

The worldwide migratory phenomenon and the challenges to the Scalabrinian Lay Missionaries' mission

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The migrations are not a novelty of nowadays. Everything points out that there have always been migratory flows in the course of humankind's history. However, the migrations, as human and social phenomena, always assume singular characteristics of the times and context it happens. It would be naivety, then, to consider answering to the current migratory challenges with old, anachronic approaches. What worked in the past will not necessarily work today. Therefore, before thinking of operational answers, we must reply to some queries: what are the singular characteristics of contemporary migrations? What challenges us, as human beings, Christians and lay scalabrinians? The expression "what challenges us" can also be translated as "what makes us indignant", "what hurts our sensibility and our conscience", "what contradicts our values", but, also, "what reveals the God's salvific and freeing presence", "what represents a sign of the times", "what calls us to conversion"?

1- The relativism of the "human"

The first challenge to be emphasized in the analysis of the contemporary migratory flows is the "relativism of human". It is usual, in our times, to talk about "relativism" concerning to religious doctrines. In our case, by "relativism of human" we understand the subordination of human being and its dignity to other value referrals, like the neoliberal market, money, power, nationalism, national identity, ethnic identity, racial identity or religious identity. The human being, from a fundamental value, a purpose, becomes a tool, a way to achieve other goals, as economic enrichment, security, power, etc.

In the ethical-moral field, it is common to use the expression "reification" (from the Latin word "res", thing) or "thingification" of human being: the individual becomes a "object", a thing, that can be used and discarded, depending on the interests of who uses it. Finally, the human being assumes a value comparable to a good whose aim is to satisfy the needs and wills of its user.

In contemporary migrations, unfortunately, the "relativism of human" becomes more and more usual. For instance:

- The migrant is often considered just an object to maximize the profits: black-marketers and dealers attract and use people in mobility to pocket small amounts of money; employers enrich exploiting the informal work of illegal migrants; immigration countries profit from refusing to the foreign workers – especially the

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illegal ones – the access to the basic social services; emigration countries profit from manipulating the migrants' remittances.

- The migrant is often considered just an object to reach power: in many countries, the easier way to win elections has become to criminalize foreigners, and to promote strict migratory policies¹. In the same way, to radicalize the fight against terrorism – many times identified with the fight against Muslim migrants – assures, frequently, the approval of the majority of the voters. Besides, related to power, there is also human trafficking for sexual exploitation, especially of women. In this case, the power is not political, but it is the domination over the other, the delight on humiliating and subjugating the victim. In this category, some hideous crimes committed against migrants by skinheads and Neo-Nazis groups may be included too.
- The migrant is often considered just an object to increase the security and to relieve social crises: though they have little or no responsibility on the social crises of the country of arrival, foreigners are usually used as scapegoats. The terms “wave”, “avalanche”, migratory “invasions” are used to create social cohesion against a common enemy, and to strengthen a national identity in antithesis to the “barbarian” invaders.

Those succinct examples prove how, in migration's world, the “human” is more and more relativized, slighted, subordinated to other criteria and values. This is the first great challenge of human mobility in contemporaneous context: to recover the centrality of the migrant human being and its inalienable dignity. In other words, independently of the migratory process nature and causes, the person in mobility is owner of rights that cannot be subordinated to the logic of profit, to power or to national and individual security. To say that the dignity of the migrant human being is “inalienable” means to say that it cannot be “alienated”, nor it can be “sold”, or, better, it is not available, it has no price.

Translating those affirmations in a Christian language, we can say that each human being is freely created to God's image and resemblance (Gn 1,26) and, then, owner of a dignity that does not depend on nationality, ethnicity, religion or morality (cf. Gn 9,6). Human being dignity arises only from God's free gift, who created men and women as “subjects”, “interlocutors”. It is exactly with the human gender that God establishes its salvation dialogue. This dialogue is grounded on the acknowledgement, by God, of the dignity and the respect of the freedom of the human being, even when used against the divine plans.

To Scalabrinian lay Christians, to acknowledge the dignity of the migrant means to have he/she as an “interlocutor”, a person with whom we are called to interact, to dialogue. Concretely, that implies the duty of denouncing situations that “dehumanize” migrants and refugees and, at the same time, the duty of multiplying shelter, partition, communion and interlocution spaces, in which people in mobility “rediscover” that slighted dignity. Finally, to create solid practices in which migrants and refugees, as subjects of their own history, live symmetrical, interdependent and liberating relations.

