vs. Universal

There is a widespread tendency to consider the Church only in her local dimension, thus losing sight of her universal character. Every Sunday in the Creed we proclaim that the Church is "one", and she is such because, as the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, she «has as her source and exemplar the unity of the Trinity of Persons in one God. As her Founder and Head, Jesus Christ re-established the unity of all people in one body. As her soul, the Holy Spirit unites all the faithful in communion with Christ. The Church has but one faith, one sacramental life, one apostolic succession, one common hope, and one and the same charity» (CCCC 2005:161).

The risk of internal division and fragmentation, always present in the history of the Church, has today resurfaced with vehemence. Even with different connotations, Paul's warning to the Church of Corinth sounds very timely: «For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you. I mean that each of you is saying, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Kephas," or "I belong to Christ."» (1 Cor 1,11-12). Catholic migrants, in their endless journeys, move across the territories of many local Churches and usually highlight the limits of self-understanding. In fact, they no longer cross Churches, but always the same Church, their Church, located in different territories.

Catholic migrants help us to remember the uniqueness of the Church and, equally, to grow in catholicity. More than a challenge, it is an opportunity offered to us to understand the Church as "communion in diversity", shaped according to the Trinitarian model, one God and three distinct Persons. The uniqueness of the Church truly makes her the mother of all, home and family for all the baptized.

Indeed the Church's catholicity, her universality, must be embraced and expressed in every age, according to the will and grace of the Lord who promised to be with us always, until the end of the age (cf. Mt 28:20). The Holy Spirit enables us to embrace everyone, to build communion in diversity, to unify differences without imposing a depersonalized uniformity. In encountering the diversity of foreigners, migrants and refugees, and in the intercultural dialogue that can emerge from this encounter, we have an opportunity to grow as a Church and to enrich one another. All the baptized, wherever they find themselves, are by right members of both their local ecclesial community and the one Church, dwellers in one home and part of one family. (Francis 2021).

The uniqueness of the Church, however, is by no means synonymous with the homologation of the faithful. Without diversity, communion cannot be achieved, and this diversity must be preserved. For this reason it is essential to provide, especially at the beginning of the migratory experience, a proper pastoral care for migrants and refugees of different origins, never losing sight of the long-term horizon, that is, the formation of new Catholic communities, in which communion in diversity is experienced (M&R 2022:21).

c) Fear vs. Blessing

In countries where migratory flows are considerable, many Catholic communities have a large percentage of migrants. In some cases, almost all parishioners are foreigners. Furthermore, in some dioceses, the administration of the sacraments and pastoral services already depends on priests who

come from abroad. However, this is rarely considered a blessing, a precious opportunity for ecclesial life to flourish again, particularly where, due to secularism, the spiritual desert menacingly advances (M&R 2022:23).

The persistent coldness by which our communities - including pastors - treat newcomers is often the result of ignorance and prejudices linked to their origin, a bit like Nathanael: «Can anything good come from Nazareth?» (Jn 1, 46). Other times this attitude is motivated by the fear of dangerous contamination of traditional liturgical and religious expressions, by giving too much room to other celebratory forms typical of other continents. It should also be noted that, in many cases, the wealth of migrants and refugees is not so evident due to their tendency to not fully disclose themselves, to remain behind the scenes, whether out of shyness or fear of rejection.

Faced with the presence of many faithful who have come from far away, «The Catholic Church is called to understand and value the opportunities that Catholic migrants offer as a way to bring new life to local communities» (M&R 2022:23). The first step in the right direction is the recognition of their presence as a blessing, an occasion of grace:

The peculiarities of migrants is an appeal for us to live again the fraternity of Pentecost, when differences are harmonized by the Spirit and charity becomes authentic in accepting one another. So the experience of migration can be the announcement of the paschal mystery, in which death and resurrection make for the creation of a new humanity in which there is no longer slave or foreigner (cf. Gal 3:28). (PCPMI 2004:18).

The active participation of Catholic migrants in parish life should be promoted, inviting them to make their personal skills and those acquired in their communities of origin available to everyone. They must be invested with pastoral responsibilities, encouraging their participation in parish pastoral councils, finance councils, catechesis, and liturgical animation. Parishes are invited to develop innovative pastoral plans with strong intercultural dynamics, with special attention given to second generation children and young people. Great importance must be attributed to the specific training of both, native and foreign, ministers who are called upon to coordinate all the efforts listed above. Such training must already begin in the seminaries (M&R 2022:24-27).

