

**Second Sunday in Ordinary Time - B**  
**World Day of Migrants and Refugees**

St. Helen's Church

15 January 2012

Dear brothers in the priesthood, dear Sisters and dear friends in Christ:

***Introduction***

Today the Church throughout the world is celebrating the 98<sup>th</sup> Annual Day of Migrants and Refugees: those many people who have to face “the difficult experience of migration in its various forms: domestic or international, permanent or seasonal, economic or political, voluntary or forced.”<sup>1</sup> Migration is an opportunity for all of us to emphasize the unity of the human family and the values of acceptance, hospitality and love of neighbour. The Lord has gathered us here this evening to join our migrant brothers and sisters, in prayer and reflection, and to build awareness, in the ecclesial community and public opinion, regarding the needs and problems, as well as their contributions to the Church and society.

I am especially grateful to the Scalabrini Fathers here at St. Helen's, and at Our Lady of Sorrows and at Our Lady of Fatima parishes for their faithfulness to their charism of accompanying, supporting, and defending migrant peoples in our Archdiocese. But my gratitude also extends to all the priests and Sisters – and especially the Carmelite

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for the 2011 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

Missionary Sisters – as well as the many selfless volunteers who have made ministry to migrant peoples in our Archdiocese a priority in their apostolic endeavours. Particular thanks are likewise due to Evelyn Vollet, Director of the Archdiocesan Office of Service and Justice and Lindseigh, her assistant. Like so many of you, they are tireless in ensuring that we take to heart in our daily life the Lord’s words: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35).

We live in a province and country which, from their origins, have welcomed immigrants and refugees from nearly every country on earth. Today, more than ever before, our Archdiocese, in the rich mix of people from different nations and cultures, reflects the beauty of the Church which is truly Catholic. A concrete sign of our catholicity is that fact that Holy Mass is regularly celebrated in 20 languages in the Archdiocese. We are truly thankful for the many blessings that migrants and refugees bring to our local Church: their unshakeable faith in God, often tried in difficult situations in their homelands, their deep religious fervour expressed in the different popular devotions that colour our religious life with traditions from other regions of the Catholic Church, and their willing generosity to help others who are still in the process of coming to the Lower Mainland.

Besides those who come to Canada as to a new homeland, there are others who are here for a shorter stay. For that reason they deserve our

attention and respect even more. Increasingly we are now welcoming migrant workers who come here as temporary workers, and many of them are particularly vulnerable to injustice as well as challenges to practising their faith. A significant number of these temporary workers are women, who do domestic work, help children and the elderly, care for the sick and work in the hospitality sector. In the case of all such temporary migrants we must work to ensure their just treatment and recognition of their human rights.<sup>2</sup>

***Jesus in Exile as a Refugee***

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Message for the 2006 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

During the Christmas season just concluded, the Church reminded us, by recounting the story of Jesus' birth and early infancy, that he himself knew first-hand the experience of being a refugee. Shortly after his birth, Joseph was forced to leave for Egypt by night, taking the Child and his mother, Mary, with him, in order to flee from the persecution of King Herod (cf. Mt 2:13-15). The Holy Family is, therefore, "the model, the example and the support" of all migrants and refugees of every age and every country, of all those of any condition who, compelled by persecution or need, "are forced to abandon their homeland, their beloved relatives, their neighbours, their dear friends, and move to a foreign land."<sup>3</sup> In this experience of the Family of Nazareth we can catch a glimpse of the painful condition of all migrants and refugees. This is a condition and situation known to the Lord himself.

### ***Gospel***

Today's Gospel narrates the call of the first disciples as recorded by John the Evangelist. It is a forceful reminder that people are drawn to Jesus and are called by him because others point the way. They share in Jesus' work of being his hands and his voice for others.

Think of John the Baptist. He had his own followers who held him in high esteem as a great prophet. But John knew that he was only a

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<sup>3</sup> Pius XII, *Exsul familia*: AAS 44 (1952), 649.

messenger who was to prepare the way for One greater than he was. And so, one day, “as he watched Jesus walk by,” he shouted out to his followers: “Look, here – and not at me! – is the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:36).

