

# Pastoral Letter

To the people of God,  
the laity, pastoral ministers, consecrated women and men,  
priests, bishops and all people of good will.

**HE SAW THEM, HE DREW NEAR  
TO THEM & HE CARED FOR THEM**

—Walking with those who migrate, refugees, internally  
displaced persons and survivors of trafficking—



Border Bishops and Bishops Responsible for Ministry with Migrants  
in North America, Central America and the Caribbean



# INTRODUCTION



In preparing this document, we have been inspired by the synodal process of listening and dialogue which the Holy Spirit has inspired in our church. We have also taken up the invitation of Pope Francis to embrace the challenge of being a church that goes forth. We know, too, that ‘the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty’ (*Aparecida*, 392), and we wish to reaffirm the preferential option for the poor and excluded, which should permeate all evangelizing action and the entire life of the Church. Therefore, we, the border Bishops and Bishops responsible for ministry with those who migrate in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, raise our voices in union with the many pastoral efforts carried out historically in our different countries on behalf of those who migrate, refugees, internally displaced persons and survivors of trafficking.

The development of this document is the fruit of more than 20 years of reflection in our region, in the different geographic and territorial spaces which have been critical for the coordination of care for those who migrate, including initiatives such as the Tex-Mex Bishops, which brings together Bishops and pastoral ministers from dioceses in the United States and Mexico, as well as the Meetings of Border Bishops and Pastoral Workers in Southern Mexico and Central America, and also the meetings of the Bishops of the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

This pastoral letter aims to be a tool to guide pastoral work in our local churches. It is also a call to recognize that the reality of migration and its pastoral character demand a regional approach, including shared strategies and collaboration among the different Bishops Conferences.

In harmony with the Universal Church, we have developed this document by means of a synodal process. In addition to the collegial work of the Bishops of the different participating Bishops

Conferences, this letter is the fruit of listening to the voices of many, especially pastoral ministers, religious women and men, and those who migrate themselves.

This pastoral letter consists of three chapters, beginning with an analysis of migration in our region (*see*), followed by a theological reflection (*judge*), and finally, a proposal of pastoral actions that should be implemented regionally in order to more effectively accompany those who migrate (*act*).

Chapter one is entitled ‘*The signs of the times confront us*’. This chapter summarizes the reality of migration, focusing on migration routes and corridors as well as the root causes of migration flows and their consequences. It also describes the decisions and actions by countries to deter vulnerable persons on the move, exacerbating their vulnerability, and leading to serious violations of human rights, even death.

Chapter two, entitled ‘*God walks with His People*’, seeks to shed light on the complex reality of migration in our region from the perspective of the Word of God and the teaching of the Universal Church. It aims to stimulate reflection on a theology of communion and pastoral commitment alongside those affected by forced migration.

Chapter three, ‘*Let us walk with those forced to migrate*’, begins with a recognition of those who have made an active commitment to share the journey with our migrant sisters and brothers and also lays out the challenges of undertaking pastoral work as a church without borders, in a spirit of unity and regional communion.

The overall aim of this letter is to further the work of supporting and guiding the pastoral work of the local churches. It encourages a regional vision and regional actions to better accompany those forced to migrate, as they are pushed from their home communities, journey through countries of transit, and arrive to their new homes in destination communities. Without a doubt, this work is a part of ‘the delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing’ (*Evangelii gaudium*, 9).

The title of this pastoral letter echoes the merciful actions of the Good Samaritan, which invite us to *see, draw near, and care for* the most vulnerable and excluded. As the Holy Father, Pope Francis, reminds us:

*Each day offers us a new opportunity, a new possibility. We should not expect everything from those who govern us, for that would be childish. We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes. Let us take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies. Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveler in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen. (Fratelli tutti, 77)*



# CHAPTER ONE

The signs of the times confront us



# I. Forced to flee: the humanitarian crisis of forced migration and its characteristics

1. *'We cannot deny the humanitarian crisis which in recent years has meant migration for thousands of people'*.<sup>1</sup> In order to grasp the reality of migration in our region, we must better understand the causes and conditions faced by those who migrate, refugees, displaced persons and asylum seekers. Here we share some facts as pastors concerned by the increase in the numbers of persons who are migrating, as well as by the risks and abuses that they encounter along the way.
2. Over the past decade, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean have experienced a complex situation in the area of international migration, including forced internal migration. The causes of this migration are many and complex: social and political instability, inequality and poverty, and lack of access to basic rights such as dignified work, education, housing, drinking water and health. Environmental degradation, the crisis in growing food, as well as natural disasters, have all deepened the inequalities facing the most vulnerable, especially women and children, as well as indigenous communities and Afro-descendant communities, whose faces are more and more visible along the migration route.
3. This crisis is reflected in the increase in forced migration in the region.<sup>2</sup> As Pope Francis has stated, we face 'one complex crisis which is both social and environmental' (*Laudato si'*), which is clear when a significant number of our sisters and brothers lack fundamental rights to life, liberty and security in their places of origin. The link between structural inequality, violence and political conflicts does not permit us to clearly distinguish between those who flee on account of lack of economic opportunity and those who are escaping political persecution or attacks by organized crime. A recent international report on poverty in Latin America estimates that '201 million people did not have enough income to cover their basic needs, including 80 million people whose income was less than the value of a basic food basket'<sup>3</sup>. The Covid-19 crisis also introduced new factors, which have exacerbated displacement.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Pope Francis, *Homily at the Ciudad Juárez Fairgrounds* (17 February 2016).

2 See Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Informe sobre la Pastoral Migratoria en México, Centroamérica y el Caribe: Libres para elegir si migrar o quedarse, Buenas Prácticas 2022* (2024).

3 U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2022: Transforming education as a basis for sustainable development* (2023), 55.

4 The U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean estimates that the number of persons in poverty increased in 2020 by 22 million persons. See *Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean 2020* (2021), 26.

4. Because of their geography, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean are vulnerable to the effects of climate change as well as environmental disasters, which are driving more and more people to migrate.<sup>5</sup> The care of our common home remains a critical responsibility, even more so when, despite the clear fragility of our planet, our Mother Earth continues to be exploited by large scale mining and extractive industries, tourism megaprojects, agribusiness and the cutting down of our forests.
5. The destruction of natural ecosystems has accelerated the migration of indigenous populations, small farming communities and Afro-descendant communities, which are forced to abandon their ancestral lands. Those who have not been forced to migrate and who are offered compensation for their land often receive payments that do not, in fact, correspond to the real value of their land, and this compensation is insufficient to start an alternative life project for their families elsewhere. These persons become cheap labor in global capitals or inhabitants of the world's peripheries.
6. In some countries, the worsening of violence connected to warfare between organized criminal groups, which the church has again and again denounced,<sup>6</sup> is leading to unprecedented levels of forced migration in some places. A recent example of this is the violence taking place in Chiapas, in the south of Mexico, as well as in other parts of Mexico and many other countries in the region.

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5 See Ileana-Sînziana Pușcas, *Central and North America: Migration and displacement in the context of disasters and environmental change* Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Policy Brief Series 4, no. 1 (March 2018).

6 See the statement of Bishop Jaime Calderón of the Diocese of Tapachula, *A la familia diocesana. Una palabra de fortaleza ante el sufrimiento de los hermanos de la Foranía Sierra* (24 July 2024).



