

The Universal Church as Defender of the Rights of Migrants

by Cardinal Theodore McCarrick

I would like to thank Dr. Schneck for his kind introduction and to thank Catholic University and the Migration and Refugee Services office of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for inviting me to speak today.

Today's discussion of the church and migration is of special importance to me, as I have myself witnessed the migration phenomenon in all its forms during the long years of my own ministry. Even when visiting a country to discuss political affairs, or to observe responses to poverty, or to visit the local church, migration has always been part of the conversation and always must be considered as leaders seek just solutions to mankind's failures.

Migration is not always a pretty sight, as, because of the nature of our world, persons on the move are often running away from danger, from wars, persecution, or grinding poverty. However, it continues to be a permanent part of the international landscape that cannot be ignored, because it involves human beings and their welfare.

Before I we talk about the present day reality and about responses to international migration, and the Catholic Church's involvement in it, let me first present the Gospel foundation that provides the basis for our involvement.

Although some are not aware of this, migration is a central theme of both the Old and New Testaments. In Exodus, we see the flight of the Israelites, who escape the oppression of Egypt and wander in the wilderness for forty years, until the Lord leads them to a new home, Israel. This experience leads to the Lord's admonishment to the Israelites in Leviticus: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34). There is no equivocation in that statement.

In the New Testament, exile and homelessness mark the life of Christ as well. In Matthew, the child Jesus and the Holy Family flee as refugees to Egypt to escape the threat of Herod. As an adult, Jesus is an itinerant preacher who travels throughout Galilee and Judea to spread his message: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His Head." (Mt 8-20) As the Lord came to share humanity with us in everything but sin, so, too, he came to share our experiences and challenges, including the problems and dangers of the migrant experience.

There is not just coincidence here -- Christ lived as a migrant and a refugee for a reason: in order to live with his people in solidarity, to provide example to all generations, even to this day, and to give witness to the Kingdom of God. This becomes clear later in the Gospel of Matthew, where our Lord teaches us that to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, we must welcome the stranger: "...For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Mt. 25-25) "Just as you did this to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Mt 25-39, 40)

So, in Catholic teaching, in the face of the immigrant, refugee, asylum-seeker, or trafficking victim, we see the face of Christ. We may not recognize Him at first, but He is there, just as the two disciples who met the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus only knew it was the Lord "in the breaking of the bread."

Thus, the Universal Church's role as a defender of the person on the move locally and globally is grounded in our faith and in our belief in Jesus Christ our Savior, who, as both God and man, embodied all that is Divine. This includes every human being, from the Iraqi refugee fleeing war to the Latin American migrant searching for a job.

Successive Popes have built upon the Gospel teachings and applied it to migration in the modern world. Pope Leo XIII established the right of a person to find work in his landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, reacting to the forces of the industrial revolution. Pope Pius XII, in his apostolic letter *Exsul Familia*, established the right of a person to migrate in order to find employment and support a

family, partially a by-product of migration stemming from the Second World War. In *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) Pope John XIII, noting the rise of the global powers, wrote of the obligation of nations to the international common good and how that obligation extends to the accommodation of migration. Pope John Paul II reaffirmed these teachings in several of his encyclicals, emphasizing the need for special protection of undocumented migrants. He was reacting to a relatively new phenomenon called globalization.

Today, the world is more complicated than ever, and, as such, the Church needs to remain more vigilant in defense of the migrant. As John Paul II realized, we live in a world marked by globalization, where the world has shrunk --and where communication, goods, and capital can be exchanged by nations and individuals at a moment's notice, and individuals with means can travel across the world in a day. As the world has changed in this way, making economic relationships easier to manage (although not always in a positive way), it has not changed with regard to the migration of peoples, particularly those in search of work and survival. In fact, the situation is worse.

