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Our mission to, with and for migrants today: the context, the principles and the pastoral strategy

Thank you for the invitation to participate in the Conference. Those of you who know me know that the theme of 'migration' in all its forms has been very close to my heart for many years - ever since I left Ireland to study and work in the U.S. over 40 years ago. As you know over the last ten years I have worked with a wide variety of immigrant communities in South London - communities from West and East Africa and the Republic of the Congo, from Ecuador and Columbia but also from Goa, Kerala, and Mangalore and other parts of India and Sri Lanka. Earlier this year I celebrated Confirmation in Spanish and twice in Portuguese for the Spanish and Portuguese speaking communities in South London.

In this short input I would like to focus on three points – the context of our mission, the principles that inform our mission and the pastoral strategy that guides our mission.

The context of our mission

The Church's pastoral and prophetic mission to, for and with migrants always takes place in a specific social, economic and cultural context. Migration is and always has been a constantly changing phenomenon and whilst it is impossible this evening to give a detailed social analysis of our present day social context I would like to identify five key features that impact on our mission to migrants in Britain today.

First and foremost it is important to recognise that here in Britain and the rest of Europe we have moved from an era of industrialization to an era of technology and globalization. In the 19th century the Social Teaching of the Church developed in response to the suffering and exploitation that accompanied the industrial revolution. Now, however, we are truly in an era of globalization. Companies and markets are global, labour force is mobile and at the touch of a button millions of dollars can be sent from one side of the world to another. Many years ago Pope Paul VI in a document called Octogesima Adveniens spoke about the Church's responsibility to care for the casualties of social change. Migrants and their families are amongst those who suffer as a result of social change in our world today.

Secondly, this year we have experienced major crises in two of the key institutions that manage our economy; a crisis of credit in our financial and banking system and a crisis of confidence in our Parliamentary system. The implications of the recession for migration are still unclear but already we have seen a slow down in construction and rising tensions between British and overseas workers. The crisis of confidence in Parliament and the ensuing results of the recent European and local elections have created a vacuum of leadership within the main political parties with regard to migration. In that vacuum the Church has I believe an important role to play at local and national level.

Third, we live in a world still marred by poverty and conflict with the result that millions and millions of people throughout the world are still forced to leave their home, their families and their countries simply to survive. Our concern for those fleeing persecution, conflict and deprivation is rooted in our concern for all who suffer throughout the world. Migration is an international not just a domestic issue -an issue that is closely linked to international development and peace.

Fourth, the introduction here in Britain of the Points Based system has already affected the pattern of immigration into the U.K. from outside the E.U. It seems to me that national interest – economic and

social – is the driving force behind this system leaving very little room for the consideration of other factors. It is anticipated that fewer and fewer unskilled workers from outside the E.U. will obtain entry under this new system and there is a growing concern that the PBS generally excludes poor migrants (skilled and especially unskilled and soft skilled) as they have to show that they have a certain amount of money in the bank before they arrive.

Lastly, we are just becoming aware of the implications of climate change and the very real possibility in the future of environmental refugees.

Informed by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching

I would like now to suggest that our pastoral and prophetic mission to, for and with migrants is shaped and informed by six key principles of Catholic Social Teaching – principles that are shared by many people.

First, the principle of human dignity. At the heart of Catholic Social Teaching is the principle that every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ and is therefore invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. This fundamental principle shapes our ministry with migrants – forced or unforced, documented or undocumented. A migrant's legal status is quite separate from his or her human dignity. A human beings worth is defined and determined by their God given dignity not by the papers they do or do not carry.

Secondly, the principle of association and especially the right to have a family, to be a family and to live as a family. A family does not cease to be a family because one of its members lives overseas. The universal Declaration of Human Rights (16.3) recognizes the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society entitled to protection by society and the State.” Recognising and re-uniting families is therefore very important.

Third, the principle of participation and equality. Human beings have a right to participate in society and have access to the economic, social, cultural networks that are necessary for human flourishing. This principle inspires and shapes our advocacy work especially as migrants and those seeking sanctuary find themselves excluded from or have great difficulty in gaining access to the institutions and agencies that provide education, healthcare and housing – all basic human rights.