## II. The causes and effects of the crisis are connected to failed development models

7. This scenario began to take shape some time ago when the causes and effects of migration became more acute at a global level. In the Americas, this situation was driven by failed economic models and political systems with deep structural gaps that are connected to individualism, selfishness, the concentration of wealth and power, as well as the emergence of a throwaway culture. Greater economic dependence and political subordination to the great powers of globalization have led to increasing inequality and social exclusion. According to the Holy Father, economic doctrines, in their idolatry of profit, consumerism and selfish individualism, have created ‘injustices and structures of sin, to the point of unhealthy interdependencies between social, economic and political systems.’<sup>7</sup>
8. As public and private corruption have increased, confidence in institutions has diminished, social cohesion has weakened and hopelessness has increased. In the absence of integral development policies, the most lucrative economic activities are shaped by the power of global corporations, even on a local level, leading to the dispossession of lands and the displacement of small farmers, indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, as well as the reduction of the cultivation of basic foodstuffs, and the deterioration of our common home. These practices have all made Latin America even more vulnerable to the risks of climate change.
9. Although the historical influence of military regimes in domestic life may have been considered a thing of the past, military interference, political instability and the persistence of authoritarianism are considerable threats to social coexistence in many countries, and continue to be a threat to democracy. In some countries, this interference has deepened migration connected to economic, social, political and environmental causes. The weakening of civic culture has encouraged broad support for radical populist governments and authoritarian regimes that violate fundamental rights.

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7 Pope Francis, *Address to the Fourth Edition of General States on Nativity* (05 October 2024).

### III. A migration corridor fraught with risks: a tragedy that confronts us

10. The main characteristics of the region's migration corridors are the following:<sup>8</sup>
- A global South-North migration mega-corridor runs from South America to the United States, which remains the main destination country for migrants worldwide. This is a multinational, multicultural and multiethnic reality with people from very diverse countries, family groups and a very large number of women, children and girls.
  - People from Mexico and Central America constitute the main flow of migrants to the United States, but there is an increasing number of persons from Caribbean countries, mainly Haiti and Cuba. Beginning in 2022, migration from Venezuela began to outpace migration from other nations.
  - Migration in the region is impacting many local communities, which are sometimes overwhelmed by the needs of those who pass through.
  - Increasingly restrictive migration policies, in addition to the lack of protection for forced migrants, have now also produced a southbound migration flow, made up of hundreds of thousands of people detained and then deported to their countries of origin, with little possibility of reintegration. This further stresses the structural causes of forced migration.
  - Dangerous geography; difficult travel through inhospitable places, especially jungles, deserts and the Caribbean Sea; the control of migration routes by criminal actors; and the lack of means to reduce vulnerability have turned this corridor into one of the most dangerous in the world.
11. Until about 2015, migration in the region originated primarily from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. People from Caribbean nations seeking to reach the United States made use of routes in Central America. Currently, new flows made up of people from other parts of the world who transit through the region with new characteristics and facing various risks, have added to the migrant caravans that began in northern Central America

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8 See Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Informe sobre la Pastoral Migratoria en México, Centroamérica y el Caribe: Libres para elegir si migrar o quedarse, Buenas Prácticas 2022* (2024).

in 2018.<sup>9</sup> There are also South-South migration flows: Nicaraguans who arrive in Costa Rica as their final destination; Haitians who move to the Dominican Republic, intra-Caribbean migration, mainly to Trinidad and Tobago and the Dominican Republic; and Dominicans who cross the dangerous Mona Passage to Puerto Rico. In South America, migration between Colombia and Venezuela and between Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina links this flow to flows in the Caribbean and Central America and also includes people from other continents. There is migration from Asia, mainly made up of Chinese, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis; as well as from sub-Saharan Africa, Syria and the Middle East, although these groups are fewer in number.

12. For more than a decade, the passage through the Darien Gap has become ‘one of the most dangerous and challenging regions in the world’.<sup>10</sup> During a visit to the Darien Gap, the Bishops of the border dioceses of Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica issued a statement describing that place as ‘a *gap of inhumanity*, due to the conditions of vulnerability and death faced by men, women, young people, girls and boys.’<sup>11</sup>
13. Accidents and deaths occur often along the route. On many of the routes through Mexico, at the US-Mexico border and in Panama’s Darien jungle, these risks seem to have no limit. The waters of the Caribbean Sea are also becoming a cemetery due to the constant shipwreck of the fragile boats that people use there, as well as abuse by immigration authorities. The danger is also increasing because government policies pressure those who migrate to travel through places where they are exposed to human trafficking and smuggling. Even among law enforcement, there are officers who act in complicity with criminal organizations.
14. People who migrate experience untold psychosocial consequences that go beyond just individual behavioral disorders. Broken social and family structures, constant confrontation with danger and an array of natural and criminal threats, as well as human rights violations, are all part of a terrible mosaic of loss, grief, and collective and generational traumas. These are only made worse by deportation.
15. Women often migrate not only to protect and provide for themselves but frequently also to save their children from forced gang recruitment, which takes place everywhere in the region. We often hear these questions: *Why do they leave their children in their communities of origin?* And also: *Why do they travel with them, exposing them to all the risks?* The decision to migrate is wrenching in all cases.

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9 See Abelardo Morales Gamboa, *Migraciones internacionales, refugiados y desplazamientos internos en Centroamérica: factores de riesgo e instrumentos para fortalecer la protección de los derechos humanos* Informe de investigación, Sexto Informe Estado de la Región (2020).

10 UNHCR, *Monitoring movements through the Darien jungle in Panama* (05 July 2023).

11 Border Bishops of Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama, *Dios Camina con su pueblo, sosteniendo su esperanza* (22 March 2024).

16. For mothers forced to migrate, work options are very limited because they are the primary caregivers for their children. They often ignore their own hunger and pain in order to feed and comfort their loved ones. Sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon against women and girls who migrate. Testimonies reveal that many of them are forced to enter into relationships with men they meet along the way as a form of protection, even though this leads to other forms of violence and control.
17. When it is no longer a free decision, migration and displacement reveal the fragility of the family as a sanctuary of life. Thousands of families forced to flee experience the broken ties of being separated from loved ones. In many cases, children have no choice but to migrate at an early age. Some of them are detained or trafficked, go missing or die on the journey.<sup>12</sup> Vulnerability is not only experienced by those who have left home in search of a new destination but also by those who remain, dependent on family remittances. Responsibility for these situations must be shared by the countries of origin, transit, destination, return and those that deploy harsh enforcement measures.
18. These conditions also explain the link between the precariousness of migration and an increase in crimes associated with human trafficking for labor or sexual exploitation or for the criminal business of forced marriages. Pope Francis has described human trafficking as ‘an open wound on the body of contemporary society, a scourge upon the body of Christ’<sup>13</sup>. In Latin America and the Caribbean, forced recruitment and the exploitation of human lives take place in various ways. These situations have only increased in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and have become a lucrative business for criminal organizations. Among the victims are numerous human beings from a variety of countries; since 2020, Venezuelan migrants, mainly girls, have been among the most vulnerable.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Michel Kerf, Manuel Contreras-Urbina, Ana Aguilera, Erika Padron, Carlos Muñoz Burgos, *Migrant women and girls in Central America risk their lives in search of a better future* World Bank Blogs (06 June 2023).