Missionary Challenges and Responses

From a missiological perspective, in the field of migration we can distinguish two types of mission: the *missio ad migrantes*, meaning the evangelizing action carried out on behalf of migrants, and the *missio migrantium*, meaning the mission where Catholic migrants are the main actors in their experience of mobility.

a) Migrants as Missionaries

There is a general lack of awareness on the part of the agents of the *missio migrantium*. Catholic migrants are often unaware of the missionary responsibility belonging to every baptized:

All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. (Francis 2013:120).

The Church in the country of origin is called to ensure adequate preparation for those leaving, also in view of integration processes which often prove to be quite complex. She needs to prepare «Catholic migrants to be real missionaries in the countries of arrival, witnesses of their faith and heralds of the Gospel. Such a mission should be acknowledged, promoted, and supported through effective

intereclesial cooperation» (M&R 2022:25). One could also think about establishing a particular ministry to be entrusted to Catholic migrants who seriously plan to engage in this missionary endeavor. Furthermore, it would be very helpful to provide migrants with a list of useful ecclesial contacts in the receiving country and equally to inform the Church in the country of origin regarding their new destination country. The latter should develop support and integration programs to be included in the diocesan pastoral plan, in full respect of the cultural and linguistic diversity enriching the catholicity of the Church.

The responsibility of the local Church on behalf of missionary migrants does not end after their departure. They need to be continually sustained in their evangelizing work. And this support could be guaranteed, for example, by sending pastoral workers - priests, men and women religious, and lay people - aimed at accompanying and animating migrants either permanently or with occasional missions, always in accord with the Churches located in the countries of destination.

b) Migrants as Revitalizers

In host countries the role of Catholic migrants as revitalizers of ecclesial communities in the context of what has been defined as a “new evangelization” is seldom appreciated. They, in fact, «are called to face a substantially new and fundamental chapter in the missionary task: that of being missionary in countries of long Christian tradition» (PCPMI 2004:100). Even in this case the challenge often shows a substantial unpreparedness of Catholic migrants to fulfill this missionary responsibility, as well as a lack of recognition of their missionary potential by the local Churches involved.

As highlighted in the previous point, the Church of origin is invited to commit to preparing migrants for this specific missionary task as well as supporting them to achieve its fulfillment. As for the Church in the country of destination, her specific commitment entails «Acknowledging the presence of migrants in the Catholic communities and promoting the understanding of such a presence as a blessing and an occasion to open up to God’s grace that can energize ecclesial life, as migrants can be agents of new revitalizing dynamics» (M&R 2022:24). Since Catholic migrants tend to remain at the margins of receiving communities, with little interaction with the local faithful, it is essential to find ways to empower «migrants to be able to recognize their own richness as a valuable contribution to the life of local communities, offering the skills and expertise acquired in their communities of origin» (M&R 2022:24).

c) *Missio ad Migrantes*

In regards to the *missio ad migrantes*, the great challenge is how to evangelize newcomers when they belong to other faiths or have no faith at all. In several cases, Catholic communities welcoming them see them as a threat rather than a missionary opportunity: «Many Catholic communities perceive the arrival of migrants [...] of other faiths or no faith as a threat to their established religious and cultural identity. This often leads to attitudes of distrust and suspicion that prevent any meaningful interaction with them» (M&R 2022:28).

Without encounter there can be no announcement. Without contact there can be no witness of faith. And, even in this case, the lack of adequate missionary preparation on the part of the native faithful goes against it, as does the failure to include this important missionary activity in diocesan or national pastoral plans.

Local communities are called to acknowledge the missionary opportunity provided by the arrival of many people who have not yet had the chance to get to know Jesus Christ and his Gospel.

The current influx of migrants can be seen as a new “frontier” for mission, a privileged opportunity to proclaim Jesus Christ and the Gospel message at home, and to bear concrete witness to the Christian faith in a spirit of charity and profound esteem for other religious communities. The encounter with migrants and refugees of other denominations and religions represents a fertile ground for the growth of open and enriching ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. (Francis 2017).

From acknowledging this, it follows the missionary responsibility entrusted to Churches welcoming migrants of other faiths or without faith. With no proselytizing intention, the evangelizing endeavor entrusted to these communities begins with the testimony and charity offered to many of these struggling brothers and sisters. The announcement, made above all through testimony, still requires specific preparation. And this training can be a privileged opportunity to deepen and strengthen one's Catholic faith (M&R 2022:29).

The proclamation of the Gospel is above all a proclamation of God's merciful love, which translates into welcoming attitudes and charitable services for all migrants and refugees knocking on our door:

For this reason, the presence of migrants and refugees – and of vulnerable people in general – is an invitation to recover some of those essential dimensions of our Christian existence and our humanity that risk being overlooked in a prosperous society. [...] Through works of charity, we demonstrate our faith (cf. Jas 2:18). And the highest form of charity is that shown to those unable to reciprocate and perhaps even to thank us in return. (Francis 2019).

