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## **Catholic Teaching and Tradition: Guiding ICMC's Response to the Human Face of Migration**

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ICMC Council Plenary Meeting  
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Thank you to Monsignor Vitillo for the invitation to speak to you today – it's a privilege to be here and to listen to your reflections on the work of ICMC.

### **The development of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on Migration**

My own experience of connecting to the social teaching of the church on migration issues came about ten years ago when I was working as a volunteer in an immigration detention facility in the UK. This was the first time I had come face to face with a range of individuals who shared with me their stories of a reality that was both intensely personal and also a structural, global reality. I also understood for the first time that as the citizen of a nation-state that I was not a person outside this reality, but that I too was involved in this reality in a very particular way. To make sense of this reality I read widely and I thought hard about what I was seeing and hearing, and uniquely amongst those sources I found that the church's social teaching had something to say to me. In fact it was facing migration as an issue defining of our times that enabled me to re-engage with the church's social teaching on economic, political and social issues as a whole. It brought the body of teaching on what Pope Pius called 'the social question' back to life for me, as an urgent, living tradition. My research for the last ten years has been trying to make sense of both the reality of global migration and also contributing to the development of a new generation of Christian social teaching fit for our times. I see this task as a shared task that stretches from the local level to the global and includes local communities as well as professional practitioners, academics and church leaders. This is to enact the idea of the common good as a practice not just a theory of social life. What I will do now is to explore both the background to the Church's social teaching on migration and also the wider tradition of social teaching that might help us think about the challenges and opportunities we face.

The Bible is arguably a history of migrant peoples – it tells the story of migrations that are chosen – even blessed – and also of migrations that are forced, through which God still acts, but which God laments: and sometimes of migrations that

are both forced and blessed – think of the person of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is both the most detained character in the Old Testament – his story is spent in and out of forms of house arrest, prison and attempted murder - and also subject to many of the practices of terror and isolation that haunt the world of migration today, and yet he is also God’s prophet. This makes the Bible a troubling and intriguing resource for our times because it does not start from a place that sees migration as either only ‘bad’ or ‘good’, it tells a much richer and truer story. This complex history of the people of God as both literally and spiritually a migrant people has shaped generations of Jewish and Christian social practice: from cities of sanctuary in the Old Testament and early Church, to religious orders established to cross newly formed borders and care for those on the move, to new forms of hospitality, accompaniment and hosting. Of course, this history has not always been good – from the reality of ghettos to, in more recent times, in my own country, the role the Church played in creating the child migrant schemes that caused unimaginable suffering to so many. We have our own history of grace and sin.

Nonetheless, one of the striking things about the Catholic social teaching tradition is that migration has been one of its most significant themes since at least the 1850’s. We often connect CST in our minds with economics, and yet migration has been one of its most continuous concerns – not just at the level of theory but in the realm of practice. The migrations out of Europe to the Americas in mid nineteenth century saw a new need to make provision for the religious and pastoral needs of Catholic migrants. A century later, and following the catastrophe of a second world war, this pastoral, social and spiritual work developed into a more overtly theological set of reflections. The Church’s most significant document on migration *Exsul Familia* was published in 1952 – and had an immediate effect on the way that the Catholic community reflected on migration. *Exsul Familia* introduced a series of new reflections into CST:

- EF introduced the idea that we should be reading the biblical and thinking about doctrine as reflection on the reality of migration. The Holy Family were both the models and protectors for all displaced persons, the Church had always understood that it had a role in exercising the works of mercy, towards migrants.
- EF also drew on Pius XII’s great wartime emphasis on human dignity and argued that forced migration was a threat to human dignity and security. (If you haven’t read them, Pius XII’s Christmas addresses from the 1940’s are a really underrated resource that reads very well in the current context).

Later Vatican documents on migration – including John Paul II’s updating of *Exsul Familia* entitled *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, deepen this theological reflection further:

- The Old Testament themes of Exodus and Covenant are used to remind the Church that Christians are called to live out of the memory of being a community of exile. God makes a covenant with his people – not a social contract – he invites us into the heart of his life and that makes us both

participants in a divine drama of love and forgiveness and also therefore always spiritual strangers in a foreign land.