Pope John Paul II recognized this new reality, and Pope Benedict XVI has expanded upon it. In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which marked 100 years since *Rerum Novarum* and applied its principles to the modern era, John Paul II tied globalization with integral human development, stating that free economies should "presume a certain equality between the parties, that one party would not be so powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience" (N. 14). He expanded this notion to all persons in the apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*: "In the variety of cultural forms, universal human values exist and they must be brought out and emphasized as the guiding force of all development and progress." He added that the Church will work to ensure that all "elements in society will cooperate to promote a globalization which will be at the service of the whole person and all people."

In his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), Pope Benedict XVI develops this globalization theme further, stating that economic life is "part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner" (n. 36). In an April 30, 2010, talk to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, His Holiness added that "economic life should properly be seen as an exercise of human responsibility, intrinsically oriented towards the promotion of the dignity of the human person, the pursuit of the common good and the integral development -- political, cultural, and spiritual -- of individuals, families, and societies."

Given these ethical considerations in the context of globalization, the Church is compelled to defend the human person in this new economic global rubric, including those who are subject to its economic forces. This is one primary reason for the Church's support for comprehensive immigration reform, which seeks to restore basic rights to persons who come to the United States to work and feed their families. As the U.S. and Mexican bishops states in their landmark pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, globalization is a new factor which impacts the migrant: "It is now time to harmonize policies on the movement of people, particularly in a way that respects the human dignity of the migrant and recognizes the social consequences of globalization" (n. 57). The effects of globalization on the human person, particularly the migrant worker, will be one of the most challenging moral issues of the twenty-first century. It will be left to the Church to lift this issue up and call upon nations to address it."

Likewise, the Church also is compelled to defend persons on the move for reasons of persecution and war, which tragically is another permanent part of the global landscape. Today, there are as many as 13 million refugees in the world and over 20 million internally displaced persons, many whom are women and children. Through the Pontifical Council on Migrant and Itinerant Persons and the International Catholic Migration Commission, the universal Church attempts to respond to the suffering of these persons. I am privileged to serve as a board member of Catholic Relief Services. In this capacity, I have witnessed first-hand the life-saving assistance to refugees and other persons on the move provided by CRS all over the world. Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, working with dioceses and Catholic Charities organizations across the country, is the largest resettler of refugees in the United States, helping to re-locate as many as 20,000 refugees per year in our country. Pope John Paul II once referred the world refugee situation as the "festering of a wound."

The Church responds to another global wound which I must highlight, modern-day slavery known as human trafficking. Pope Benedict XVI has called the trafficking in human beings a "scourge" and has called upon nations to work to end it. In the United States, MRS oversees programs to trafficking victims, including child trafficking victims. CRS operates anti-trafficking programs in countries around the world. The re-authorization of the Trafficking Victim's Protection Act in Congress this year gives us another opportunity to improve the U.S. response to victims of trafficking.

As Christ Himself was a refugee fleeing the terror of Herod in the Gospel of Matthew, so, too, are millions of our fellow human beings across the globe. They deserve our attention and life-saving support, and, as I have outlined, the universal church does what it can to give it to them. We provide it to them regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, or religion. As the late Cardinal Hickey, my great predecessor in Washington, always said, "We serve [persons] not because they are Catholic, but because we are Catholic."

Today, however, I would like to call attention to a specific group of refugees -- namely Christians who flee religious persecution. In different areas around the world, religious persecution is more prevalent than ever, particularly against Christians. Such persecution -- from denial of their right to worship to violent attacks against them -- has occurred in Egypt, Iran, China, and Iraq, to name a few places.

Of these examples, I would like to focus on our Iraqi brothers and sisters. I have traveled with CRS throughout the Middle East and have spoken with Iraqi Christians, including Iraqi Catholics, who have fled the war to neighboring countries. They are fearful to return to Iraq. This is understandable, given the October 31 attack on Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church in Baghdad which killed 58 people, as well as attacks on Christian households on New Year's Eve. These attacks received international attention; an untold number of other attacks against Iraqi Christians have not.

