

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract: The religion of the twenty first century shapes social organizations, state institutions and overall the international relations. Rather ignored in most analyses of the international relations, religion today makes its way not only in the image of a 'renaissance' or resurgence which bring to the front various fundamentalisms and religious justifications for terrorism, but also as a factor in a variety of contexts in the IR field.

This article explores the relationship between religion and migration; a special focus will be on analyzing the essential involvement and role of the Catholic Church. It aims at exploring Vatican's actions and projects towards migrants and refugees, approaching the global migration phenomenon as one of the main challenges for our world today, having at its center the ongoing refugee crisis, analyzing the dialogue and pastoral initiatives, the very recent 20-point action plan for governments entitled 'Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points' (2017).

The paper will explore the role of religion in the communication process involved in the refugee crisis, arguing that we should welcome, protect, t promote, and integrate migrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking (Pope Francis).

Keywords: Refugee crisis, migration, religion, Vatican, interreligious dialogue.

1. Introduction. The Catholic Church and Migration

In our globalized world facing violence and conflicts, stringent challenges such as violations of human rights, various types of discrimination, the refugee crisis, one keyword echoes and makes its way both in the private and public agendas- *tolerance*; fighting against all forms of intolerance, aiming at putting an end to all forms of discrimination and ultimately reaching and building what could be called the project of *re-learning to be human*. It reminds us all that acceptance of the *other* is built on epistemological attitudes, on knowledge and dialogue, on remaining committed to the strong values that are at the foundation of a just and peaceful society called to act as a community despite the inherent and intensified diversity of our world today.

The Vatican's actions and projects towards migrants and refugees have approached the global migration phenomenon considered to be one of the main challenges for our world today. Its actions and initiatives illustrate the consistent involvement under various forms, from the dialogue and pastoral initiatives, to the Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia* published in August 1952, *The Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People* established as early as 1970 then transformed in *The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People* (1988), the Catholic policies for interreligious dialogue expressed in the document *Erga migrantes Caritas Christi* (2004), to the very recent 20-point action plan for governments entitled *Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points*.

The Catholic Church has had an active involvement in various actions related to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Human mobility has been and remains a focus and consequently various documents and encyclicals analyze the complexities of migration.

The displacement caused by the horrors of World War I was one of the main priorities of the papacy of Pope Benedict XV whose efforts were directed to providing assistance to prisoners of war and refugees. In this sense he appointed a special *Ordinary* “aiming with this means to provide better religious assistance to the refugees lay people and, at the same time, to those who are gathered in small centers who require very special assistance”.¹

Pope Benedict XV founded the *College for Migrants* whose goal was to offer priests the special formation their pastoral work with these categories of people required; to cover for the expenses of the College a *special collection to be taken in a National Emigrant's Day*. This idea would be later developed by the *Exsul Familia* (1952): “They (Pastors) must do their best, using the methods that seems most useful, to ensure the success both of the Day for Italian Emigrants, to be held annually, and of the collection for the spiritual assistance of migrants... We request that in parishes where all or most of the members are of Italian descent there be celebrated an annual Day for Italian Migrants... Similarly, this should also be done with necessary modifications, for migrants of other nationalities and languages, so that a Day for Migrants may be celebrated throughout the whole Catholic world at one and the same time, on the first Sunday in Advent.”²

The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, *Exsul Familia* represents a first landmark in the Catholic Church’s teaching on migration. It constituted the first official document of the Vatican to direct its attention to the challenges of offering spiritual assistance to migrants. With its first statement it sets the framework of the analysis by reflecting on the *émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, as the archetype of every refugee family*. Thus, the inherent mission of the Church is affirmed in terms of assistance to all categories of migrants, refugees, exiles: “The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.”³

The encyclical also reflects on the past, recalling the implication of the Church from the time of the Bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, who released and offered protection to the prisoners taken after the defeat of the Emperor Valentine; it reviews the Catholic aid to the people touched by the atrocities of war, especially the First and Second World Wars, while looking at the future and outlining various norms for future action.

The Pontificate of John XXIII mirrored a special care and preoccupation for migrants and refugees: “We feel no less anxiety for the lot of those who, from the need to seek a means of livelihood or because of the wretched conditions in their native countries forced to leave their own land. The difficulties and hardships these have to endure are numerous and

¹ Ezio Marchetto, *The Catholic Church and the Phenomenon of Migration: An Overview*, Center for Migration Studies, New York, 1989, p. 8, <http://cmsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Marchetto-The-Catholic-Church-and-the-Phenomenon-of-Migration.pdf>, Accessed on December 20th, 2017.

² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

³ Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Exsul Familia Nazarethana*, August 1, 1952, www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12exsul.htm, Accessed on December 17th, 2017.

considerable, for they have been brought from their father's home to distant lands, and often have to live, in crowded cities and amid the noise of factories, a life very different from that based on their ancestral customs, and sometimes, what is worse, gravely harmful and opposed to Christian virtue.”⁴

John XXIII was the initiator of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the *aggiornamento* of Church structures and a step forward to an *increasing commitment to evangelization and human promotion*. The challenges of the phenomenon of migration were addressed by the Council “which was to insist on the dignity and rights of immigrants and on the cultural dimension of the migratory phenomenon; the causes that gave rise to migration, old and new, were denounced, that is, disorderly economic development and certain political and economic choices; and the conviction was expressed that in her catholicity the Church would become a sign and instrument of new orders that would also favour immigrants.”⁵

Author of two major encyclicals, *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII was profoundly aware of the importance of international relations in modern times, he is considered to have played an essential role in the positive outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis, “he supported international organizations which, on the basis of the most recent economic and social statistics, fostered better relations among countries in the communal striving toward a more just society.”⁶

The 1960's represented a *tumultuous decade*- increasing migration from the Third World countries, intra-European migratory flows, refugees - and the Church sought to give a pastoral response to these provocative events of international migration.

The encyclical *Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)* was written as a response to the crises of the late 1960s and it revealed Pope Paul VI's care for the stringent challenges of his time such as poverty, social injustice and conflict, and his appeal for international cooperation that would eventually lead to a global development of the common good. Familiar with the struggles and difficulties of vulnerable areas in Africa, Latin America, Palestine or India, that the Pope visited on various occasions, his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* becomes the voice of the *hungry nations of the world* crying out to the *peoples blessed with abundance*, insisting on “the duty of giving foreigners a hospitable reception”, conceived as “a duty imposed by human solidarity and by Christian charity, and it is incumbent upon families and educational institutions in the host nations.”⁷ The encyclical also touches upon issues such as the effects of colonialism; addressing both the positive and the negative side of the phenomenon.

The papal letter formulates the project of a *true humanism* that steps away from the *closed off from God* humanism, as expressed by Henri de Lubac in *Le drame de l'humanisme*

⁴ John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Ad Petri Cathedram*, June 29, 1959, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_29061959_ad-petri.html, Accessed on December 17th, 2017.

⁵ Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 2004, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html, Accessed on December 17th, 2017.

⁶ Ezio Marchetto, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

⁷ Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples*, March 26, 1967, www.papalencyclicals.net/pius12/p12exsul.htm, Accessed on December 17th, 2017.

athée, advocating for a *new humanism*, “one which will enable our contemporaries to enjoy the higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and contemplation”.⁸

The *Justitia et Pax (Justice and Peace)* Commission was created at the request of Pope Paul VI within the Church’s central administration in order to contribute to the progress of poorer nations and international social justice, urging all men “to pool their ideas and their activities for man’s complete development and the development of all mankind.”⁹

Towards the end of the twentieth century, as migration became a global phenomenon, the Church reiterated its concern and care for the migrants, perceived as a responsibility of the Church: “Emigrants, on account of the peculiar nature of the Church [that of being the pilgrim people of God], are not outsiders.”¹⁰

John Paul II, the *Pilgrim Pope*, showed a special concern for the phenomenon of migration and its implications: “Migration always has two aspects, diversity and universality. The former comes from the meeting between diverse individuals and groups of people and involves inevitable tension, latent rejection and open polemics. The latter is constituted by the harmonious meeting of diverse social subjects who discover themselves in the patrimony that is common to every human being formed as it is by the values of humanity and fraternity. There is a mutual enrichment when diverse cultures come into contact.”¹¹

Between 1985-2002 the annual Migration Day messages are authored by John Paul II; they all emphasize the need for solidarity, for showing respect of human rights, insisting on welcoming the stranger: “hospitality extended to the stranger, whatever his religious belief, in the rejection of all racial exclusion or discrimination, in the recognition of the personal dignity of every man and woman and, consequently, in the commitment to furthering their inalienable rights.”¹²

As Nicholas DiMarzio reflected in his article *John Paul II: Migrant Pope Teaches on Unwritten*

Laws of Migration, “the teaching of John Paul II on migration gives us a legal framework to understand this complex public policy issue. This legal framework is rooted in human dignity and freedom, without which the human laws necessary to guide migration and the common good can never be correctly formed.”¹³

Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi (The love of Christ towards Migrants) was a document issued by The Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People in 2004. It both summarizes the teachings in all previous documents and contextualizes them in the present era, examining the pastoral response to changing conditions of migration.

