



BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE SCALABRINIAN MISSION*

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Provocative question: What is the Scalabrinian mission, who are its subjects and who are its recipients?

Introduction

*"The land is mine, and you are guests and passing migrants!"
(Lev 25:23).*

This biblical passage is a watershed, or, if you prefer, a turning point in the way of thinking about the world, migration, and consequently the Scalabrinian mission. Many biblical passages are transgressors of normality, of the simply given, of what is taken as logical and obvious, calling for a paradigm change. The question is how it is written and how it is interpreted, as Jesus asked the teacher of the law: "what is written and how do you read it" (Lk 10,26). Not infrequently, the current reader stands before the biblical text with what he/she is and carries with him/her, his/her preconceptions and subjective categories, hoping that his/her reading will confirm his/her expectations (fundamentalist and manipulative), wanting to guarantee his/her privileges, security and stability of life on earth. At the same time, the text reminds us that we are beings of passage, guests on this earth, migrants by nature.

In social life, the relationship with the other is determined by the categories of the cultural, historical environment of reference and by the universe of collective and subjective values that each person carries with him or herself. In today's multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious society, intersubjective relationships are fragmented or determined by a worldview divided into classes, rich and poor, foreigners (non-citizens) and citizens, those who count and those who do not. Thus, the other is not always seen as another me, as subjectivity or

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a subject of his history, because his/her personal identity is equated with his/her nationality, his/her purchasing power, and his/her political-social status: the immigrant, the refugee, the poor, the Venezuelan, the Peruvian, the Brazilian, the African. In this way, walls are constantly being built, following the logic of indifference and exclusion; the other person is worth as much as he or she is useful to me.

The Holy Scriptures, however, invites us to project a look according to the logic of life, of the Creator, and of creation. With mastery and wisdom, full of omniscience, the biblical narrator, as a true master, from the beginning introduces his readers to the logic of life, which is movement, is going out, is a constant exodus. The first BEING to go out of himself, putting himself in movement, was God: "In the beginning, God created" (Gen. 1:1). God created the universe, this great common house, to host the human being, his image, and likeness. In the beginning, it was God who took the initiative to move toward the human being: "They heard the Lord God walking in the garden at dusk" (Gen 3:8). God who walks toward humanity is an image that runs through the entire Bible.

More than a social, political or economic factor, in the Bible, the migrant and migration are theological categories; God reveals himself as a migrant with the migrants, God of the migrants, of the exiles and refugees. (Is 52:12; 40:3-11), an itinerant God, who dwells in a tent (2 Sam 7:6), who leaves his temple to go and meet his people in exile (Ez 10:18-22; 11:22-25), in order to lead them back to the promised land, a favorable place to live the covenant with God. In the New Testament, Jesus reveals the depth and solidarity of God with migrants by assuming the identity of a migrant himself, from his birth, forced to take refuge in Egypt, to the cross, receiving the condemnation reserved for foreigners, because that is how he identified "I was a foreigner" (Mt 25:35).

The Scalabrinian mission, therefore, is based on the inestimable value of the life of every human being passing under the earth: "In his image and likeness God created them... male and female he created them..." (Gn 1:27). (Gen 1:27), in God's preferential love for migrants (Deut 10:17-19; Mt 25:35), in the logic of life as movement, departure, migration: "The land is mine, and you are guests to me, you migrants passing through" (Lev 25:23), and in the vulnerable situation in which migrants find themselves "You know the life of a migrant, for you were a migrant in Egypt" (Ex 23:9). In this sense, some biblical foundations for the mission with and for the migrants are presented.

2. Biblical foundations of mission together with migrants

2.1 Welcoming: The oldest motivation for welcoming and protecting immigrants is found in the historical memory of a people whose migration is part of their DNA as recounted in the historical creed "my father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:5) and David at the time of the consecration of the temple "I am a migrant and a pilgrim like all my ancestors" (1Cor 29:15). The patriarchs



wandered through the promised land, went down into Egypt without possessing ownership of land. The only portion of land left as an inheritance was a field with the tomb that Abraham bought to bury Sarah in the Hebron region (Gen 23:20) and became a family tomb. Theologically we interpret it as the partial fulfillment of the promise, or an anticipation of the ownership of the whole land, for, in this portion of land, Israel's womb and seed were planted to take root (Gen 25:9; 35:29; 49:31; 50:13), grow, bear fruit, sow new seeds and multiply, taking possession of the land, this is a metaphorical image.