Let me share with you the story of one Iraqi Christian I met. During my brief visit in Jordan, I had the opportunity of seeing some of the refugees from Iraq who are being helped by Caritas. One of the people that I met was a man who had just recently fled from Baghdad with his wife and three small boys. You will remember the massacre in the Catholic Church, which took place there a few months ago. He happened to be in the church at that time, with his three sons. Thank goodness he was sitting near the side wall of the church and was near a door. As soon as he heard the noise in the front of the church, he took his youngsters and ran out the side door. It was only when he got home that he heard the news that two of the priests had been killed together with some 58 other people.

A short time after that, someone broke into his house around two o'clock in the morning and he found himself being awakened by the pressure of a revolver against his temple. A man's voice said to him "Take your family and get out of here in three days or we will kill you ". He said to the intruder: "why, I haven't done anything." The voice came back and said, "You're a Christian, that's enough. We don't want you here."

The next morning after a conversation with his wife, he called the three boys in and told them that they were moving away from Baghdad. The youngsters protested. They said "Daddy, we don't want to move from here. All our friends are here, and our school is here. Please don't make us move. This is the only place we have ever lived." The father did not know how to respond at first. Finally he said to the boys "okay, if you really want to stay, we will stay. But I have to tell you that Jesus cannot stay with us. He is not going to be able to be with us if we stay in Baghdad. Only if we go away, can we still talk to Jesus."

The six-year-old said to him "then we have to move. We can't stay here without Jesus. It won't be home anymore." Once the middle child had spoken, the other two agreed and so they left. The man was a carpenter. And, thank goodness, was able to find a job -- illegally of course -- in Amman. I said to him "If things cleared up, would you ever go back?" He said to me "Not if they offer me a house of gold!"

This is the real face of the refugee. This is the migrant who has no choice but to move and this is the family, which is our responsibility, as church, as society and as fellow human beings.

The United States, as both a participant in the Iraqi war and a Christian nation, has a special obligation to protect this family and other Iraqi Christians. Yet, as U.S. combat troops prepare to leave Iraq later this year, there is no public plan to ensure the protection of religious minorities in Iraq, including Christians. The U.S. refugee program, which has resettled about 50,000 Iraqi refugees, including Christians, to date, has stagnated, with only 6,000 awaiting consideration of close to 2 million located in surrounding countries. Iraqi women and children are more vulnerable to human trafficking. The welcome mat for Iraqis in surrounding countries -- which to date has been very generous--is fraying.

Our government must step up its efforts to respond to this reality, particularly before U.S. troops leave Iraq. These ancient religious communities should be able to remain in Iraq in safety, and those who cannot return and live in safety in their own country must be

provided for, either in the countries to which they have fled, or, if that seems impossible, in a third country where their culture and faith can continue to be fostered. Otherwise, our fellow Christians and Catholics in the region could one day soon face oblivion.

While I completely subscribe to the late Cardinal Hickey's statement as an accurate description of Catholic service to mankind, it does not mean that we should not provide special support and attention to members of our own faith who are in peril. Charity has to begin at home! I urge you to join me in defending their right to practice our faith in security and freedom and to be able to remain in their homes to do so.

In closing, then, why is the Catholic Church at the forefront of defending the migrant, the refugee, the trafficking victim, and others who are on the move?

In his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI gives us the simple answer: "Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance" (n. 62). And as the gentle Servant of God, Cardinal Terence Cooke, used to say: "We are all brothers and sisters in God's one human family."

This is the principle and the message, simple but powerful, that the Church and her members can deliver effectively.

As the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States stated in *Strangers No Longer*: "We judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us" (n. 6).

I would like to encourage you to continue your efforts to help persons on the move. If you are new to this mission, I pray that this conference will inspire you to get involved, whether it be on a service, advocacy, or pastoral level. As we offer these works of solidarity, however small, the Lord Jesus sees them and sends the Holy Spirit to help us, so that our work helps unify all His people. It is those here today and Catholics throughout the world who must be able to convince the powerful to heed this principle, and to realize in our own lives that Christ is still present in the life of the stranger and still rewards those who take Him in!

God bless you.