

MIGRATION FORUM 2009

Free Movement of Workers: Reality or Utopia? Reinforcing a framework to protect workers' human rights in a process of increasing international mobility of workers

“Let my people go”

1. Introduction to the theme

Caritas Europa is organising this Migration Forum for the 6th time. This year we are focusing on labour migration. Let me ask you: Why should Caritas Europa deal with migration and more specifically labour migration? Aren't we all migrants on earth? Aren't we all compelled to move to our working place? So what is the issue for Caritas dealing with this theme?

My dear friends, I think that Caritas is challenged and daily faced with migrant workers in its social services because there is an issue of justice, or should I say injustice. Indeed, labour has become a market and has developed its own rules and laws. As the labour market is one of the three pillars of social security and protection, we can't be surprised that human work is at the centre of social justice.

National and international legislations are trying hard to protect working people against abuses and injustice. The international financial and economic crises made and still make us aware that we are part of the global economy. The globalisation of our open world, especially in the field of economic development, has abolished national borders. Today there is a global competition on a global labour market. When someone is willing to work for less than the minimum wage, in most cases forced because of his/her weak legal residence position, this is not only a threat to his/her workers' rights, but also puts social justice and the social protection system under pressure. The old liberal rule arises again: who pays the best value for my offer?

But why are migrant workers so vulnerable? I think this is due to a divide that society and politics have introduced. First and foremost this is not only an economic decision but it is also backed up by societal and political decisions. The presumption that some workers are considered only as labour force and not as members of our society, is creating that gap. They are excluded from society and sometimes even from the law. Society and politics make those people invisible and sometimes inexistent and thus completely vulnerable to any abuse. If we consider economy as a means and not as the purpose of our society¹ we have to accept that society cannot produce wealth for the establishment at the cost of other people. The society loses part of its potential.

¹ “Insofar as they are instruments, the entire economy and finance, not just certain sectors, must be used in an ethical way so as to create suitable conditions for human development and for the development of peoples.”, Caritas in veritate (65), Vatican 2009

Introducing and implementing minimum wages in all countries would certainly help to alleviate poverty amongst those who are working hard to earn their life.

2. Biblical hints for today's advocacy

Let's have a look at the bible which retraces an important part of the history of salvation. In the Old Testament we are meeting the people of God at least twice in dramatic situations of oppression and injustice. Under the Egyptian Pharaoh they were slaves and had to fulfil their work or should I say the work of the Egyptian society under hard conditions. Under the leadership of Moses and inspired by the God of liberation they escaped from Egypt and this became their Easter night – which is part of our Christian tradition as well.

“When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go
*Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land
Tell ol' Pharaoh, Let my people go.*
Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said
Let my people go,
If not, I'll smite your first-born dead
Let my people go.
Go down...”

The people of God re-became master of themselves, masters of their destiny. We know of course that the story of the holy people became even more tragic after this liberation when they went through a hard time in the desert.

Once settled again as an own nation they were enslaved once more under Nebuchadnezzar and had to leave for exile in Babylon. This second big house of slavery has to be understood in a different theological way. This time God cannot be blamed for the misery of the people living in slavery in Babylon. The loss of faith and the loss of justice in their own people have to be decoded or understood as one cause for the new misery.²

The solution for this dilemma is still a matter of world history. Should there be a Jewish State? Should there be Islamic republics or Catholic governments? At its beginnings Christianity did not adopt that solution. In the early years of Islam however, the Prophet Mohammed did even leave his “land” to become the prophet of

² Rivers of Babylon by Boney M :

By the rivers of babylon, there we sat down
Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered zion.
By the rivers of babylon, there we sat down
Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered zion.
When the wicked
Carried us away in captivity
Required from us a song
Now how shall we sing the lords song in a strange land

all – not only all Arabs. Christians had learned from their predecessors in faith and from Jesus their leader that they should not build new boundaries but that they should live in the open society and in all the states and systems of the world.

