

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

St. Patrick's Church

21 January 2018

Dear brother priests and deacons, consecrated women and men, and dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Introduction

Today, although a week later than in the rest of the Church, our Archdiocese is celebrating the World Day of Migrants and Refugees. In our thoughts and prayers we remember those many people who have faced, or are facing, the experience of leaving their homeland to a new home: whether permanent or seasonal, whether for economic or political reasons, whether voluntary or forced by circumstances. As well as the many immigrants in our own Archdiocese, we cannot forget today the millions of refugees around the world, especially those in Iraq and Syria, the Congo and Sudan, and the vast numbers of Rohingya, who have had to leave their homes because of violence, terror and religious persecution.

Sadly, there is widespread indifference in the face of these tragedies, which is a dramatic sign of the loss of that sense of responsibility and solidarity for our brothers and sisters, on which every society is based. As believers, it is always necessary to see the human face of migration.

Gratitude to Those Who Welcome Refugees and Migrants

Here in Vancouver I am especially grateful to the Scalabrini Fathers and the lay Scalabrinians, under the direction of Father Richard Zanotti, for their faithfulness to their charism of accompanying, supporting, and defending migrant peoples in our Archdiocese.

My gratitude also extends to all the other priests and the Sisters, as well as the many selfless volunteers, who have made ministry to migrant peoples in our local Church a priority in their apostolic endeavours. You are, all of you, tireless in ensuring that we strive to put into practice in our daily life the Lord's own words: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35).

I encourage you to carry on generously with your ministry, and to continue to commit yourselves to working with refugees and migrants who find themselves in conditions of need and marginalization, on the peripheries of our society. May they find in you brothers and sisters who love them with the same love that Christ has for the marginalized, he who himself experienced being a refugee in Egypt. Continue to bend down and lend a helping hand to all those who are in need, without counting the cost and without fear, but rather with tenderness and with understanding.

Gifts Migrants Bring to Our Local Church

It is so important that we appreciate that the migrants and refugees

who come to us come as a gift, a gift from God. It does not take long to discover that they do not arrive empty-handed. “They bring their courage, skills, energy and aspirations, as well as the treasures of their own cultures.”¹ In this way, they enrich the lives of our parishes and communities. To know and to welcome newcomers means to open ourselves without prejudice to their rich diversity, to understand the hopes and potential of those who are newly arrived as well as their fears and vulnerabilities.²

Dear refugees and migrants: thank you for the many blessings that you bring to our local Church: your deep faith in God, often tried by persecution or situations of hardship in your homelands; your religious fervour expressed in the different popular devotions that enrich our religious life; and your willing generosity to help others who are still in the process of migrating.

And so, today, we give thanks to the Lord that our local Church is now home to so many people from different nations, ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Dear friends: your presence enables all of us to appreciate what it means to say we are the “Catholic” Church. Ours is, quite

¹ Francis, Message for the 2018 World Day of Peace, 3.

² Cf. Francis, Homily (14 January 2018).

literally a community without frontiers. We are blessed to welcome here “every nation, race, people, and tongue” (Rev 7:9).

No one is a stranger in the Christian community or in a parish family, for we all form one Body, one Church where every person is precious. The worth of a parish community “is measured by the way it treats the life and dignity of human beings, particularly when they are vulnerable,”³ as are so many of our refugees and immigrants.

Challenge to Host Country

Those who come to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia are forced to change some of their most distinctive characteristics, and those who welcome them are also forced to change. It is up to us to experience these changes in a positive light, as opportunities for genuine human, social and spiritual growth. We all have to work to ensure that the inevitable integration into Canadian society will be the source of mutual enrichment, and not allow discrimination, racism or extreme nationalism to colour our relations.⁴

Admittedly, it is not always easy to accept the traditions of other cultures, to put ourselves in the shoes of people different from us, to

³ Francis, Message for the 2017 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

⁴ Cf. Francis, Message for the 2016 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

understand their thoughts and their experiences. As a result we often refuse to encounter the other and raise barriers to defend ourselves. Local parish communities are sometimes afraid that the newly arrived will disturb the established order, will take away something they have long laboured to build up. And the newly arrived also have their fears: they are afraid of confrontation, judgment, discrimination, and failure.

Having such fears on both sides is not itself sinful. The sin is to allow these fears to determine how we act and welcome. The sin would be to compromise respect and acceptance, to feed hostility and rejection. The sin is to refuse to encounter the other, the new neighbour. It is to ignore the fact that this a privileged opportunity to encounter the Lord in other persons who are God's children.⁵

Hospitality to the Stranger

Each of us is responsible for his or her neighbour: we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Concern for fostering good relationships with others and the ability to overcome prejudice and fear are essential ingredients for promoting what Pope Francis calls a "culture of encounter, in which we are not only prepared to give, but also to receive from others." Hospitality is a two-way street. It entails both giving and

⁵ Cf. Francis, Homily (14 January 2018).

receiving. “Welcoming others means welcoming God in person!”⁶

The host must welcome the stranger, but likewise the stranger must welcome the host. Otherwise, we build ghettos, just living side-by-side and not with one another. That’s why, although we frequently worship with our own group, whether ethnic or linguistic, we must make efforts – as we are doing today – to pray with others in our parish communities as an archdiocesan family.

Today’s Gospel

Before concluding this afternoon’s homily, let me just say a word about today’s Gospel.

The first words of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel tell us that Jesus said “believe in the good news” (Mk 1:15) What is this “good news”? Is it what is contained in the four Gospels? Or is it information about God or Jesus? Not really.

Here the “good news” refers to Jesus himself. He is the Good News who has come in the fullness of time. Through him, God is speaking, revealing that he loves us, and that he has entered into our history and into the life of each of us.⁷

⁶ Francis, Message for the 2016 World Day of Migrants and Refugees.

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, Meditation during the First Congregation of the 13th Ordinary

Since the “Good News” is Jesus Christ, the message and the messenger are the same. He proclaims the “Good News” not just by what he says or does, but by who he is.⁸

“To believe in the Gospel” is not, therefore, simply to accept what is written in the four Gospels, but to entrust oneself to Jesus, to enter into a personal relationship with him who is alive. Now. In our own lives. Jesus is the Good News for each one of us personally, individually.

Conclusion

As we continue our Mass, let us pray that, like the disciples whom Jesus called to be with him, we too will become “fishers of people” (Mk 1:17) who go out to welcome and defend the dignity of the refugees and migrants who come to us with the face of the Lord, he who now comes to us in this Eucharist.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

Synod of Bishops (8 October 2012).

⁸ Cf. St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 13.