



The Holy See

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS

Message of Pope John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The phenomenon of migration with its complex problems challenges the international community and individual States today more than ever. The latter generally tend to intervene by tightening migration laws and reinforcing border control systems. Thus migration loses that dimension of economic, social and cultural development which it had in the past. In fact, there is less and less talk of the situation of "emigrants" in their countries of origin, and more and more of "immigrants", with respect to the problems they create in the countries where they settle.

Migration is assuming the features of a social emergency, above all because of the increase in *illegal migrants* which, despite the current restrictions, it seems impossible to halt. Illegal immigration has always existed: it has frequently been tolerated because it promotes a reserve of personnel to draw on as legal migrants gradually move up the social ladder and find stable employment.

2. Today the phenomenon of illegal migrants has assumed considerable proportions, both because the supply of foreign labour is becoming excessive in comparison to the needs of the economy, which already has difficulty in absorbing its domestic workers, and because of the spread of forced migration. The necessary prudence required to deal with so delicate a matter cannot become one of reticence or exclusivity, because thousands would suffer the consequences as victims of situations that seem destined to deteriorate instead of being resolved. His irregular legal status cannot allow the migrant to lose his dignity, since he is endowed with inalienable rights, which can neither be violated nor ignored.

Illegal immigration should be prevented, but it is also essential to combat vigorously the criminal activities which exploit illegal immigrants. The most appropriate choice, which will yield consistent

and long-lasting results is that of international co-operation which aims to foster political stability and to eliminate underdevelopment. The present economic and social imbalance, which to a large extent encourages the migratory flow, should not be seen as something inevitable, but as a challenge to the human race's sense of responsibility.

3. The Church considers the problem of illegal migrants from the standpoint of Christ, who died to gather together the dispersed children of God (cf. Jn 11:52), to rehabilitate the marginalized and to bring close those who are distant, in order to integrate all within a communion that is not based on ethnic, cultural or social membership, but on the common desire to accept God's word and to seek justice. "God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

The Church acts in continuity with Christ's mission. In particular, she asks herself how to meet the needs, while respecting the law of those persons who are not allowed to remain in a national territory. She also asks what the right to emigrate is worth without the corresponding right to immigrate. She tackles the problem of how to involve in this work of solidarity those Christian communities frequently infected by a public opinion that is often hostile to immigrants.

The first way to help these people is to listen to them in order to become acquainted with their situation, and, whatever their legal status with regard to State law, to provide them with the necessary means of subsistence.

Thus it is important to help illegal migrants to complete the necessary administrative papers to obtain a residence permit. Social and charitable institutions can make contact with the authorities in order to seek appropriate, lawful solutions to various cases. This kind of effort should be made especially on behalf of those who, after a long stay, are so deeply rooted in the local society that returning to their country of origin would be tantamount to a form of reverse emigration, with serious consequences particularly for the children.

4. When no solution is foreseen, these same institutions should direct those they are helping, perhaps also providing them with material assistance, either to seek acceptance in other countries, or to return to their own country

In the search for a solution to the problem of migration in general and illegal migrants in particular, the attitude of the host society has an important role to play. In this perspective, it is very important that public opinion be properly informed about the true situation in the migrants' country of origin, about the tragedies involving them and the possible risks of returning. The poverty and misfortune with which immigrants are stricken are yet another reason for coming generously to their aid.

It is necessary to guard against the rise of new forms of racism or xenophobic behaviour, which attempt to make these brothers and sisters of ours scapegoats for what may be difficult local

situations.

Due to the considerable proportions reached by the illegal migrant phenomenon, legislation in all the countries involved should be brought into harmony, also for a more equitable distribution of the burdens of a balanced solution. It is necessary to avoid recourse to the use of administrative regulations, meant to restrict the criterion of family membership which result in unjustifiably forcing into an illegal situation people whose right to live with their family cannot be denied by any law.

Adequate protection should be guaranteed to those who, although they have fled from their countries for reasons unforeseen by international conventions, could indeed be seriously risking their life were they obliged to return to their homeland.

5. I urge the particular Churches to encourage reflection, to issue directives and to provide information to help pastoral and social workers to act with discernment in so delicate and complex a matter.

When an understanding of the problem is conditioned by prejudice and xenophobic attitudes, the Church must not fail to speak up for brotherhood and to accompany it with acts testifying to the primacy of charity.

The prominence assumed by the welfare aspects of their precarious situation should not mean that less attention is paid to the fact that there are often Catholic Christians among the illegal migrants who, in the name of the same faith, often seek pastors of souls and places where they can pray, listen to God's word and celebrate the Lord's mysteries. Dioceses have the duty to meet these needs.

In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the task of the various Dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community.

Solidarity means taking responsibility for those in trouble. For Christians, the migrant is not merely an individual to be respected in accordance with the norms established by law, but a person whose presence challenges them and whose needs become an obligation for their responsibility. "What have you done to your brother?" (cf. Gn 4:9). The answer should not be limited to what is imposed by law, but should be made in the manner of solidarity.

6. Man, particularly if he is weak, defenceless, driven to the margins of society, is a sacrament of Christ's presence (cf. Mt 25:40, 45). "But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed" (Jn 7:49), was how the Pharisees judged those whom Jesus had helped even beyond the limits

established by their precepts. Indeed, he came to seek and to save the lost (cf. Lk 19:10), to bring back the excluded, the abandoned, those rejected by society.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). It is the Church's task not only to present constantly the Lord's teaching of faith but also to indicate its appropriate application to the various situations which the changing times continue to create. Today the illegal migrant comes before us like that "stranger" in whom Jesus asks to be recognized. To welcome him and to show him solidarity is a duty of hospitality and fidelity to Christian identity itself.

With these wishes, I impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of abundant heavenly rewards to all those who are involved in the field of migration.

From the Vatican, 25 July 1995, the seventeenth year of my Pontificate.