3. Religious and humanistic universalism

Living your faith wherever you are born or settled is one expression of universality. Another expression of this universality is the concept of creation. All men and women are created by God – not only those who belong to the community of the faithful. And a third expression relates to the one common destiny of the human family. Everybody will be judged by the same Christ King at the very end. And the criteria for that judgment will not be a religious one but a moral one. “And the king will answer them, “I tell you the truth, just as you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me.” (Mt 25, 40). This universal framework was certainly co-promoting the tradition of human rights which rely on the same intrinsic conviction that all people are equal despite their religion, race or whatever orientation or conviction.

Whether we choose the Human Rights approach or the Christian universalism approach we have to consider all human beings as belonging to one and the same human family. So how can it be that state boundaries and legal boundaries and attitudes or economics are introducing divides and gaps within that one human family?

4. Leading questions for this forum

How much do we rely on labour migration? It seems to be obvious that Europe cannot survive without “new people” contributing to its wealth and development. Sometimes you have to understand things from their opposite perspective. This was marvellously done in the movie “Un dia sin mejicanos”. The “story” told is simple and frightening: what would happen if no Mexican migrants clean the streets, open the fast-food restaurants, and take care of the elderly and sick?

One might go one step further. What would happen if one day “migrant workers” would find a “new Moses” mobilizing “his people” to leave the houses of slavery? Do our politicians and our economic leaders only understand this “egoistic moral viewpoint”? Do we understand only “threat” as an argument? Wars are dissuading this silent power of mobilization and revolution. The world will not be changed by wars, but by peaceful revolutions. Gandhi’s non-violent salt march is one of the last examples of what power people do have if they unite under the banner of “peace and justice”. The fall of the Berlin Wall under the pressure of prayers and candles is another example. This is an issue for politicians. It is an issue for NGO’s and it is an issue for religions.

Our own religion is rooted in the story of people who left their land from slavery into the desert, because they believed that the desert would be more fruitful than the little income they received as slaves. Christians are convinced that the Kingdom of God began with Jesus Christ and is present wherever the love of God is lived

authentically. As Christians we are stateless people anyway. Our home is the Kingdom of God. And as members of the universal Church we can make His Kingdom visible in our sacraments. But this doesn't mean that we could contain God's love or action in our sacraments or churches. "Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission." (Lumen Gentium 1).

We call the people of God in the old alliance and in the new alliance pilgrims. Pilgrims are "migrant workers" for His Kingdom.

5. Some proposals

If we applied this scheme to our advocacy and political work we could:

- a) organise the "migrant workers" under our leadership
- b) threaten the people in power that "their" slaves might leave the land of slavery
- c) advocate for a minimum wage in all countries in order to establish an official bottom-line for "labour-", "salary-" and "social protection"-justice, because it is in OUR ALL interest – including citizens and migrant workers

My dear friends,

We have heard the song "let my people go" in ancient times. Let's listen to it in modern times and in modern versions.

We have heard the songs about the tears at the rivers of Babylon. Let's listen to the tears and sufferings of today's slaves.

We have seen the trailer of "Un dia sin mejicanos". Let's use this image to understand what "migrant workers" are contributing to; not only as "labour force" but as "new citizens" in a global world.

6. Concluding remarks

I hope and I wish that this Forum will become a place for exchange and for reflection. We are grateful to those who have made the preparations in the Secretariat and in the Commission of the Migration Forum. We are grateful to Le Quyên Ngô Dinh for what she contributed to this Forum as the former President of the Migration Commission and today as an expert to our Forum. She was a refugee and she understands her identity in that sense. A few years ago she was rewarded by the Italian Government with the Italian nationality. She accepted this "link" to a new nation as a means to work for and with refugees – mainly within the Caritas network. She is such a pilgrim of hope and confidence without a nationalistic anchor. We were happy to have her in our Migration Commission nominated by Caritas Italiana being employed by the Diocesan Caritas of Rome. This being in between became an obstacle to her and to Caritas Europa. Le Quyên Ngô Dinh, thank you for your flexibility above all borders and obstacles to be with us as "our" special expert. You will lead our thoughts and synthesise our work at the end and during our Forum.

Thank you and thanks to all of you who came to Poland for this meeting of Caritas in Europe.

May God bless our thoughts and exchanges in order to make them fruitful for his Kingdom.

Erny Gillen
President of Caritas Europa

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