- The prophetic tradition is drawn upon to offer a vision of hospitality and care for the stranger and the oppressed,
- and we are reminded about the uncomfortable truth that God chooses the displaced and the stranger to be difficult and mysterious messengers of his Truth - a truth we (including the Church) often do not wish to hear. These biblical prophets often reveal our own departure as 'settled' people from faithfulness. (A theme Pope Francis has given his own 'spin' to – we will return to Francis!)
- Drawing from the New Testament, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* notes the migration of God himself through history. Jesus repeats the journey of the people of God into exile, and in entirely practical terms he aids the stranger and tells us to do likewise.<sup>1</sup>
- From the book of Revelation and from the Pentecost story key lessons are drawn for the way that the Church should understand herself. The Church of Pentecost is presented as a diverse, inter-cultural society. What is also interesting is that occasionally church documents also note the significance of the line in Revelation in which we are told that people from every nation, every tribe, every people will be presented before the throne of the Lamb. A significance is given not only to individuals (as we like to think of people in the West) but also to the preservation of human cultures and distinct communities. This text in Revelation might hint to us at reasons we should grieve when ancient cultures are obliterated by military and economic interests, (it matters to Christians that both the Yazidis and the Christians are slaughtered),
- Perhaps above all the Church's documents on migration challenge our culture to move away from two poor choices in the way that we see migrants: either as threats to peace, order and prosperity or as passive, suffering victims in need of salvation. The theological tradition presents migrants as self-determining but also interdependent human agents whose action and dignity must be engaged with and protected. It presents them as bearers of true peace. It presents them as people who are both uprooted and necessarily uproot the mindset of those who cannot welcome the stranger. Again, we will return to the suffering and agency themes when we look at Pope Francis' contribution.

Over the course of the last 50 years this biblical and doctrinal material has also been used to develop a set of natural law principles to guide the practice of human government in matters of forced migration:

1. Catholic social teaching begins with the principle of peace: it proposes a "right to stay or to remain" – the right not to be displaced.<sup>2</sup> We all need membership of

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<sup>1</sup> See discussion of the biblical context and figure of Christ as refugee in *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi (The Love of Christ Towards Migrants)*, (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, 2004)

a stable covenantal community to survive and it is the duty of those who govern to provide the conditions for this stability. This principle has clear implications for conflict-resolution and development policies addressed to the root contexts of displacement.

2. However, governments often fail in this task. And so the second principle states: where there is conflict, persecution, violence or hunger there exist natural and absolute rights of the individual to migrate and a natural right to seek sanctuary within an alternative 'safe' political community.<sup>3</sup>

3. This implies a third principle: a moral requirement that nation states receive the refugee. We all have an inalienable membership of a universal human family, AND we seek membership of a political community in order to live well. The task of human government is to recognise both these goods – because I am a member of the human family I have a right to a place of safety.

4. For these same reasons CST offers a fourth principle: the (imperfect) right of a sovereign political community to regulate borders and control migration. CST has not thus far proposed completely open borders. But neither does it recognise borders as divinely ordained, as claimed by some other Christian traditions. Rather, in CST borders are conceived as a relative good and recognised as legitimate only insofar as they both protect the common good of the established community and are porous and humane. Political communities are invited to include within the exercise of sovereignty the establishment and oversight of just measures for those who arrive seeking sanctuary and for effective global governance, to minimise and accommodate migration flows as well as to understand the pressures on local communities and to act to foster the local common good of a city or district.<sup>4</sup>

5. Finally, recognising the nature of the human person and their dignity, the Church teaches a need for both migrant participation and contribution to a host society and therefore a responsibility to enable real social, economic, civic, political participation of the migrant in the host community.<sup>5</sup> To fail to do so offends against the requirements of contributive and social justice.

### **Pope Francis and migration**

Pope Francis' own contribution to addressing the question of migration has been rather different in style and tone to his recent predecessors. Firstly, Francis has

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<sup>3</sup> See Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World)*, 1965, n.65.

<sup>4</sup> See Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*, (Encyclical On Human Development in Charity and Truth), Vatican City (2009), n.62.

<sup>5</sup> See John Paul II, *Message for the Day of Migrants and Refugees*, (Vatican City, 2001), n.3. See also, on the question of just legislation to enable integration and participation in host communities, John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens (Encyclical On Human Work)*, (Vatican City: 1981), n.23.

insisted on making personal journeys to be with those who are making their migrant journeys. He describes these journeys as a 'gestures of closeness'.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst in Lampedusa Francis delivered a now famous homily which began with a reflection on the first two questions which God asks humanity in the Scripture: Adam, where are you? Cain where is your brother?<sup>7</sup> Francis interprets these passages as stories of human disorientation, of the first signs of a tendency in humankind to lose our place within creation, to lose our orientation as creatures towards a creator. Thus to Fall is to be disorientated, or uprooted, to lose our bearings.