13 Pope Francis, *Address to participants in the international conference on combating human trafficking* (10 April 2014).

14 See Mariana Calderón-Jaramillo, Diana Parra-Romero, Luz Janeth Forero-Martínez, Marta Royoa, Juan Carlos Rivillas-García, *Migrant women and sexual and gender-based violence at the Colombia-Venezuela border: A qualitative study* Journal of Migration & Health (September 2020).

## IV. A drama that is worsening and which demands a Gospel response

19. Security, the length of time migrants spend on their journey, as well as the financial costs of migrating, are all now in the hands of criminal organizations, beyond the reach of authorities along the entire migratory route. Thousands of people languish in the border regions between Panama and Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico, and the United States and Mexico. In many cities along the route, there are homeless persons who are migrating and live on the charity of others. Only the fortunate are able to stay in migrant shelters or welcome centers, which are often overcrowded.
20. Latin America is currently experiencing one of the largest and most complex child migration crises in the world.<sup>15</sup> Since 2013, and increasingly since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of unaccompanied migrant children, many of whom travel alone or as part of families crossing the jungle. Children and adolescents are also arrested in both the United States and Mexico and are sometimes forced to navigate immigration courts alone.
21. Not every country in the region has child protection strategies. Among those that do have such strategies, there are often significant gaps. The very fact of being a child migrant, whether accompanied or not, as well as factors such as age and language, all increase risk and vulnerabilities. The violence children face is unacceptable under any circumstances. They encounter crime, lack of access to education and limitations in accessing health services, including mental health services. The situation of mental health is often acute, given the challenging circumstances that force these children to flee in the first place as well as the conditions they encounter along the journey.
22. For some local business owners, migration represents a significant source of revenue, especially for transportation and lodging providers, money transfer businesses and others. Politicians, merchants and local entrepreneurs are all involved in the business of migration.
23. For their part, many local leaders and politicians employ xenophobic rhetoric, accusing people who migrate of a series of ills, such as insecurity, lack of hygiene or the occupation of city centers and public places. Indifference and lack of sensitivity towards them become a bargaining chip in the discourse of populist politicians in order to attract votes, which even includes accusations against those who aid those who migrate. A recent concrete example took place in Ciudad Juárez, on the northern border of Mexico, in which the mayor asked the local community to stop giving money to people of Venezuelan origin who were home-

15 UNICEF, *The Changing Face of Child Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean: A region like no other* (2023).

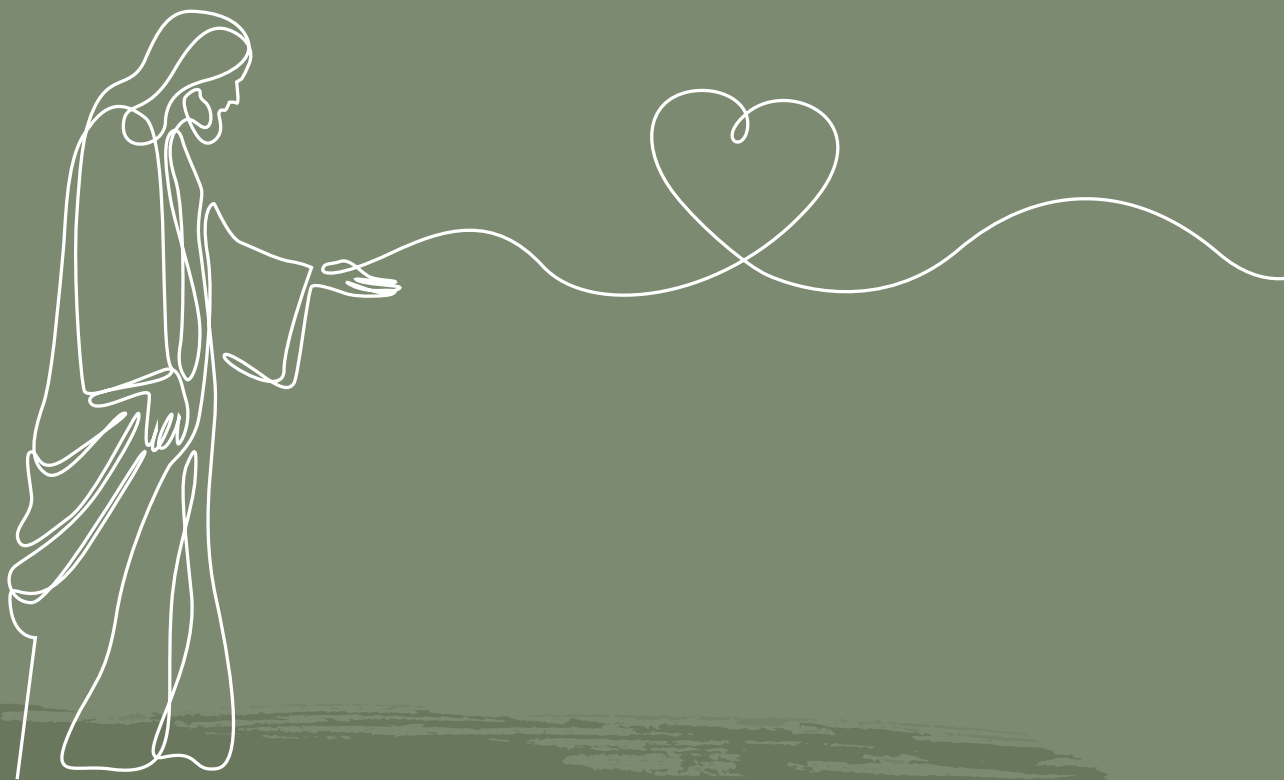
less. He then collaborated in the mass detention of more than 200 migrants. This situation ended with a fire in an immigration detention center in the same city, in which 40 lives were lost, 15 women suffered post-traumatic stress and 27 young people suffered permanent damage to their health.

24. People who migrate often do the jobs others do not wish to do, both in the places they travel through and in the communities where they arrive. They also contribute in many ways by paying taxes, sending remittances to help their families survive back home and often substantially improving conditions in their destination communities. They contribute, too, to lowering the average age of aging populations and countries with fewer children.
25. The response of the political community to the constant flow of vulnerable people on the move, both those forcibly displaced within our region and those from the global community who travel through our region heading primarily to the United States and Canada, has been fragmented and uncoordinated. Despite the stated intention of our governments to find sustainable and ethical ways to manage migration, such as in the Los Angeles Declaration, there remains a serious lack of imagination and long-term commitment from nations to implement the genuine solutions we desperately need.
26. Instead, authorities in the region have responded largely by implementing broad deterrence policies. They have acted to harden borders, limit the free movement of people, weaken access to essential protections such as asylum, restrict people's ability to work and support their families, and have established agreements between countries to deny entry and international protection to asylum seekers.
27. In practice, these deterrence policies take many forms. They include steel walls, military and police deployments at borders, invasive surveillance and technological control mechanisms, the detention and deportation of our people, policies that separate families and brutal police actions that violate the right to migrate and other human rights. They also include deliberate strategies to channel people who are migrating into inhospitable and dangerous border regions, exposing them to exploitation by various groups and individuals and even death.
28. In our accompaniment of those who migrate, we have seen the same painful costs of deterrence strategies in many places: on the rivers between Canada and the United States, in the desert sands of the Texas border, in mass graves in Tamaulipas, in overturned buses in Chiapas, in the waters of the Caribbean Sea and in the jungles of the Darien Gap. These places have become horrific theaters of death. It is important to understand the deadly costs of these deterrence policies and their increasing use throughout our region, to analyze them in light of the demands of the Gospel and to ask how our community of faith should respond to the pain and death they inevitably bring.