⁸*Ibidem*.

⁹*Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Church and Human Mobility*, May 26, 1978, <http://www.acmro.catholic.org.au/about/church-documents-on-migration/the-teaching-of-the-universal-church/other-vatican-documents/414-circular-letter-to-episcopal-conferences-church-and-human-mobility/file>, Accessed on December 17th, 2017.

¹¹ *Migration Day Message*, 1991, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/migration.index.html>, Accessed on December 17th, 2017.

¹² *Migration Day Message*, 1999, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/migration/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_22021999_world-migration-day-1999.html, Accessed on December 21st, 2017.

¹³ Nicholas DiMarzio, “John Paul II: Migrant Pope Teaches on Unwritten Laws of Migration”, in *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy*, volume 21, Issue 1, 2012, p. 214.

Pope Benedict XVI continued on the same path as his predecessors in expressing *the maternal concern of the Church in the vast sector of migration*. His 2011 message for the 97th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, entitled *One human family* synthesizes his vision: “All, therefore, belong to one family, migrants and the local populations that welcome them, and all have the same right to enjoy the goods of the earth whose destination is universal, as the social doctrine of the Church teaches. It is here that solidarity and sharing are founded.”¹⁴

2. The Refugee Crisis.

At the end of 2015, 65.3 million people were displaced globally, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)¹⁵. The responses from Western countries varied, however there was an overwhelming dominant exclusionary rhetoric. The religious element played a particularly important role in shaping the discourses revolving around the ongoing refugee crisis. As most refugees belonged to predominantly Islamic countries they were assumed to be Muslim¹⁶ and then further associated with the danger of terrorism or various security threats¹⁷. A crisis of solidarity soon developed; as Zygmunt Baumann reflected in a *New York Times* interview “The Refugee Crisis Is Humanity’s Crisis”: “Refugees are worldless in a world that is spliced into sovereign territorial states, and that demands identifying the possession of human rights with state citizenship. This situation is further compounded by the fact that there are no countries left ready to accept and offer shelter and a chance of decent life and human dignity to the stateless refugees.”¹⁸

With the beginning of his Pontificate Pope Francis indicated that the phenomenon of migration would hold a central place when his first visit as Roman Pontiff was dedicated to the migrants on the island of Lampedusa, an important entry point for migrants and asylum seekers. Pope Francis expressed his concerns that the world today is experiencing a *globalisation of indifference* and that *we have become used to the suffering of others*. As the phenomenon continued to amplify and more persons forcibly displaced, Pope Francis reiterated that “each of them has a name, a face, and a story, as well as an inalienable right to live in peace and to aspire to a better future for their sons and daughters.”¹⁹

With every address the emphasis was placed on the importance of offering migrants and refugees *adequate and dignified initial accommodation*. Opposing any arbitrary

¹⁴ *Migration Day Message*, 2011, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/migration/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100927_world-migrants-day.html, Accessed on December 21st, 2017.

¹⁵ Around 22.5 million of them are refugees, over half of them are under the age of 18.

¹⁶ Despite the fact that most refugees are from countries where Islam is the dominant religion and consequently assumed to

be Muslim, many of them are Christian, Yazidis, Baha’i, Druze etc.

¹⁷ The stereotype association between ‘refugee’ and ‘terrorist’ has become rather common in the public discourse and shaped

the responses to the phenomenon by addressing almost exclusively the ‘security’ dimension in the detriment of the ‘solidarity’ one.

¹⁸ B. Evans and Z. Baumann, “The Refugee Crisis Is Humanity’s Crisis”, in *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/02/opinion/the-refugee-crisis-is-humanitys-crisis.html>, Accessed on December 21st, 2017.