John had a role to play – and that was to lead others not to himself but to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. He was to point out the Messiah to others. He was Jesus’ voice, but his hand always indicated his Master. The Baptist’s followers left him for Jesus – and he was glad!

And look, too, at what happened when the first disciples followed Jesus. They became excited by the Lord’s presence, and one of them, Andrew, then called Simon, his brother, to join the group of followers. What does this tell us? Jesus had need of others in his ministry. Here the Gospel shows that both John the Baptist and then Andrew brought others to him so that they could “abide” or stay with him, learn from him, and then later be sent out to preach on his behalf.

Is this not what we are called to do with others, and perhaps especially with newcomers in our midst? We are to go out to them and bring them to Jesus. “Each one of us . . . is called to witness to the Gospel, with greater concern for those brothers and sisters who, from other countries and for various reasons, have come to live among us.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, Angelus (18 January 2009).

The Church needs you, dear friends, and is counting on you. You play a very important role in the Church's mission of evangelization. "Coming from different cultures, but all united by belonging to the one Church of Christ, you can show that the Gospel is alive and suited to every situation; it is an old and ever new message. It is a word of hope and salvation for the people of all races and cultures, of all ages and eras."<sup>5</sup> You must, of course, present this Good News taking into account the different social and cultural situations you encounter and the unique difficulties of each one as a consequence of his or her condition as a refugee, immigrant or temporary migrant worker.

Our time is marked by endeavours to efface God and the Church's teaching from the everyday life. Doubt, scepticism and indifference are creeping in everywhere, seeking to eliminate the public visibility of the Christian faith by confining it merely to worship within our churches.

Because of this situation in our country, migrants who have known Christ are sometimes persuaded to consider him no longer relevant to life in their adopted homeland, and to leave behind the practice of their faith. Having grown up among people marked by Christian faith, they often, unfortunately, do not find either the support or welcome in our midst. This forces us to face up to the challenge of helping migrants

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<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for the 2008 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

keep their faith firm even when they are deprived of the cultural support that existed in their country of origin. It seems to me we must devise new and more effective pastoral approaches, as well as methods and expressions, so that the new arrivals to our Archdiocese will maintain and deepen the faith they had when they arrived.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Message for the 2012 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

But if our main concern is with those who share the Catholic faith, we cannot fail to see that the migration of so many people to the Lower Mainland is also “a providential opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel.” For the many men and women from various regions of the earth, above all from Asia, who have not yet encountered Jesus Christ or know him only partially, “it is necessary to find adequate ways for them to meet and to become acquainted with Jesus Christ and to experience the invaluable gift of salvation which, for everyone, is a source of ‘life in abundance’ (cf. Jn 10:10).”<sup>7</sup>

### ***What Should We Do?***

If we ask, “what should we do?” the answer is straightforward. As individuals and as parishes we should pay special attention to migrants and refugees by accompanying them with prayer, solidarity and Christian charity, by receiving gratefully the cultural and religious gifts they bring, as well as by fostering initiatives that promote respect for the dignity of every human person, the safeguarding of the family, and access to dignified housing and to work. Let us never forget that migrants and refugees possess fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for the 2012 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 62.

Jesus' words resound in our hearts: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35), as does the central commandment he left us: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind, but together with love of our neighbour (cf. Mt 22:37-39).

### ***Conclusion***

It is my prayer that this World Day of Migrants and Refugees will be an incentive for all of us – priests, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful – to live fraternal love to the full, in the conviction that any one who needs us and whom we can help is our neighbour.<sup>9</sup>

This commandment of love – as we well know – is nourished when disciples of Christ, united, share in the banquet of the Eucharist which is, par excellence, the sacrament of brotherhood and love. And just as Jesus at the Last Supper combined the new commandment of fraternal love with the gift of the Eucharist, so we who want and are striving to be his "friends," following in his footsteps and sustained by his grace cannot but dedicate ourselves to the migrants and refugees entrusted to us. In this way we shall comply with St. Paul's admonition: "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

And may the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of acceptance and love, help us to serve her Son by welcoming every stranger in our midst!

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 15.

Amen.

\_J. Michael Miller, CSB  
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