# CHAPTER TWO

God walks with his people





## I. A migrant and missionary church that goes forth

29. The previous chapter described the effects of the globalization of indifference, which impedes us, as a society, and in some cases also as a church, from offering an honest response to the question that resonates in our conscience today: *Where is your brother?* As the Holy Father stated during his first visit outside of the Vatican to Lampedusa, we truly are witnessing a ‘globalization of indifference’<sup>16</sup> in a society increasingly desensitized to the death of so many sisters and brothers.
30. The church that journeys together in Latin America, North America and the Caribbean is aware of its vocation to be ‘an advocate of justice and of the poor in the face of intolerable social and economic inequalities which cry to heaven’<sup>17</sup>. We who are baptized ‘have much to offer’<sup>18</sup>. We are aware that history is a place where God himself speaks to us, revealing His will and His loving presence, even in challenging situations and amidst conditions of injustice. Therefore, in every person who migrates and in every refugee and internally displaced person, we can find the God who shows Himself to us. We are a church that goes forth and walks with those who migrate because we know the suffering that every person who decides to leave their home experiences. Let us not be indifferent to them.
31. In his recent *Message for the 110th World Day of Migrants & Refugees*, Pope Francis reflects on the importance of walking together. Like the people of Israel during the exodus, the church walks with those who migrate. The church is an image of the People of God who journey towards the eternal homeland. As she walks through history, she engages in a fruitful exchange of charisms and ministries at the service of the Reign of God and of the poor.
32. The Word of God contained in holy Scripture, in tradition and in the Magisterium enlightens us to understand this reality more deeply. In order to know the will of God, it is also necessary to listen attentively to the voice of the People who walk, to understand the realities that people face, to discover ourselves anew as brothers and sisters and to find ways to walk together and build a better world. Here we must mention the unique sense of faith that the People of God have. In our region, we know that we must undertake all of our ministry *with* those forced to migrate and do nothing without them.

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16 Pope Francis, *Homily at Lampedusa* (08 July 2013).

17 CELAM, *Aparecida Document* (2007), 395.

18 *Idem*.

## II. Called to a better life, they undertake the journey

33. The word of God sheds light on the reality of migration in our region. In the Book of Genesis, we find God's call to Abraham, which is the same call that God makes to many parents, young people, adolescents and even children who migrate: 'Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father's house to a land that I will show you' (*Gen* 12, 1). At the core, what Abraham experienced in faith was a call to seek better conditions of life, which today we might associate with what we call integral human development. Thus, Abraham began a journey in faith, with the certainty that God called him to walk towards the Promised Land.
34. The decision to leave one's place of origin is not easy for millions of people in the region and is full of challenges. When people are forced to move, in order, in the words of Saint Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, to 'find their daily bread elsewhere'<sup>19</sup>, they experience the suffering of being uprooted. But they also possess the hope of finding a better life. This hope is a constant in the experience of many who migrate; those who have an unshakeable faith in God know that He will not abandon them because the path they have undertaken is the path on which God walks alongside them. Migration is a fundamental experience in the development of humanity and also an essential part of the history of salvation.
35. Similarly, the Hebrew Scriptures portray the lives of the other patriarchs as lives of constant movement, not only as individuals but as entire families. Thus Joseph, son of Jacob, uprooted from his land by the hand of his own brothers, after many trials and injustices, settled in a foreign land and contributed to the good of Egypt, a nation that came to welcome him. In situations of famine, his talents benefited both Egypt and his own family. This is what happens today with the many newcomers who choose not to forget their place of origin and send remittances to improve the living conditions of their families, communities and countries. Like Joseph, their work and talents also contribute to the common good of the new societies where they reside.

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19 Pope Francis, *Address to the participants in the XVI General Chapter of the Missionaries of Saint Charles (Scalabrinians)* (28 October 2024).

### III. The journey of liberation as a migrant experience

36. In the history of salvation, exodus represents liberation from slavery and from an unjust political and economic system. Exodus is the primordial experience of God's presence for Israel. The Lord Himself precedes the departure of the People of Israel from Egypt, and He guides them. On their journey through the desert, He appears as a light during the night and a cloud during the day. The light and the cloud represent God's loving care for those who migrate. The image of the people of Israel on the way to the promised land is evocative: 'a long journey from slavery to freedom prefiguring the church's journey toward her final encounter with the Lord'.<sup>20</sup>
37. God's covenant promises liberation through migration to the promised land. This liberation is an urgent call in our region, given the inhumane conditions facing many people in their communities of origin, which keep them from enjoying a dignified life. Latin America is the most unequal region in the world, with deep differences between countries with lower levels of development and countries with greater political and economic power. The path to liberation requires solidarity, which is imperative for those who have nothing. For this reason, the Bishops of Latin America have discerned together that 'the church faces a great challenge in promoting the dignity of all people, not merely through charity and almsgiving, but by acting to promote humanity, work and a dignified life, as well as the adequate conditions deserved by all, regardless of color or race'.<sup>21</sup>

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20 Pope Francis, *Message for the 110th World Day of Migrants & Refugees* (2024).

21 CELAM, *Hacia una Iglesia sinodal en salida a las periferias -Reflexiones y propuestas pastorales a partir de la Primera asamblea Eclesial de América Latina y el Caribe* (2022), 175.

## IV. 'No!' to the exploitation and mistreatment of those who migrate

38. For this reason, the Hebrew Scriptures establish precepts of hospitality towards foreigners, numbering them alongside the most vulnerable, orphans and widows. These groups of people were among the poorest, as they had no land or property. The Book of Exodus states this precept in a way that remains valid today and categorically excludes slave labor and discrimination: 'You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt' (*Ex.* 22, 20). This provision is contained in a series of laws regarding justice. Because abuse of all kinds towards people in movement has always been part of the migrant experience, the Bible makes it clear: 'There is but one statute for you and for the resident alien, a perpetual statute throughout your generations. You and the resident alien will be alike before the LORD, you and the alien residing with you will have the same rule and the same application of it' (*Num.* 15, 16).
39. Very often, people who migrate are the target of rhetoric that criminalizes them or portrays them to be people of lesser worth. As the Holy Father says: 'Migrants are not seen as entitled like others to participate in the life of society, and it is forgotten that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any person.' (*Fratelli tutti*, 39) In our region, this situation is unfortunately present both in places where people who migrate pass through and where they arrive. It is often believed that they are going to take away jobs or threaten the rights of others. At other times, they are considered criminals or socially harmful.
40. In dealing with those who migrate, governments often put in place practices of exclusion and discrimination, even though in political discourse, they may disguise their actions: 'No one will ever openly deny that they are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human. For Christians, this way of thinking and acting is unacceptable, since it sets certain political preferences above deep convictions of our faith: the inalienable dignity of each human person regardless of origin, race or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love.' (*Fratelli tutti*, 39) We cannot forget our vocation to live as sisters and brothers, which 'is not to remain an abstract idea but to find concrete embodiment ... forcing us to see things in a new light and to develop new responses' (128).
41. Our witness for equal treatment and justice for those who migrate must be a clear sign for communities through which migrants travel, communities where they arrive, as well as for civil authorities. Scripture states that the fallen grains of harvest are to be reserved for widows and migrants (*Lev.* 23, 22). To understand how life and goods are to be shared, the church's social teaching always begins with the principles of solidarity and the universal destination of goods. As the Holy Father reminds us in *Laudato si'* (67), 'God rejects every

claim to absolute ownership: *The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev. 25, 23)*’.