¹ “Imigração é tema central das eleições americanas”. Available on:
<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/mundo/ult94u100992.shtml> - viewed on 10.16.06

In this topic, the words of the priest Giorgio Paleari are very worthy:

The child does not build its world vision talking about a God that is love; but, through “freeing pedagogical practices”, the child and the adult become subjects, experiencing fraternity and, afterwards, they, in a constant comparison with God’s Word, can rebuild the vision of a God that is Father, who is good and wants that everyone lives as brothers and sisters. It is through experience, new practices and new attitudes that the child and the adult, as subjects of the catechism, are able to reformulate their vision of the world.²

Finally, in face of the “relativism of the human” of migrants and refugees, the Scalabrinian lay Christians are called to rebuild or to “re-create” the human dignity of the people on mobility by multiplying interdependent and fraternal relations practices and spaces where – as the General Directives of the Scalabrinian Lay Missionaries Movement states – “nobody is excluded and everyone is called by the Father by its own name”.³

2- A world in mobility, a people that mobilize itself

Another characteristic of contemporary migrations is its “permanent and structural” character⁴. We are facing a phenomenon slightly different in relation to the past. Today, we do not just live in a time of great migrations, but in a time lived in “state of migration”. Some examples will be sufficient to elucidate the statement.

Nowadays, besides the 200 million people living outside their country of birth (international migrants), there are millions of people living outside their homeland or hometown (internal migrants), millions of people working outside their homeland or hometown (seasonal or temporary working migrants), millions of people that move temporarily for tourism or other activities. Besides, we cannot forget the millions of people who, even standing in their own land, live the “migratory fact”, due to the daily absence of migrant relatives. Finally, we live in a world in mobility, in a world where the geographic dislocations became more and more normal, habitual.

This generalized mobility is also proven by the quick diffusion of the “transnational families”. This expression means “those whose members belong to two places, two cultures and two economies, simultaneously”⁵. In these families, one or more members live in another country, but keeping deep affective and economic connections. There are many shapes of transnational families. A frequent case happens when the head of household migrates to another country to work and to send remittances. The children stay in their country of birth, under the responsibility of the other parent or of some relative. We don’t have space enough here to deepen this theme. What we want to emphasize is that the human mobility became such a permanent and structural factor that even the familiar cores are adapting themselves to this reality.

The job search is, without doubt, one of the main causes of this permanent and structural mobility. The predominance of the speculative financial capital, the structural

² PALEARI, Giorgio. *Visão do mundo e evangelização*. Uma abordagem antropológica. São Paulo: Ave Maria, 1994, p.64.

³ SCALABRINIAN LAY MISSIONARY MOVEMENT – SLM. *General directives*.

⁴ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, n.1.

⁵ UNFPA. *Estado de la población mundial 2006*, p.33.

unemployment and work “flexibility” force millions of people to move constantly, looking for jobs and for better life conditions. In many places, the demographic growth and the use of technologies in the rural areas provoke an intense expelling from the countryside, and a consequent swelling of megalopolises with all the consequent issues. In the last 15 years, according to UN’s statistics, it is also noticed an accelerated increase of the international immigration from the South – Northbound: in other words, from the poorer countries to the wealthier ones. Although it is not an “invasion”, as some people state, it represents, certainly, a sign of the wish for a united and fairer world, a world where everyone has the right to “biological inclusion” (survival) and to “social inclusion” (citizenship)⁶.

Thus, people in mobility are also a mobilized group that rejects the subaltern role and the relativism of humanity itself. Manifestations of May 1st, 2006, in the USA, against immigration laws reform, represent a sign that people in mobility are mobilized themselves. Millions of migrants and non-migrants supporters peacefully protested following Martin Luther King’s legation, and, today, just like segregated Afro-American people did in the 60s and 70s, migrants fight for their right to full citizenship, for an inclusive society, and against criminalization, exploitation and xenophobia.

In other countries, although it has not always been undertaken in a totally pacific manner, migrants and their children expressed indignation, clamor for justice and inclusion. When highlighting these events, what concerns us is to stress that, now a days, migrants are becoming historic subjects of change. Although victimized, they are taking a lead role, rejecting the “poor”, “abandoned” migrant stereotype. The contemporary migrants ask for solidarity, not charity. They want participation, not benefits.

These reflections point to many challenges to the Scalabrinian lay Christians.

1) In first place, a world in mobility is a world that needs to place the “migratory fact” as a guiding criterion for contemporary analyses, evaluations, decisions and policies. In other words, in any topic we deal with (work, education, health, politics, family, religion, sports, etc.), it will have to be analyzed under a migratory view too, from migrants’ standpoint. Migrations became an essential key to understand reality.