Fourth, the principle of preferential protection of the poor and the vulnerable. In line with the story of the Last Judgement in Mt. 25 our Catholic tradition exhorts us to stress the needs of the poor and the vulnerable. In the years after Vatican II the Synods of the Church and Conferences of bishop's (especially CELAM) began to spell out the Church's special responsibility for the poor stressing that the Church is always called both to a ministry of charity and a ministry of justice. Migrants are amongst the most vulnerable and exploited people in our world today.

Fifth, the principle of the common good. This principle presupposes the dignity of every person but also stresses the importance of the social conditions necessary for people to realise their full potential with dignity. These social conditions include ‘respect for persons’, the ‘social well being and development of the group’ and the ‘maintenance of peace, harmony and security’. This principle invites us to reflect on what it means to live in communion with others and to spell out what we mean by and how we can facilitate ‘social cohesion’, ‘integration’, ‘intercultural relationships’ and ‘intercultural understanding’.

Sixth, the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. The principle of solidarity constantly reminds us that we are one human family and that as human beings we are interdependent and rely on each other for all kinds of needs. Migration today is a global phenomenon that necessitates cooperation and collaboration. Our ministry to and for migrants necessarily involves working with others - with migrants and migrant associations, with governments and political parties, with trade unions and business groups. Subsidiarity on the other hand reminds us of the responsibilities and limits of government - local, national and international - and respects the natural groupings that form in communities. The principle of subsidiarity helps us to distinguish between the State, society and the community but also calls us to work with and

engage with government, with society groups and community groups. For many of our migrant communities the community or village group is very important.

A pastoral strategy inspired by the Gospel

The third and final point I would like to make is that our pastoral strategy is always inspired by the Gospel. I would like to suggest that the Gospel story of the Journey to Emmaus provides us with a very useful model for our ministry with migrants and migrant communities today. The story begins as the two disciples are leaving Jerusalem and going to Emmaus. They have been devastated by the recent events in Jerusalem – the arrest, the trial, the torture and the death of Jesus. He was the one they had hoped would have set Israel free. Like many migrants their hopes have been dashed by the reality of life.

In the story Luke describes how Jesus ‘comes up to them’ and ‘walks with them’. In other words Luke reminds us that all mission (and in particular mission to migrants) involves taking the first step. Notice how it is Jesus who approaches the disciples not the disciples who approach Jesus. Luke reminds us that our ministry to migrants involves first a ministry of welcome but then a ministry of accompaniment. Being a missionary Church means that we must be ready to reach out and cross the frontiers of language, culture, race and religion so that we can welcome others. Ten years ago when I was appointed to the parish of St. Thomas the Apostle in Nunhead in South East London I discovered hundreds of Latin Americans living in the area – in one street alone there were over 120 – all undocumented, all unable to speak English, all living in the private rented sector three and four to a room. When one young man died I suddenly realized that I needed to improve my Spanish if I was going to connect with that particular community. Again and again *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* exhorts us to exercise a ministry of welcome to migrants and migrant communities. The point I want to make is that welcoming means more than saying hello: it means recognising people, connecting with people, engaging with people and including people in our local communities and in our parishes.

The rest of the Emmaus story is a description of what accompaniment or walking with people actually involves. It involves listening – listening to the stories, the struggles, the anxieties and the hopes of the two disciples. It involves sharing – a sharing of wisdom, information and advice, a sharing of faith and hope and last but not least the sharing of a meal. In Luke’s Gospel the sharing of meals is very important and very often is the context for the proclamation of God’s inclusive love and forgiveness. By sharing a meal with the two disciples Jesus is treating them not as foreigners but as brothers. Finally, accompaniment gives way to empowerment as the two disciples are transformed and return immediately to Jerusalem with new heart and new hope. At the beginning of the story the two disciples see Jesus and treat him as a foreigner but through the warmth of his welcome, the wisdom of his knowledge and through the fellowship of a meal they gradually see him not as a foreigner but as a brother and they see that their mission is to bring hope to the community in Jerusalem. Likewise our own experience with migrants and their families teaches us that welcoming and walking with always lead to empowering so that as people grow in knowledge and skills, in confidence and in hope they themselves – individually and collectively - are inspired and empowered to reach out to and work for justice for their fellow migrants.