The evangelizing mission entrusted to local communities also requires a commitment to interreligious dialogue, which entails a solid and balanced knowledge of other religions, refraining from generalizations and prejudices (M&R 2022:30).

The missionary responsibility of the welcoming communities must be included in the pastoral programs at diocesan and parish level, so as to become a structured commitment. And to ensure a greater effectiveness of the missionary action, the ministers responsible for it must be appropriately trained (M&R 2022:30).

The role of priests ministering to migrants

In migrant ministry - as it is common in any other ministry - priests are called to take care of their own flock showing to them the loving concern of the Good Shepherd. «A priest, although ordained for a universal mission, exercises his ministry in a particular Church. This ministry is pursued in sacramental brotherhood with other priests who form the “presbyterate”. In communion with the bishop, and depending upon him, they bear responsibility for the particular Church» (CCCC 2005:329). Therefore, priests assist their bishop in the ministry. The local ordinary remains always the main person responsible for every pastoral care, including the migrant ministry: «The responsibility of diocesan bishops in this regard is unequivocally reaffirmed, both for the Church of origin and the Church of arrival» (PCPCMIP 2004:28).

The tasks entrusted to a priest in the migrant ministry may vary significantly according to his particular assignment: director of the migrant office, parish priest, chaplain, missionary *cum cura animarum*, etc. However, a specific role can be identified for all priests, which can be summed up with three verbs: discern, organize and act.

Discern

In addition to eagerly providing immediate response to migrants’ needs, priests should allocate sufficient time to assess the real challenges posed by migration to the local Church in a given setting.

«The challenge confronting us in today's migrations is not an easy one because many different spheres are involved: economics, sociology, politics, health, culture and security» (PCPCMIP 2004:3). Therefore, a fair assessment of the migration reality in the territory of concern is certainly needed. Such assessment should begin with collecting data on migrants and identifying their needs, though the interpretation of recorded data should take an interdisciplinary perspective. Consulting experts from different disciplines would greatly help in the discernment process (Baggio 2010).

For a full comprehension of reality, it is necessary to read it with the “eyes of God,” beyond the mere scientific understanding. Priests are, then, invited to elaborate a «specific biblico-theological frame of reference, incorporating the migration phenomenon into the history of salvation, as a sign of the times and of the presence of God in history and in the community of peoples, directed to universal communion» (PCPCMIP 2004: Introduction). As a general rule, while doing theology, meditation, contemplation and prayer should always accompany the intellectual exercise (Baggio 2010).

The Catholic Church has been catering to migrants for centuries. Her experience in the migrant ministry represents a rich legacy, which should be highly taken into consideration while assessing migration challenges. The same is true for the Magisterium, which offers grounding principles and operative indications for pastoral workers in the migrant ministry. The most important documents of the universal Magisterium on migration have been collected in the volume *Caring for Migrants*, published in 2009 (Baggio - Pettenà 2009). Documents issued after 2009 can be consulted in different languages on the Vatican website (www.vatican.va).

Organize

All baptized are called to be active in the migrant ministry: «All Christians must respond to this challenge; it is not just a matter of good will or the personal charisma of a few» (PCPCMIP:3). Each person is supposed to contribute to the good work according to her/his own vocation. It is the responsibility of the priests to promote, motivate and organize their effective participation. Most of the responses to the pastoral, ecclesial and missionary challenges would require special skills and expertise that can be found among members of local communities – or even among migrants themselves. Priests should be able to identify them, generate effective spaces for engagement, and ensure support structures (Baggio 2010).

Since migration is an ever-changing phenomenon, pastoral structures aiming at responding to its challenges should be at the same time stable and flexible. This is particularly true for new structures, which «need to be thought out that, on the one hand, will be more “stable,” with a more consequent juridical form in the particular Churches, and, on the other, will still be flexible and open to mobile or temporary immigration» (PCPCMIP 2004:90). Given the juridical and financial implications of pastoral structures, it should be the responsibility of priests to choose the most suitable ones, in communion with their local ordinaries.

Due to its complexity, migrant ministry generally requires professional training that goes beyond personal skills and capacities. To this extent, one can «envisage certain environments, structures or specific pastoral sectors that are dedicated to animation and formation at various levels in the world of migrants» (PCPCMIP:94). One of the best practices originated in the Philippines. This is the Exodus Formation Program, a one-week intensive training seminar on migrant ministry that started in the Philippines thanks to the Scalabrini Migration Center (SMC) and is now organized by the Episcopal Commission on the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI) of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). The program has also been replicated by other local Churches in Asia (Baggio 2010).