¹⁹ Pope Francis: “Each migrant has a name, a face, and a story”, *Vatican Radio*, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/09/17/pope_francis_%E2%80%98each_migrant_has_a_name,_a_face,_and_a_story%E2%80%99/1258801, Accessed on 21 December 2017.

expulsions of migrants and refugees as not a suitable solutions, The Pope, *considered to be the voice of compassion of the world's refugees* made a reference to various widespread programmes of welcome, which favor *a personal encounter and allow for greater quality of service and increased guarantees of success*. Time and again his plea was directed to parishes, convents, monasteries, urging Christians across Europe to open up their homes to refugees, announcing that Vatican will take two families "fleeing death" in the Middle East.

In July 2017 Vatican's Migrant and Refugees Office (Dicastery for promoting Integral Human Development) issued a set of *Twenty Pastoral Action Points* and *Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts*, focusing on implementing four actions – *to welcome, to protect, to promote, to integrate* – in the attitudes and actions of Christian communities and of all those concerned with those who are forced to flee, and in international and national policies. The *Migrants and Refugees* section is personally directed by Pope Francis, whose efforts are directed to ensure that *those forced to flee are not shut out or left behind*, and is committed to help those *forcibly displaced by conflict, natural disaster, persecution or extreme poverty*, as well as victims to human trafficking.

The document *Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts* begins with a reflection on past actions, assistance and special pastoral attention received offered by the Catholic Church and its continuous efforts to act and *continue this work in solidarity with them and in cooperation with the international community*: "Even amidst the current crisis, experience teaches that effective, shared responses are available. The Church looks forward to working together with the international community to promote and adopt such measures to protect the dignity, rights and freedoms of all persons currently on the move, including forced migrants, victims of human trafficking, asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons. The United Nations processes to produce Global Compacts, one on safe, orderly and regular migration, and the other on refugees, are a unique opportunity to respond together through international cooperation and shared responsibility."²⁰

The Twenty Action Points rooted in the Catholic Church's practices in responding to the needs of migrants and refugees, aims at providing guidance to policy-makers and all those concerned and involved in assisting those affected and vulnerable. The above-mentioned actions- *to welcome, to protect, to promote, to integrate*- are the pillars of the document, indeed *each is an active verb and a call to action*, and "starting from what is currently possible, their ultimate goal is the building of an inclusive and sustainable common home for all."²¹

The first section, *To Welcome: Enhancing Safe and Legal Channels for Migrants and Refugees* holds that *migration should be safe, legal and orderly, and the decision to migrate voluntary*. The second section, *To Protect: Ensuring Migrants' and Refugees' Rights and Dignity*, underlines the imperativeness of a *holistic and integrated approach, with a focus on the centrality of the human person*. The holistic approach is considered to be effective in stepping away from any *harmful stereotypes*. The last two sections, *To Promote: Advancing Migrants' and Refugees' Integral Human Development* and *To Integrate: Enriching Communities through Wider Participation of Migrants and Refugees*, make a specific reference to the international community encouraged to include refugees, asylum seekers and labour migrants in their development plans and this *acceptance* is considered to be a twofold

²⁰*Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts*, 2017, <https://migrants-refugees.va/20-action-points>, accessed December 21st, 2017.

²¹*Ibidem*.

opportunity for new understanding and broader horizons. Those accepted have the responsibility to respect the values, traditions and laws of the community which takes them in, and the other side is called to acknowledge the beneficial contribution which each immigrant can make to the whole community: ”both sides are mutually enriched by their interaction, and the community as a whole is enhanced by a greater participation of all its members, both resident and migrants. This is also true for the migrant or refugee who chooses to return home.”²²

The other document, *The Twenty Pastoral Action Points* is directed to the use of the Church’s dioceses, parishes and religious congregations, by various Catholic organizations or at the level of civil society, media, *inviting everyone to join in reflection, prayer, communication and action.*

The message which Pope Francis has prepared for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees to be celebrated on 14 January 2018, entitled “Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating”, is yet another invitation to us all to contribute to the processes underway at the international level.

All the addresses by Pope Francis beyond those dedicated to the *World Day of Migrants and Refugees*²³, as well as continuous interventions by the *Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant People* reveal the engagement of the Church to any form of injustice, violence and abuses that people are facing in various areas of the world.

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²²*Ibidem.*

²³The Church has celebrated the *World Day of Migrants and Refugees* each year since 1914, reflecting on the role of migration, the challenges and opportunities it represents, and expressing concern for migrants and refugees.

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