It means that the Scalabrinian charisma has never been so precious, urgent and necessary as today. To the Scalabrinian lay Christian that represents bliss and, at the same time, a serious responsibility: it urges us to influence centers of reflection and analysis, such as decision-making centers, to highlight the “migratory fact”.

2) In second place, a world in mobility is also a dynamic, open, and in continuous evolution world. Contemporary reality undergoes extreme changes in very short time. The migrants’ geographic mobility accompanies and, sometimes, stimulates this ever more frenetic “cultural mobility” – meaning cultural changes. Space and time have shrunk! It is the global society.

Migrations, despite not being the main cause of this situation, constitute a subsequent factor of change in contexts already characterized by quick, extreme changes. A feeling of “abandonment” and “uncertainty” spreads in many societies. This situation may create two risks: 1) hostility to every kind of change and novelty, including those introduced by migrants, with consequent strengthening of fundamentalist, xenophobic and

⁶ Cf. BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *O Mal-estar da pós-modernidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1998, p. 24.

nationalistic trends⁷; 2) total renunciation to any kind of solid, stable ideal or value – because everything changes, everything is transitory – with the consequent relativism of human rights.

Facing these risks, the challenge for the Scalabrinian lay Christians is, first of all, to testify, in words and actions⁸, the action of Christ's Spirit that "renews the surface of the Earth"⁹, being the "novelty", a exceptional place for manifestation of God's action in history. In this perspective, the "alterity" brought by the migrant, far from being a danger or a threat, it becomes a resource, an opportunity for a mutual cultural, and social and spiritual enrichment.

On the other hand, if the irruption of the novelty help us not to absolutize the status quo, due to the current axiological fragmentation – or, as some prefer: post-modern – we are called to reaffirm the existence of universal values that, even constantly reinterpreted, last through times and cultures. In this realm, it is important not to impose "our" values, and to create dialogue spaces where people from different nationalities, cultures and religions can reflect together and find ethical convergences concerning values and principles that base human acquaintanceship¹⁰.

3) Third, the responsibility for strengthening migrants' lead role lays on the Scalabrinian lay Christians. We must overcome the exclusively aiding focuses, even though it is clear that there are cases when emergency help is needed. In fact, when we exaggerate with paternalism or motherhood, we are transmitting distrustfulness on the migrants' ability to be the subject of their own history. Actually, we can consider it a dissimulated kind of relativism of human being.

In this sense, it is important, in our daily lives, not just to seek what we can do for the migrants, but also what we can receive from them. Nothing strengthens more self-esteem and "rebuilds" humanity in the migrant than the experience of feeling useful, precious, and enriching to the people around him/her. The Latin American and Caribbean bishops, in the Conference of Puebla, in 1979, spoke of the "evangelist potential of the poor"¹¹. In a analogue way, today, we can talk about the "migrants' evangelist potential" that, in joy and in pain, testify the ideal of a society without borders, where the communion of the "human family" precedes any distinction based on nationality, ethnic group, religion or social class.

To support the migrants' lead role also means to be solidary with their demands. Usually, people in mobility find it more difficult to demand for their rights; sometimes for fear of deportation, other times because they do not know their rights or just due to lack of time or opportunities. Here, frequently, local support is determinant to the migrants' expression of their clamour for justice and dignity.

⁷ A symptom is shown by recent news that appeared in the international media reporting on the existence of about 10.000 neo-nazis in Spain (Cf. "Dez mil radicais unidos pela xenofobia". Available on: <http://noticias.uol.com.br/midiaglobal/elpais/2006/10/10/ult581u1841.jhtm> Viewed in 10.10.06).

⁸ Cf. *Dei Verbum*, 2.

⁹ Sal. 104,30.

¹⁰ Cf. KUSCHEL, Karl-Josef – MIETH, Dietmar (orgs). Em busca de valores universais. *Concilium* 292 – 2001/4.

¹¹ CELAM. *Conclusões de Puebla*. São Paulo: Paulinas, n. 1147.

Finally, when we consider that, today, many people migrate from economically poorer countries to economically richer ones, to assume the migrants' cause means to denounce the injustices and the asymmetries of the political and economical international relations, and to work to build a more equitable, and fair international society or, as *Erga Migrantes* states: "a new vision of a worldwide community, being considered as a people's family, to whom the land's goods are finally destined, in a perspective of the universal common good"¹².

3. Inter-culture or monoculture?

Though there are relatively few countries with large percentage of foreigners among the national population¹³, there is no doubt that the migrants' presence is taking a growing visibility. This visibility¹⁴ may come from different factors, as the growth in the absolute number of foreigners, the larger ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, the growing media coverage on the issue and, above all, migrants' organized groups and individuals demands.