42. We must also speak about work. Work is an important element of human dignity. Through work, people who migrate exercise their freedom and contribute to the development of the community as well as the common good. Work, which those who migrate are eager to do, combines a practical and useful aspect with a personal and human aspect. Work is both essential for the communities where migrants reside, and it also shines light on important questions about the rights of all workers, a fair economy and the building up of culture.<sup>22</sup> Decent work, to which everyone has a right, is a fundamental element of achieving social justice and peace.

## V. The open arms and heart of a merciful church

43. We have described a context in which our global crisis of indifference is reflected in our relationship with those who migrate. Indeed, ‘we are living out an inhumane form of globalization in which markets and economic interests override the dignity of people’<sup>23</sup>. Faced with this challenge, our church in the region must respond.
44. In this context, our church’s migrant shelters, welcome centers and soup kitchens—staffed by consecrated men and women, committed laypersons, and volunteers who are sometimes not even Catholic—represent a light and beacon of hope for societies where the globalization of indifference and the culture of well-being have dulled consciences and hearts and prevented us from discovering a brother or sister in the discarded and poor.
45. Those who defend, in so many ways, the human rights of those forced to migrate are true prophets of our time since, in an environment of hostility towards the most vulnerable, or at best of indifference, they call for justice, echoing the psalmist: ‘Defend the lowly and fatherless; render justice to the afflicted and needy’ (*Ps.* 82, 3).

22 Cruz González, Gerardo y Jorge Heredia, *Los migrantes, ¿descartados o esenciales? Una aproximación desde Fratelli tutti*, Fraternidad universal desde México, “Lectura de la Encíclica Fratelli tutti con espíritu de discernimiento” (2023), 212.

23 José Sols Lucia, *La humanidad se puso en pie*, Fraternidad universal desde México, “Lectura de la Encíclica Fratelli tutti con espíritu de discernimiento” (2023), 24.

46. Here we must make the words of Pope Francis our own, who, during his visit to Mexico, recognized ‘the committed work of so many men and women religious, priests and lay people in accompanying those who migrate and in defending life. They are on the front lines, often risking their own lives. By their very lives, they are prophets of mercy; they are the beating heart and the accompanying feet of the Church that opens her arms and sustains.’<sup>24</sup>

## VI. Those who migrate are the suffering flesh of Christ

47. Those who migrate represent a sign of the times and are a source of theological reflection, and they also present us with the suffering flesh of Christ, being people who ‘are forced to leave their land, to face the risks and tribulations of a hard journey, finding no other way out’.<sup>25</sup>
48. Every person has his or her origin in the heart of God. This revelation, about which the prophet Jeremiah is so completely convinced, is alive in every migrant: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,’ (*Jer.* 1, 5). Because ‘every human being is created out of love ... each one of us is wanted, each one is loved, each one is necessary’<sup>26</sup>. This insight has been formulated in the church’s social teaching as the principle of the dignity of the human person, which is the cornerstone of all pastoral action and must also be the cornerstone of all public policy. The human dignity of those who migrate, however, is often obscured. Pope Francis, writing to those migrating through the Darien Gap, called on them to keep this truth alive: ‘Never forget your human dignity. Do not be afraid to look others in the eye, because you are not a throwaway; you too are part of the human family and of the family of God’s children.’<sup>27</sup>
49. If every person is the fruit of God’s love, so too is every people. In this sense, an appreciation for what belongs to us by birth and the sense of having roots is natural to every person. Therefore, people should enjoy the right to live in their place of origin. But when the painful moment comes in which a person decides that she must leave her community of origin, the fundamental right to seek new horizons in other countries must be recognized. This right to

24 *Homily at the Ciudad Juárez Fairgrounds.*

25 Pope Francis, *Letter to a group of migrants gathered in Lajas Blancas, Panama* (21 March 2024).

26 Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily at the beginning of the Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome* (24 April 2005).

27 *Letter to a group of migrants gathered in Lajas Blancas, Panama.*

migrate has historically been recognized in our region, both in the reception throughout the Americas of people from other places, mainly from Europe, as well as in acknowledging that those who must leave their homeland for another contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of the places where they arrive, without having to abandon their identity.

## VII. The right to migrate and the right to remain

50. In communities of destination, the work of welcoming those who migrate often represents a challenge due to misinformation and disinformation, frequently fueled by manipulative media and politicians, who promote narratives of xenophobia and rejection. Recent arrivals and those communities receiving them must be accompanied pastorally to grow mutually in a healthy balance, to welcome without fear and offer spaces for temporary hospitality, promoting the full integration of newcomers by heeding the Word of God: ‘You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God. ‘(*Lev. 19, 34*)
51. In situations where governments are unable to guarantee people to subsist with dignity or to live in peace, free from violence, persecution and hunger, there is a natural right to migrate and seek refuge.<sup>28</sup> It is the moral duty of nation states to manage their borders and receive migrants, according to the demands of social justice, the universal destination of goods as well as the moral unity of the human family, assessing the possibilities of admission, transit and belonging. Therefore, the most prosperous countries have the duty to welcome foreigners who seek better living conditions.
52. It is also necessary to reaffirm the corresponding right not to migrate, which, in order to be effective, is conditional on people’s ability to access other basic human rights that allow, in their homeland, a dignified integral human development. Convinced of this possibility, we must fight for solutions in countries of origin so that people are not forced to migrate.
53. From the beginning, the church has sought to affirm this right in its social teaching. *Rerum novarum*, the encyclical that inaugurated the modern papal contribution to the development of Catholic social teaching, states that ‘men would cling to the country in which they were born, for no one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means

28 See Pope John XXIII, Encyclical letter, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), 25.

of living a decent and happy life'.<sup>29</sup> This right, anchored deeply in the tradition of the church, has been praised as an act of social justice. Thus, as Pope Francis reaffirms in his *Message for the World Day of Migrants & Refugees* in 2024, migration should always be a free choice.

54. This requires a significant investment in sustainable and integral development as well as policies to address environmental degradation and climate change.<sup>30</sup> In this vein, as Pope Francis notes, 'it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons. We will feel its effects in the areas of healthcare, sources of employment, access to resources, housing, forced migrations, etc. (*Laudate Deum*, 2)'. This threat is already present in our region, where climate change is expected to be devastating to Central America and the Caribbean.
55. For this reason, the care of those who migrate is entrusted to all of us who make up the church. It is essential to promote the signs of the Reign of God that Jesus practiced in welcoming the poorest and most vulnerable: mercy towards those who suffer and victims of inhumanity, such as the lack of opportunities for integral human development, human trafficking and smuggling. These are the faces of the suffering Christ today. We must respect the culture and history of each people and person in order to weave an inclusive society that creates bridges of forgiveness and reconciliation. And we must respect the dignity of every person and their fundamental rights.