It is interesting that Francis juxtaposes an account of the disorientation of the settled in relation to the orientation of the displaced. In order to identify what might be going wrong in a failure to respond adequately to the challenge of the displaced, we must first see our own disorientation. Francis roots this disorientation not only in a classic account of the Fall, but also in the features of our own times: he draws attention to the culture of wellbeing. The culture of wellbeing breeds indifference towards others. Part of the culture of wellbeing is to become accustomed to the suffering of others. Our own transient cultural ways breeds indifference towards truly transient people. Thus globalization, which creates ironically the transience of the settled, produces too as its by-product, the globalisation of indifference. In turn the by-product of the culture of indifference is that we ourselves become anonymous – we seem unable to understand ourselves as named, particular and responsible in relation to named, particular and responsible others. 'The globalization of indifference makes us all 'unnamed', leaders without names and without faces.'<sup>8</sup>

This indifference and anonymity is the opposite of the Creator-creature relationship, through which we are named, and as named beings we are called to account for other named beings. Adam, where are you? Cain, where is your brother? This approach to the ethics of migration deals less with the external borders of the nation state and more with the prior internalised borders of the human will as the 'matter' of a theological ethics. These two sets of borders – one geopolitical and one interior to the human self – are read against each other. Francis wishes us to see the deep, practical interconnections between these two sets of borders.

However, two other comments on Francis' teaching should be made: in *Laudato si'*, Francis connects the failure of law to a deep failure in civil society. Indifference to migrant suffering in Europe suggests not just the failure of government or the individual but 'the loss of that sense of responsibility for our

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<sup>6</sup> Text of Pope Francis' homily:  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html) (last accessed 22.4.15.)

<sup>7</sup> The narrative of Cain and Abel is a trope to which Francis has returned on numerous occasions, most recently in his treatment of integral ecology in *Laudato Si'*.

<sup>8</sup> See link to Lampedusa sermon above.

fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.<sup>9</sup> Civil society is the context in which compassion must be generated and kept alive: a failure of compassion in the case of migrant welcome indicates for Francis a failure of civil society to be itself as much as failures in state political leadership.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially for some, the notion that the social teaching of the Church should lead us back towards a willingness to suffer as a form of solidarity is an emerging hallmark of Francis' pontificate. Francis' contrast between a 'well-being' culture that seeks to protect the person from the suffering of others and a Christian social ethics, which seeks ways to take the suffering of others into the life of the self, is sharp and deliberate. In *Laudato Si'* Francis goes as far as to suggest this defines the very task of Catholic social teaching itself: 'Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.'

### **Further resources:**

In the short time I have left I will now do two things briefly – point to two areas which are perhaps a little neglected but could be very significant elements of our resources for thinking in fresh and challenging ways about our context, and then say a little in conclusion about new challenges for CST in the arena of migration.

Whilst the Christian tradition has lots of material for thinking theoretically about migration it also has a history of Christian practice guided by the Holy Spirit. Chief in this area is the history of offering sanctuary and asylum. Our current national and international asylum laws relate to a history of offering refuge that has its roots in the biblical Jewish cities of sanctuary and Christian practices of offering territorial sanctuary in Churches and monasteries. Only from the 16<sup>th</sup> C onwards did the state begin to take over this practice and formalise asylum laws. Gradually this became something the state did and not the Church. Whilst no-one suggests reversing this process this history has been the inspiration for a global movement of cities of sanctuary who have been reinventing the tradition of offering sanctuary as a form of local, often faith based humanitarianism. Rethinking forms of Christian sanctuary for a very different age is something that the Churches are now beginning to do in quite important ways. There is an important space of imagination here. (I don't have time today to do more than simply name this practice).

A further area where I think there is significant resource for thinking differently and challenging structures of power relates to the deeper Catholic tradition of thinking about the nature of the good.