To designate this new reality, we use, today, words preceded by the prefixes "pluri", "multi", "inter": for instance, multi-culture, pluricultural and intercultural. The message is clear: societies are not homogeneous and monolithic anymore. The world in mobility is a world where cultures, ethnic groups and religions interlace. Today, it is not so easy to identify a country based on determined biological or cultural features. In the past, for instance, one could say with conviction: "the german have fair skin". However, in the last soccer's World Cup, the german team had a black player. Today, we can only say: "most of the germans has fair skin".

The "complexity" and diversification concern every field of culture: the adaptive, associative and symbolic dimension. Briefly, they concern to the identity of individuals and of collectivities. Here we refer not only to the emigrating people, but also to those who receive the immigrants and those who are abandoned by them. We are in front of a large number of human beings, in different situations and with different characteristics, but sharing the need to respond to a new reality, which can result even in identity changes. How to deal with this situation? How to make identity reformulation a space for human, and social and spiritual growth? How to avoid, in these situations, the rise or strengthening of "phobias", with the consequent fundamentalist, nationalist, xenophobic or racist solutions? How to ensure migrants' civic integration and, at the same time, and "integration" of people in receptor countries to the new reality created by intense immigration?

¹² *Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, n. 8.

¹³ According to UN data (2005), migrants represent more than 20% of the population in only 10 countries with more than 1 million of inhabitants (cf. ONU – Consejo Económico y Social. *Seguimiento de la población mundial, con especial referencia a la migración internacional y el desarrollo*. 2006. Available on: http://www.cinu.org.mx/prensa/especiales/2006/Migracion/poblacion_04_04_06.pdf. Viewed in 08.24.2006).

¹⁴ In this reflection we insist on the issue of "migrations' visibility", because we believe that it is one of the signs of the times. However, we reckon that we are in front of a still incipient process. In many countries, the migratory flows still are totally "invisible", and most particularly, when they led by women.

A first answer to these challenges plunges into a fundamental choice: intercultural or monoculture? It means, do we want to work for the creation of plural, dialogic societies (intercultural) or for the exclusion and elimination of the diversities (monoculture)? As Christians and scalabrinians, we believe that our choice cannot be other than intercultural, for different reasons.

First of all, from an evaluating point of view, the diversity represents an asset and an opportunity for human, social and spiritual growth of people, if lived in a way of dialogue and reciprocal respect. In other words, the problem is not on the “alterity” itself, but on the difficulty – for migrants and natives – to deal with it. With no doubt, this is a first challenge: to create a “culture of tolerance” or, more than that, a “culture of dialogue”.

In second place, the choice for intercultural comes from a specifically pragmatic reason: it is impossible to stop the international mobility of humans. Even building walls or implementing severe immigratory policies, the flow of international migrants will stay intense. As we have said before, we are in front of a “structural and permanent” phenomenon, not something conjunctural. In this sense, the monocultural option is merely illusory.

Finally, from a Christian point of view, the intercultural brings us back to the Trinitarian relations, to the relational communion of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. The Trinitarian model becomes inspirational to plural societies in which the diversities are received and shared in spaces for interlocution and interaction.

In this context, there is a broad series of immediate challenges, such as the integration or incorporation of migrants; the complex issue of the second and third generations; the return and “re-integration” challenges; the inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue; the intercultural education; the transcultural medicine; the promotion of civil and political rights of foreigners; the outcoming of every kind of discrimination, xenophobia and ethnocentrism.

When dealing with all these issues, the background choice, the guiding horizon, should be clear: the building of a plural, inclusive and intercultural society, that is, a society in which the different cultures may live together in a peaceful, dialogic and reciprocally enriching way.

In this context, Christian communities are called to become clear signs of intercultural, building themselves as spaces for dialogue and interlocution, in a constant search for the universal and enlivening presence of the Spirit “that blows wherever It wants” (Jo 3,8). Surely, it does not exempt the communities from taking a position or, eventually, to question some practices or ideologies. However, the essence of the Christian identity, before becoming part of precepts, norms ou doctrines, is in the imitation and practice of that salvific dialogue that God, since the beginning, established with the humankind and its creation, looking for the entire, historical and scatological salvation of all of His creatures.

4. Inspired by the Kingdom of God’s logic

A last challenge we would like to stress refers to our relation with the human mobility. Until now, we saw aspects of the human mobility that challenge us and call us to

urgent and focalized answers. Now, we are going to take the opposite way, that is, our relation with the human mobility. In other words, how does our life, our daily routine let itself be questioned by the urgencies of international migrations? The “poor’s outcry” – the Puebla bishops said – is “clear, increasing, impetuous”¹⁵, ... and what about our ears? Are we available, open, “converted” to hear the shout of migrants and refugees?