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29 Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical letter, *Rerum novarum* (1891), 47.

30 See Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ, *In a Time of COVID-19, Migrants and Refugees and the New Generation Responding* (27 November 2020).



## VIII. The pastoral way of welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating

56. In the region, as pastors and as a church, we have assumed as guideposts the four verbs that constitute the method of walking with those who migrate: *welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating*
57. In effect, welcoming means receiving those who migrate with open arms, offering them support and compassion. Protecting means working to guarantee their safety and wellbeing, defending them from danger and abuse. Promoting means fostering their integral development, offering them opportunities to grow and prosper, especially with jobs and fundamental rights such as health care and decent housing. And integrating means including those who migrate culturally, socially and economically so that they feel part of the community, eliminating barriers and prejudices.<sup>31</sup>
58. The church that journeys in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, in communion with the Universal Church, has a pilgrim identity. She identifies with the People of God in movement and on pilgrimage through history, whose goal is the Reign of Heaven. Those who migrate in our time, as in every time, are a living image of the People of God on the way to the eternal homeland. As Pope Francis points out, ‘their journeys of hope remind us that *our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 3, 20)*’.<sup>32</sup>
59. We are brothers and sisters who walk on the horizon of faith. The ultimate meaning of our journey in this world is the search for the true homeland, the Reign of God inaugurated by Jesus Christ, which will find its full realization when He returns in glory. To undertake this journey, in addition to faith and charity expressed in mercy, we are inspired by the virtue of hope: it sows ‘seeds of goodness’ (*Fratelli tutti*, 54) in the actions of many sisters and brothers throughout our region. Indeed, ‘hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile’ (55).

31 See Pope Francis, *Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants & Refugees* (2018).

32 Pope Francis, *Message for the 110th World Day of Migrants & Refugees* (2024).

# CHAPTER THREE

Let us walk with those forced to migrate



60. The presence of vulnerable people on the move in our region is a clear sign of the times, and more than that, of the very presence of Christ crucified and risen. This presence represents a severe judgment on the deep inequalities that wound our people, the exploitation of the environment and the systems of death that reproduce violence along the migratory journey. And it is also a call to repentance, an offer of renewal for our communities of faith and an invitation to reconciliation and communion, to weave a renewed world with bonds of love, solidarity and mercy, as well as acts of justice.
61. If we thought that God was only in structures or the walls of our churches, migration pushes us to look outwards and find Him in the suffering flesh of our neighbor. This is not a ministry of theories and abstract concepts but of touching the pain, of leaving ourselves vulnerable to the experience of others, of working together, and of opening up spaces so that everyone feels valued, collapsing the distinctions between who gives help and who receives it. Jesus Christ points the way to a fully redeemed world, where there is room for every woman and man at the table of the Easter banquet. Until this Easter vision is realized, it will be the task of the church to assume and take up this work with urgency and renewed freshness.
62. In this final chapter, we focus on a process of renewal for the church in the face of the challenges generated by forced migration, as well as the conditions which cause it. We do not overlook the fact that our church must also refresh its models of accompaniment throughout the region, involving in a synodal way those who participate in the care of those who migrate, and encouraging those who migrate to be the main actors in their own defense and development. We begin by making appeals to specific groups of actors – governments, businessmen, international organizations and other groups in society. We also insist that these realities require a very different response than the current one, and they also require a recognition of the harm that has been done to untold numbers of people who migrate, often in service of narrow political and economic interests.

## I. Our commitment to promote a ministry with those who migrate that is integral and synodal

63. We thank God for the good that our pastoral ministry has been able to do throughout the region. Discerning the signs of the times, the urgency of the moment and Pope Francis' challenge 'to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods' (*Evangelii gaudium*, 33) of our pastoral action, we consider that the next chapter of our ministry with those who migrate must start from a regional vision that integrates the

fruits of the synodal process that the Universal Church has taken on, and must be a clear expression of the God who walks with his people.

64. The first response of our church in ministry with people who migrate has historically been hospitality through migrant shelters. These works represent an important service to our neighbors, but the current context also compels us to seek out new models in order to better aid those who still encounter a limited response when they knock on our doors. We must find ways to help those who still suffer in the rivers, in the desert, in the streets, on train tracks, in hospitals and in contexts of labor and sexual exploitation. We must go out to meet them; if we believe that God walks with his people, we will find Him in them. Let us take inspiration from the models of the church through the centuries, when our temples and parish communities were itinerant and reflected the spirit of the sacred tent of meeting of the people of Israel. In addition to recovering these ancient images, let us take on the challenge of being a church that goes forth with a missionary option, which must – now and not tomorrow – respond to the presence of Christ in the movement of peoples.
65. In recent decades, we have created structures and networks and we have assigned this work to specialists, religious congregations and charitable organizations. Now it is necessary to take up this work in a synodal key, removing labels and avoiding any kind of self-referentiality. This work can no longer be the responsibility of a few professionals or of traditionally assigned structures, nor only of border dioceses. Now it must be a response that comes from the entire People of God, an invitation to every diocese, every ministry, every parish and every member of the church.
66. We also recognize that this work goes beyond the limits of our own abilities. Not only the practical need, but the importance of working for human fraternity, underscored by Pope Francis in *Fratelli tutti*, invites us to collaborate in synodality with those who, like us, work to promote human dignity and defend the rights of those who migrate, including people of other religious confessions, civil society and people of good will. We recognize the work of committed civil organizations throughout the region and we collaborate with many of them, locally and across borders, working for justice, truth and reparation.
67. Migration is a source of renewal for all dimensions of the church's pastoral care. Therefore, we must go beyond the conception of pastoral work with people on the move as an isolated ministry and recognize that migration touches on all aspects of the church's ministry. We also recognize that the presence of people of all ages and families, coming from all countries of the world and from various cultures in our parishes, enriches and revives our communities with new traditions and expressions of faith. We commit to working to build, as far as possible, a social fabric around our parishes that promotes their integration, safety and wellbeing. We also assume interculturality as a contemporary way of being the church and an opportunity for a fruitful reciprocity that enriches our faith. Let us manifest the radical nature of welcome in the face of the xenophobia and exclusion that often claim to have the last word in our society.