Another motivation for the welcoming and protection of migrants in the Bible is found in the historical memory of ancient Israel of having been a migrant people: "You know what it is to be a migrant...because you were migrants in the land of Egypt" (Es 22:20; 23:9). The memory of migration is a constituent element of the identity of the people of God, and at the same time, an ethical imperative not to repeat with the migrant the same injustices and oppressions to which the children of Israel were subjected when they were outside their "homeland".¹

In the same line, the Deuteronomic code (Deut 12-26) presents as motivation for welcoming and protecting the migrant the harsh experience of slavery in a foreign land "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and that the Lord your God rescued you from there, so he commanded you to do this" (Deut 24:22), "do not oppress the migrant.... do not take away his cloak..." (Deut 24:17; 27:19)

The experience of the Assyrian (722 BC) and Babylonian (589 BC) banishment deeply marked Israel's life like exiles and deportees, so the texts of the time of exile show a unique sensitivity to the suffering of the migrant and the duty to welcome him. Let us remember the psalm of the canals of Babylon (Ps 136), where, longing for Zion, the exiles lament the impossibility of singing the Lord's song in a foreign land. Let us remember the book of Tobias; a pious Jew deported to Nineveh, who remains faithful to God in the land of his banishment.

In this scenario, it is not strange that, upon returning from exile to live in the promised land, a sensitivity is cultivated to give a generous response to those who now find themselves as immigrants in the land of Israel. In this regard, it is possible to identify significant literature in which an ecumenical and welcoming perspective is promoted, where the migrant is seen as a blessing and a possibility for salvation, highlighting the books of Ruth, Jonah, and Job.

The book of Ruth, for example, presents as a model of virtue an immigrant woman, a Moabitess and widow, who faced forced migration due to famine and

¹ in brackets, because although Israel claims Canaan as its rightful land, in fact, looking well at history, none of Israel's ancestors were born in the land of Canaan, Abraham came from Ur, when Isaac was born Abraham had no land ownership, Jacob's children were born in Haram, and the following 10 generations were born in Egypt.



who accompanies her mother-in-law back to Israel. God appears in a very discreet way in this book; everything is very sensitive, rich in cultural elements and knowledge of what is human. The setting is the life of the field, the harvest, the seed, the workers, the strategies of Naomi followed meekly by Ruth. This foreigner became a model of a strong woman, faithful and of faith, the bearer of blessing for the house of Israel, entering into the genealogy of David and Jesus.

2.2 Hospitality: The welcoming and hospitality to migrants are criteria for salvation. In contrast, the lack of hospitality provokes God's judgment, from the first pages of the Bible to chapter 25 of Matthew, where the blessing is pronounced on those who promoted hospitality "Come, blessed ones, for I was a stranger, and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35), and the judgment against those who deny hospitality to the migrant "I was a migrant and you did not welcome me." Many biblical accounts attest to the terrible consequences of denying welcome and hospitality to immigrants, as, for example, the case of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), of the Benjaminites who violated the protocol of hospitality (Judg 19-20), and of the Pharaoh of Egypt, who tried to take possession of Sarah and was wounded with great plagues (Gen 12:18). The immigrant is blessed and protected by God; to violate his dignity and deny him welcome is an irreparable offense and provokes the sensitivity and God, who does not let it pass unnoticed.

The hospitality cultivated by all the peoples of the ancient East, to which migrants passing through, traders, nomads, empire officials, refugee slaves, etc. resorted, guaranteed the traveler lodging and sustenance, so as to ensure ample security of his life in inhospitable regions, in order to maintain the integrity of his body for as long as he needed hospitality or proved himself worthy. It is no wonder, then, that there is a lack of rules about hospitality in the Old Testament. Hospitality was a natural thing, an unwritten law that obeyed precise principles. "I was a stranger and homeless, and you took me in" (Mt 25:35) is one of the New Testament formulations that summarizes a reality common to the biblical universe.

2.3 God is the defender of the migrant: God loves the migrant and unreservedly expresses his prohibition against harassing and oppressing the migrant, saying: "If you oppress them, and they cry out to me, I will surely answer their cry. My anger will flare up, and I will cause you to perish by the sword" (Ex 22:23); "Do not oppress a poor, needy wage earner, be he one of your brothers or a migrant living in your land, in your city. You shall pay him his wages each day before the sun goes down because he is poor, and his life depends on it. In this way, he will not cry out to the Lord against you, and there will be no sin in you" (Deut. 24:24-25).

God loves the migrant: "He pleads the cause of the fatherless and the widow, but he loves the migrant, providing him with food and clothing. Therefore



you shall love the migrant, for you were once migrants in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:18-19). Migrants are God's favorites, and God is the migrants' refuge.