First of all, we have to stress that migrants and refugees nowadays are not only soap-operas characters and protagonists of TV news. We live in a time in which every country, in a more or less intense way, takes part on the migratory flows as origin, arrival and/or transit country. The migrants are part of our lives: they are co-workers, sit next to us in the bus, they attend the same class as our children, and they ask for aid in the middle of the street. Their outcry is far closer than we imagine. As in the case of the Samaritan in the Luke’s parable¹⁶, the migrants, victims of injustices, are fallen in the middle of the roads we follow; or, just like the case of the demoniac Gerasene in Mark’s gospel¹⁷, they come in our direction, shouting for liberation.

However, despite of the physical closeness of migrants and refugees, sometimes we find it difficult to deal with them. We outline two reasons: 1) the fear on losing something we believe fundamental to our happiness, and 2) the difficulty in dealing with the “other”.

Concerning the first point, the issue is specifically economic: the reception of the migrant is an invitation to the sharing. Sharing of our homes, our meals, our wages and, above it all, our time – what still is an economic issue because, in the capitalist society, “time is money”! Sometimes, the fear of losing the “wealth” we consider necessary to our happiness separates us from the solidarity with migrants and refugees.

Talking about the difficulty of dealing with the “alterity”, we believe that the thing that bothers us more in the contemporary migrations is exactly the ethnic, religious and/or cultural diversity of the arriving people. In Italy, for instance, the presence of a Catholic Spanish does not cause so many reactions as the presence of a Muslim Senegalese; or, in the USA, the presence of a white Canadian is not so questioned as the presence of a mestizo Mexican. After all, the migrant is not only the poor to be liberated, but also the “other” that begs for space, that wants to be recognized in its “alterity”. Sometimes, it is easier to receive the starving, thirsty migrant¹⁸ than to receive the “foreign” migrant¹⁹, it means, the “stranger”, the other, the different.

Finally, the challenges of migratory reality may not have any effect in the pastoral agents if not accompanied by a process of constant “conversion” to the Kingdom of God’s logic. This conversion implies many factors, but we want to highlight just two of them:

a) To receive the “alterity” as a factor of growth and fidelity to Jesus Christ’s God. Migrants’ religious, ethnical and cultural diversity challenges us, questions us, breaks our daily habits, but, at the same time, enriches us, invites us to go beyond, to overcome our strict limits. In the Christian tradition, the other is a place of meeting with the Totally Other. In other words, our capacity of receiving the divine “alterity” is proportional to the

¹⁵ CELAM. *Conclusões de Puebla*. São Paulo: Paulinas, n. 89.

¹⁶ Cf. Lc 10, 29-37.

¹⁷ Cf. Mc 5, 1-20.

¹⁸ Cf. Mt 25, 42.

¹⁹ Cf. Mt 25, 43a.

capacity of receiving the human “alterity” in the same way once God’s love is proportional to our love for our neighbor. This is a circling process is: receiving God – the Totally Other – helps us to receive the migrant “other”, in the same way as receiving the “other” migrant helps us to recognize and accept the presence of God.

b) *To assume the heresies of the “neoliberal creed” as life choices.* In times dominated by the neoliberalism, it diffuses the “creed”, the “declaration of faith” in the redeeming capacities of the market: it believes that happiness is on consumption of goods! As it normally happens, the faith declarations create also “heresies” as it means alternative and heretical creeds that question the official ones. Today, heresies to the “neoliberal creed” are: do not enrich more than the necessary to live with dignity; do not put profit ahead of human dignity; do not pollute, and do not waste the non-renewable natural resources. And, above it all, do not have another God besides Jesus Christ: it means, do not look for happiness outside the Kingdom’s logic! Today, the reception, the sharing and the communion with the migrant will only be possible if the pastoral agents assume as life choices these heresies of the “neoliberal creed”. In other case, there will be always a conflict of interests between the duty of sharing and the fear of losing the wealth considered fundamental to self-realization.

Following these ideas, we can properly finish with the words of Dom Franco Masseroti, bishop and prophet of Balsas (Maranhão), who passed away recently; these words were written after the death of Dom Luciano Mendes de Almeida:

The true death happens when we put our hope and the sense of our life in the ownership, in the power, in the loose pleasure, when we close our heart to our neighbor and let ourselves be taken by selfishness. The true death is when we are afraid of losing our life because of Jesus and the Gospel (cf. Mt 8, 35).