Act

After discerning the challenges and organizing the responses, the time comes to get to work. Many activities, which can be fairly ascribed to the responses to the pastoral, ecclesial and missionary challenges, have been discussed above. Indeed, they need to be contextualized in their scenario of reference, with high consideration of cultural diversity. Priests are responsible for coordinating the action, through the development of a well-structured pastoral plan, where objectives, activities, envisioned outcomes, beneficiaries and financial resources are clearly defined. And since migration is a very variable phenomenon, ongoing assessments and updates of the plan are usually needed (Baggio 2010).

All priests - and particularly those who have been invested in special responsibility like directors of a migrant office, parish priests, chaplains and missionaries *cum cura animarum* – are called to lead the different migrant ministry's activities. On one side, «we feel duty-bound to remember the apostolate of religious women, so often dedicated to the pastoral care of migrants, with specific charisms and performing works of great pastoral importance» (PCPCMIP 20024:80). On the other, «In both the Church and society the lay faithful, lay associations and ecclesial movements, with all the diversity of their charisms and ministries, are called to bear Christian witness and to be in the service of migrants» (PCPCMIP 2004:86). Acknowledging the specific contribution of religious women and men as well as lay people, they should be able to delegate the corresponding functions to them, always providing the necessary support.

As it has been codified by the Magisterium, there are specific assignments that are reserved to priests: chaplain, missionary *cum cura animarum*, pastor of personal parishes (PCPCMIP 20024:24,73-79). However, among the different tasks those corresponding to the priestly ministry should be always prioritized: to preach the Gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship.

They exercise their sacred function especially in the Eucharistic worship or the celebration of the Mass [...] For the sick and the sinners among the faithful, they exercise the ministry of alleviation and reconciliation [...] they gather together God's family as a brotherhood all of one mind, and lead them in the Spirit. [...] Finally, they labor in word and doctrine, believing what they have read and meditated upon in the law of God, teaching what they have believed, and putting in practice in their own lives what they have taught. (Vatican Council II 1964:28)

In order to perform their role in the migrant ministry, priests should be adequately trained, starting from their initial formation. The document titled, *The Pastoral Care of Human Mobility in the Formation of Future Priests*, issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education and quoted by the EMMC, insists on the inclusion of topics related to migrant ministry in the seminarians' formation:

Seminaries and Institutes of Higher Studies, in adapting their own curricula and methods, will enable their students to become acquainted with the various types of emigration (permanent or seasonal, international or internal), the reasons for which people move, the consequences of such mobility, the general outlines for adequate pastoral care in this field, the Pontifical Documents on the subject and also those of the local Churches" (PCPCMIP 2004:71).

For priests who are eager to be professionally trained in migrant ministry, there are several academic programs in different disciplines offered by universities around the world. In the theological department, for example, the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome holds a 2-year licentiate program in Pastoral Theology and Human Mobility with care of human mobility. In the Philippines the Loyola School of Theology offers a Licentiate in Sacred Theology (S.T.L.), and Migration Theology is one of the main focal areas.

Conclusion

This contribution does not claim to be exhaustive in dealing with the role of priests in the ministry to migrants. I mostly focused on what is stated by the magisterium in this regard. Practical experience tells a much longer story: in fact, there are many priests involved in the pastoral care of migrants, and looking at their diverse experiences could greatly benefit our reflection.

However, I would like to underline that what was previously stated about the responses and role of priests does not refer exclusively to the challenges posed by human mobility. Migrants, in fact, are the emblem of the exclusion caused by the unfortunately widespread culture of waste:

In addition to the hardships that their condition entails, they are often looked down upon and considered the source of all society's ills. That attitude is an alarm bell warning of the moral decline we will face if we continue to give ground to the throw-away culture. In fact, if it continues, anyone who does not fall within the accepted norms of physical, mental and social well-being is at risk of marginalization and exclusion. (Francis 2019)

The responses to the migratory challenges, in the name of solidarity, brotherhood and co-responsibility, are also the responses to the great challenges of today's world: humanitarian crises, the climate crisis, global injustice, the new forms of slavery, and radical individualism.

Even if I limited my personal spectrum to presenting the responsibilities of the Church facing migratory challenges, it must be recognized that in order to provide truly effective and adequate responses, joint efforts by the various local and international actors in their different areas of expertise are necessary. As the Holy Father well says it, while responding to today's migratory challenges,

This is a great responsibility, which the Church intends to share with all believers and men and women of goodwill, who are called to respond to the many challenges of contemporary migration with generosity, promptness, wisdom and foresight, each according to their own abilities. (Francesco 2018)

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