The experience of migration: "you know what it is to be a migrant"; and the knowledge of God's love, who freed his people when from migrants they were treated as slaves, are two fundamental motivations to love the migrant. In the period of slavery in Egypt, Moses experiences that the Lord is a God sensitive to the pain of those who fell into slavery (Ex 3:7). The experience of slavery is transformed by God's liberating action and is institutionally anchored, as it were, in the manifestation at Sinai. The new people of the covenant become the model of a free people (Ex 20ff) in possession of a given land, in which also the "foreigner" has the right of residence and full citizenship because the Lord is the guardian of the migrants (Ps 146:9).

2.4 Itinerancy: To know oneself being in transit as the awareness that life on earth is temporary. Every human being is in transit on earth, as a pilgrim, an itinerant, on a journey of human, spiritual, and relational maturity. God said, "The land is mine, and you are for me both immigrants and guests" (Lev 25:23b); the awareness of this anthropological dimension, as *homo viator*, implies a whole spirituality, present in the psalms: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and hear my supplication; do not ignore my tears, for I am a migrant before you, as were all my ancestors" (Ps 39:12). The psalmist knows that God does not resist the supplication of the migrant, and he uses this certainty to raise his supplications to God, in the assurance that we are itinerant in this world, we do not have our permanent dwelling place here, but we are journeying toward the definitive homeland.

In Eph 2:15-19, Paul highlights the power of Christianity in the integration and acceptance of the difference in the community, stating: "Now you are no longer strangers without the right of citizenship, but fellow citizens with the saints and relatives of God. But, also, the feeling of being a Christian and of foreign consequence is emphasized in Heb 11:13-16; 1 Pet 2:11 "beloved, I exhort you as to pilgrims and strangers." In this same vein, the letter to the Philippians in stating that: "Our homeland is in heaven" (Phil 3:20), makes a direct appeal for solidarity and sensitivity to migrants because faith must make us aware that this life is a passage, a pilgrimage, and that the human being is by nature itinerant and on the way to his ultimate goal.

2.5 Communion in diversity: Expression of the inclusive character of Jesus' mission in announcing the good news of the kingdom. In this sense, it is very illuminating concerning immigrants and refugees what Paul said to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus" (Gal 3:28) and to the Colossians: "in this new order of life, there is no longer any difference between Greek and Jew, circumcised and



uncircumcised, barbarian and citizen, slave or free, but Christ is all in all!" (Col 3:11). The letter to the Ephesians addresses the Greeks and Romans who were welcomed into the Christian community, initially composed only of Jews, to these Paul says, "You are no longer migrants or sojourners, but fellow citizens with the people of God!" (Eph 2:19), and to the Philippians, Paul affirms that our faithful citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). These Pauline letters help us understand Christ's message's most authentic meaning and implications in a multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious world.

Still, in this perspective of communion in diversity, the Jerusalem Council was a significant event of openness to diversity and universality, proper to Catholicism (Gal 2:11-16), because it was able to resolve a fundamental conflict between the community of Christians coming from Judaism and those coming from other faiths, traditions, and nationalities. The disputes were attributed to the influx of migrants, conversion of people of different creeds, culture, language, and origin from the Jews. Paul, unlike the conservatives, expresses his admiration and appreciation for the promise of salvation to all humankind and urges Christians of Jewish origin not to resort to their privileges, making others feel as if they have no merit. In Christ, there is communion in diversity because, in Him, we all form one body.

Conclusion

The Scalabrinian mission is based on God's Revelation, His Word, and Christ's Incarnation, who became a migrant. John's expression that the Word became flesh is beautiful, literally translated, "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" (Jn 1:14). The deep love of God inspires our mission, father and protector of migrants, having Christ as a model of one sent to proclaim universal salvation and his divine Spirit as the driving center of every creative action together and with migrants and refugees. Following the Master's example, the Scalabrinian mission must "break down the walls that divide" because, in Christ, diversity generates communion. The primacy of the protagonism in the Scalabrinian mission must be attributed to the migrants; they are the ones who form us and perfect us in the mission. It is up to us to always highlight the richness of cultural diversity for the formation of a Church "community of persons from various peoples and nations." For us, the migrant is a bearer of blessing, a pre-announcement of new heavens and a new earth.

To consider and feel ourselves to be all "foreigners" would help to understand the other in the totality and complexity of his or her person, without reducing him or her to the problems attributed to him or her. Today, our greatest challenge is to articulate truth and otherness in the sense of communion, intercultural listening, and encounter, not exclusion, arrogance, and self-sufficiency.



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