Over the last few years, in work I have done with migrants in immigration detention I began to notice how often they used the language of good and evil to describe their experience. I also began to notice that this same language of good

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<sup>9</sup> *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 25.

and evil has reinvented itself in public life in the West at least – deserving and undeserving migrants, good migrants stay in camps and wait for international rescue, bad migrants forge their own path etc. High skilled migration is good, low skilled migration is bad. And it struck me that a) detainees were using this language very carefully to make sense of their experience and b) that this public language is used in ways that Christians should have a problem with – and have a response to. This got me thinking about St Augustine. Augustine understands evil – not as a thing or an independent substance or as a person but rather as ‘the process through which the good is lost’. Evil happens when people – and systems – repeatedly turn away from the possibility of the good. Evil is simply lack of the good.

Listening to the experience of those on the move who are seeking status it is not difficult to spot processes which formalize the absence, lack or loss of human goods: detention, destitution, denials of legal pathways and family reunion, the manner in which human contact is conducted between authorities and individual migrants, between smugglers, traffickers and migrants etc. But the point is a bigger one: a theology of the good insists that we start our dialogue with the human goods we strive for. The theological story always starts with questions of the good: with the enfleshment of the good. Catholic social teaching has a language for talking about ‘the good’: the common good, which is made up of individual goods and public goods. We can talk rationally about what these goods are and why they are obligations. I think that one of the most striking things about the public debate amongst states about migration is either that any talk about ‘the goods’ that a migration policy should aim for is totally absent OR that there is deep confusion about what counts as a good and how it should be pursued. Here we can make a contribution from the wider tradition of CST as well as from our experience on the ground. But a ‘theology’ of the good – rather than just a philosophy of the good - is aimed not only at freedom and justice, but also at the life of communion. This what makes it a theology. The church carries a duty to foster and proclaim this as the end goal of social life – and to cooperate in making this word flesh. For these reasons I think Catholic organisations working directly with migrants and able to influence public debate can play a crucial role in at least three ways:

- 1) to articulate the visions of the good and the processes through which those goods are lost as you see them on the ground for migrants you work with.
- 2) To challenge the basis of public policy in the light of these experiences, asking ‘why’ in relation to the mechanisms of the system and challenging the system to pursue genuine individual, public and common goods through law.
- 3) Populism teaches us that there is a failure to understand the full range of goods that matter to people in everyday life: whether the settled population or those on the move. We do not have mechanisms for engaging well with these ordinary losses of the good that create anger and resentment, depression and disengagement, nor for the vision. Our CST tradition of thinking about the good offers us a language for dialogue about a sense of what has been lost and is under threat as well as about visions of the good

(individual, public, common) that we wish to pursue. These are conversations that need to be had across and between hosts and migrants, class groups, nation states.

- 4) This is a practical tradition which emphasises that states must do more, but that states will never be able to fulfil the full vision of the gospel with regards a duty to migrants. This requires a culture of encounter, accompaniment, dialogue, and hospitality and increasingly of resistance to hostile forces: it requires love as part of the establishment of justice.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis asks us to remember that the Gospel is not about occupying territorial space but rather finding ways to take part in the redemption of time. Given that time is one of the things that so many migrants experience as distorted and lost to them, this is a very resonant teaching. Francis teaches that we should commit ourselves to real human processes which enact the good in time rather than to shoring up power and territory. This is a good challenge to us in thinking about the governance and processes of our organisations – the ways in which they can be truly Catholic. Francis encourages us to think about challenging the cycle of short-termism in humanitarianism and public policy.

He also notes the principle of unity as a reality that prevails over conflict – there is a fundamental social unity which can be found and discerned if we refuse to be distracted by conflict – it is much easier to see grounds for conflict and competition than to discern (and I use the word deliberately) the fundamental unity of reality. Interreligious engagement needs to seek this reality. Francis defines dialogue as an openness to truth and love. Openness to truth requires us to talk about differences in order to seek unity. He talks about a dialogue that seeks communion but not necessary consensus.

Francis returns again and again to his idea of social peace. Peace is not just the absence of violence or warfare but the abiding commitment to upholding justice, dignity, solidarity and the common good. Peace is not therefore a negotiated settlement or a contract but rather 'a conviction that the unity brought by the spirit can harmonise every diversity'. And here we return to the vision of the Book of Jeremiah, from nothing less than Jeremiah's letter to the exiles, a message revealed to Jeremiah the migrant as a prophecy from YHWH: that our task is nothing less than seeking for the justice and the peace of the city, not for its own sake, but for the redemption of all.

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