## II. Our commitment to take of ourselves and one another

68. Migration and ministry with those who migrate are complex realities. Accompanying those who suffer inevitably causes emotional, spiritual and physical strain. The commitment to care for one another must be a personal commitment and a collective one. We recognize that there is sometimes a profound feeling of abandonment among many ministers in this field. Many priests and those who coordinate pastoral care to those who migrate feel overwhelmed and are often exposed to risks and even persecution, whether from organized crime or even the government itself. In addition, the lack of understanding of brother priests and parishioners can sharpen feelings of isolation.
69. In the case of religious sisters, we recognize that you live your charism and pastoral commitment on borders and in the interior, and that you often carry out ministries that may go unrecognized, but which are essential. Your leadership means that you often work and take initiative in contexts of uncertainty. You are also frequently given significant responsibilities without always being provided with the necessary tools and required institutional support. On the other hand, the presence of many committed laypersons in this work has been an indispensable blessing. But we also recognize that you often work in contexts that do not yet fully reflect a synodal vision; an integral accompaniment is needed which provides spaces for listening and opportunities to deepen your lay leadership.
70. As Bishops, we apologize for these gaps, and in this next chapter of our work in the region, we strongly commit to ensuring the well-being of you who work in ministry with those who migrate. It is up to us to generate concrete responses and consult with you about the impacts of their service, including the reality of vicarious trauma. We are also confident that every night there is someone who receives your burdens and listens to your concerns and prayers. Let us allow God to care for us, wash our feet and comfort us like a loving father.
71. We also affirm our responsibility to build new inculturated models of ministry in a synodal key, which recognize and integrate the talents of all and which reflect the image of a church which is ‘a family among families ... open to bearing witness in today’s world, open to faith, hope and love for the Lord and for those whom he loves with a preferential love. A home with open doors.’ (*Fratelli tutti*, 276)

### III. Our commitment to work across borders

72. The challenges of migration and displacement are local and global. Therefore, our approach must not be limited by geography but must be broadened with a vision that integrates all faces and responds to the image of a church without borders. This regional approach can also counteract the dynamics of exclusion and rejection of those who have to cross borders, in addition to mitigating and preventing human trafficking and caring for its survivors. We are committed to strengthening the communion of the Bishops in countries of origin, transit, destination and return throughout our region, seeking above all to support the local churches developing an initial response to providing inclusive and comprehensive pastoral care. This is a regional vision in which each local church can learn from one another. It is also one in which we can model the type of solidarity that will be required to address migration at the global level. In addition, we commit ourselves to discern at a regional level new ways of working together in order to raise a prophetic voice on behalf of justice for those who migrate as well as for those who remain.

### IV. A cry for justice alongside those forced to migrate

73. Our pastoral work in the area of migration began with charitable works and today we can count on a network of hospitality houses and support programs for many vulnerable populations throughout the region. Now, it is necessary to also understand that our actions must also go beyond mere charity because, as Pope Benedict XVI stated, ‘the more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them’<sup>33</sup>.
74. As Bishops, it is not our role to engage in partisan politics, a task proper to the laity, but our pastoral responsibility requires ‘a constant attention to the common good and a concern for integral human development’ *Fratelli tutti*, 276. Because they must serve the common good of our people and of the entire region, policies that restrict migration are subject to ethical scrutiny. We cannot remain silent in the face of so many acts of corruption and exploitation that people who migrate encounter on their journey. Faced with this reality, we are called to

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33 Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritas in veritate* (2009), 7.

offer a word of hope and not an empty hope, because the Gospel always implies commitment and solidarity. Therefore, our work for the common good must be reflected in concrete and effective accompaniment *alongside* affected communities, in work for the promotion and defense of human rights and for justice.

75. In our context, there is an urgent need today to reconsider the nature and moral purpose of borders. Too often, they have been used to exclude and represent a barrier to our shared humanity. As Christians, our horizon must rise above narrow nationalisms, for, as Pope Francis has often said, we are members of a church without borders, which feels itself to be the mother of all. While we recognize that national borders have a purpose, we must emphasize that they also have limits. The papal magisterium clearly teaches that ‘the principle of the centrality of the human person...obliges us always to put personal security before national security’<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, national borders must be at the service of the common good, the protection of the rights of the vulnerable, and the building up of the human family. As *Fratelli tutti* teaches, ‘the true worth of the different countries of our world is measured by their ability to think not simply as a country but also as part of the larger human family’ (141).
76. In our region, environmental exploitation, the decline of democracy, widespread corruption and criminality, the economic crisis, the murder of human rights and environmental defenders such as Juan Antonio López<sup>35</sup>, and violence against women, indigenous peoples and people of different sexual orientations are causes of forced migration. It is clear that, as the church so insistently demands, the right to stay and enjoy a dignified life simply does not exist.
77. Political leaders in our countries too often make short-term decisions without considering the impact they have on increasingly vulnerable communities. These actions call into question the very nature of politics. Grassroots participation is indispensable to holding those in power accountable and promoting the rule of law. We renew our commitment to work alongside people in each of our countries, seeking to create dignified living conditions and ensure the right not to migrate. At the regional level, we will dedicate ourselves, as a church without borders, to intensifying our work in addressing the root causes of migration, by both advocating for sustainable development and advocating against the economic and social inequalities that frequently arise from political decisions made by the countries of North America.

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34 Pope Francis, *Message for the 104th World Day of Migrants & Refugees* (2018).

35 Juan Antonio López was an environmental activist, member of the Ecclesial Ecological Network of Mesoamerica (REMAM), and advisor to the church in Honduras. He worked for the defense of the Guapinol River and opposed the environmental exploitation caused by mining projects in the region. Juan was murdered in September 2024, a crime condemned by various national and international organizations.

78. We have seen that violence sadly does not end with the decision to migrate but that there are countless painful cases of abuse suffered along the migrant way. Governments and international organizations often offer words about safe, orderly and regular migration, but we must ask: *for whom is this a reality?* For too many people, the right to migrate with dignity is a dead letter. Governments have not managed to reduce violence or guarantee safe migration pathways, precisely because they have not included the voices of those who suffer in their decision making. We need to work to ensure that there are decent conditions for migration and not simply a limited management of migration flows based solely on the needs of wealthier countries for flexible labor.
79. We strongly appeal to those who represent the Cain of our time. This appeal is directed to members of organized crime, as well as governments that have been corrupted in their various institutions, especially public security forces, immigration authorities and militaries. We make a strong call to repentance and conversion. You cannot live and act as if there were nothing beyond earthly life and seek only to accumulate power and wealth. Your obligation is to turn back to God because every time you injure His children, you are offending Him.
80. It is, therefore, essential that governments put in place effective protection mechanisms for human rights defenders so that we never again witness horrendous tragedies such as the recent murder of Father Marcelo Pérez of the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, a human rights defender, friend of displaced people and a priest attentive to the cries of the earth. Here, we must also lift up the many laypersons, catechists, religious women and men and pastoral ministers who live under daily threat in many places of mission.
81. While dangers and difficulties exist in countries throughout our region, in recent years, Mexico has represented an exceptional challenge for those who migrate. Disappearances, kidnappings, massacres and impunity have tragically become the order of the day there. We are particularly sensitive to the families of the victims; there are thousands of people who have disappeared in Mexico who have never been recovered. We think especially of the many mothers of victims who have organized to cry out for justice; we must express our recognition of their efforts and commit ourselves in solidarity with them.
82. As Bishops of the region, we support the proposal of the church in Mexico to establish a commission for the investigation and uncovering of serious human rights violations against those who migrate. This commission will contribute to the right to truth and the right to justice, as well as to implementing mechanisms to avoid the repetition of these violations.
83. We also cannot fail to denounce the pressure exerted by the United States on countries in the region, and Mexico in particular, to implement deterrence policies in order to reduce migration flows. The United States is taking an aggressive approach by working with governments in our region to curb migration by restricting their own borders and incentivizing them to use the same tactics of patrol, detention, expulsion, deportation and militarization. Too often, these actions have been legitimized through the use of secret and undemocratic



negotiations, which only further erode the rule of law in Latin America and end up repeating exclusionary patterns that belong to the past.

84. Places of immigrant detention are multiplying throughout the region. The largest detention center in Latin America is now in Tapachula, on Mexico's southern border with Guatemala; it is a hotbed of pain and a place of unrealized hopes for many of those languishing there. Many of these institutions are scandalously privately owned. How can we fail to denounce the cruel and unusual treatment of tens of thousands of people who suffer the indignity of being detained and imprisoned every day simply because of their irregular immigration status?
85. Similarly, we cannot consider consistent with the Gospel of Life the treatment of asylum seekers and other vulnerable populations who continue to be denied protection at the US-Mexico border, which has now become the deadliest and most dangerous in the world. As pastors, we reaffirm the church's call to all nations of the world to consider the humanitarian claims and dignity of those who cross their borders seeking safety. We will continue to promote regular migration which provides safe and legal channels for people to have access to documentation to stay and work. This will provide legal stability for people and will significantly contribute to the reduction of human trafficking and labor exploitation. Close to the reality of many of the people who have been expelled and returned from the United States to Mexico and other countries, often without due process, we commit to raising our voices on behalf of justice with all of them, as well as to denounce the abuses they have suffered.
86. We have seen the same militarized and deadly logic of the US-Mexico border extend further south, not only to Mexico's border with Central America, another site of exploitation, but also to places like the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Recently it has also extended to the Darien Gap, a place that has now emerged as another open wound of humanity. As a church, we are committed to making these new peripheries, where Jesus Christ manifests himself most clearly, the center of our action. Every wall and weapon to stop vulnerable people is a terrible failure of humanity. In particular, we are committed to supporting the church in Panama in its accompaniment of people crossing the Darien Gap, as well as the church in the United States, in denouncing any agreement or funding that supports the militarization of borders in our region.
87. The failure of governments to work together to achieve a framework for safe, humane and effective migration has also opened space for irresponsible forms of populism and nationalism, which incites attacks on the human dignity of people forced to migrate and blames them for their own fate, making them scapegoats for broader societal problems. This type of rhetoric troublingly legitimizes violent actions against newcomers. These unhealthy political attitudes often traffic in racism and fear-mongering, promoting among people the idea 'that they can develop on their own, heedless of the ruin of others, that by closing their doors to others they will be better protected' (*Fratelli tutti*, 141). We will open our churches, homes and

meeting spaces in order to foster dialogues, so that we may rediscover our mutual humanity, recognize our shared dignity as children of God and overcome thoughts and attitudes based on hatred, ignorance and mistrust.

88. There are worrying efforts in the region to criminalize those who selflessly help people who migrate, including Catholic organizations. We denounce and strongly reject such actions as an affront, not only to human dignity but also to the fundamental right to religious freedom. We are very aware of the lack of support from nation states, the dangers posed by criminal actors, the collusion of political leaders and the lack of protection from authorities. We will therefore defend our priests, religious men and women, and all pastoral workers who work daily to manifest the mercy of Jesus Christ to vulnerable people.
89. We are also aware that there are those who, even acting within legal frameworks, profit from transport services, remittances, lodging and other aspects necessary for migrants and refugees. It is worrying that money transfers are frequently used to pay ransoms for kidnapped people, as well as for those who are trafficked. As Bishops, we will also advocate for strengthening oversight mechanisms for the international transfer of money in order to eliminate situations of criminal exploitation.
90. Working alongside individuals and families who have migrated to destination countries means supporting them in their struggle for greater social, cultural and economic inclusion and integration. We will work to recognize and lift up their contributions to societal development in communities of destination, especially the United States, Canada and increasingly Mexico and other countries in the region.
91. In the United States, millions of people have long been denied any form of regularizing their immigration status, forcing them to live in the shadows. They contribute enormously in many ways to their new communities and their new country, and they also send important resources to families in their countries of origin. However, they continue to be denied full economic, social and political participation due to the absence of immigration reform.
92. We will work with renewed hope and vigor, together with the Bishops and the church in the United States, to advance essential reforms, including the modernization of asylum, the demilitarization of the border with Mexico, and an end to detention, family separation and deportation for those who do not pose a threat to their communities. We will also work for a path to citizenship for those without documents as well as essential reforms such as the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for those fleeing difficult conditions in their home countries. We recognize that this work must be done primarily from the bottom up, promoting the leadership of affected communities and working alongside them to raise a moral voice for much-needed change.
93. In conclusion, displacement and death must not have the last word. They must be replaced by a culture of rootedness and opportunity, family, community, dignified work, freedom of movement, humanity and life. The liberation brought to us by Jesus Christ means that this

work cannot be delayed. As Bishops and representatives of our local churches, we commit ourselves jointly to making our solidarity real, an effective sign of God's Reign of Life, and a humble contribution of the church to the building up of the Reign of God and 'a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war'<sup>36</sup>.

94. To all those who are welcomed by our church, in our parishes and through our various pastoral and social services, we reaffirm our commitment to serve you with tenderness and to work towards healing the wounds you have accumulated. Whatever your country of origin, language or religion, our arms are open to welcome you. We know that 'the dream of a new future that drives people to migrate reflects a yearning for salvation that is present in all people, whatever their race or social condition'<sup>37</sup>. We are firmly convinced that in giving our lives for you we give everything for Jesus Christ.

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36 Pope Francis, Encyclical letter, *Fratelli tutti* (2020), *Prayer to the Creator*.

37 Pope Francis, *Address to the participants in the XVI General Chapter of the Missionaries of Saint Charles* (29 October 2024).

## **Prayer to Holy Mary of Guadalupe Migrant and Pilgrim Mother**

Mary, spouse of Joseph and mother of the child Jesus,  
you lived what it meant to  
migrate hastily and during the night,  
to another country, with another language and another culture,  
and you protected the little child Jesus with love.

Today we desire to place in your maternal embrace  
so many sisters and brothers,  
who like the Holy Family are forced to flee,  
because they have no choice.

Walk with them,  
protect them with your motherly love,  
from so many dangers that surround them on the journey,  
from inhumane laws and policies,  
from trafficking networks that threaten them,  
from exploitation and smuggling.

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Holy Mary of Guadalupe,  
Mother of the Americas,  
intercede for this people who walk in hope.  
Help us to know how to care for and accompany  
our wounded and abandoned sisters and brothers along the way.

Pray also, our Mother,  
for all those of good will  
who become sisters and brothers along the way,  
and through whom your son Jesus is present,  
caring, healing, loving,  
defending, humanizing and witnessing  
that a better world is possible.

Mother of the Americas,  
you are the Mother of God and our Mother.  
Your presence on all roads  
gives us the certainty that you do not leave us orphans;  
we ask you to continue walking with us.  
Your company on the road  
makes us feel loved and protected;  
may your love make us know that we are all sisters and brothers.

AMEN.

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## BISHOPS PASTORAL LETTER

**Most Rev. Héctor David García Osorio**  
Bishop of Yoro (Honduras)  
*President, SEDAC (Episcopal Secretariat for Central  
America & Panama)*

**Alvaro Cardinal Ramazzini Imeri**  
Bishop of Huehuetenango, Guatemala  
*President, Red Clamor (CELAM)*

**Most Rev. José Guadalupe Torres Campos**  
Bishop of Ciudad Juárez (Mexico)  
*Chairman, Human Mobility Commission, Episcopal  
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**Most Rev. Rodrigo Aguilar Martínez**  
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*Mexico – Southern Border*

**Most Rev. Mark J. Seitz**  
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**Most Rev. José Antonio Canales Motiño**  
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