

Migration, in Asia Pacific perspective

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In our times, divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfilment of God's superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church," (Evangeli Gaudium 84)

Migration is part of human history; basically it is about leaving, travelling and arriving while crossing natural and/or political frontiers, but it is also - and in much more profound and affecting ways- about crossing and overcoming sociologic, political and even psychological frontiers and limits. It is a symptom of global transition and individual change connecting mankind's history and its future; about changing conditions of life and about the mix of peoples from all parts of the world gradually becoming one greater family. It is therefore about a journey of, with and to humanity.

Migration offers us an opportunity to better understand human diversity and the ultimate destination of humanity. As a social phenomenon migration reveals how much the Old Testament question "Where is your brother?" and the New Testament question "Who is my neighbour?" are pointing at still actual and further increasing responsibilities. As a herald of future societies migration strongly emphasises the need for global understanding in a deepened perspective of respect and search for human dignity, global unity and justice. Yet migration has also and more than once proved to be a divider and a generator of conflict. In a world marked by prevailing materialism and self-defence, it opposes in even more contrasting ways those who have and those who seek a future through migration. Pope Francis therefore reminds us about the Christian invitation to leave our search for comfort and to meet and welcome the stranger!

Migration is therefore also about a confrontation - not so much between the host and the migrant as this confrontation is in fact very often merely incidental - but much more about an ethical choice for humanity which both individuals and communities have to make. It is about the fundamental option to love one's brother and sister, the outcome of which always has and will to a very large extent determine mankind's future. Even if the world and the Church have known periods of darkness and mistakes, Pope Francis confirms in *Evangeli Gaudium* (11) that "Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world".

Moving from scattered perceptions to a holistic response

So much of the world's reactions to migration and migrants depend on the glasses with which we choose to look at the phenomenon. Migration is indeed too often looked upon through monocular glasses which contribute to picture the phenomenon as a movement bringing about those changes the world may well need but which in most cases it only wants when these changes are developed and proven valuable in terms of economic profit. Other single focus points tend to highlight the impact on longer standing habits and history as a threat for society and a mortgage on the stability and the balances global societies and nations have achieved throughout history. Another google eyed perspective pictures migration in a cause and effect relationship which leads to discussions on the 'failure of development' and on how to best respond to specific humanitarian issues including refugees, boat people, trafficked people, abused men and women....

Yet migration cannot be considered as a number of separate issues, as if it were just another societal or political issue: migration is an integral part of and to be considered in direct relation with many existing logics including ethical dimensions, politics, economic capacity, sociologic reactions and demographics. Migration has a deep and everlasting impact on humanity: it may in its impact well be analogue to the 16th century discovery that the earth was moving around the sun and not the inverse as had been thought up till then. The discovery did not change anything in the rotation and the movement of planets but it moved and revolutionized the minds opening perspectives and bringing about fundamental changes which were to further determine the future of humanity. This compares well to what migration is bringing and telling us: human mobility will not be stopped no matter how much we try to conceal these movements and humanity will need a revolutionary change in mentality and societal understanding to enable and envisage further growth and development. The Holy Scriptures and the Christian message to love our neighbour and welcome the stranger are in this of catalysing value.

The world is indeed in an irreversible process of increasing human mobility and mixing: the question is not if we want to stop this but rather how we wish to look at these very clear and undeniable signs of the times: as a dangerous threat for our well-being? As a political hot potato? As a ticking time bomb or as a potential for further growth and humanity; as a development factor or, much more humbly, as a design of an inscrutable divine fulfilment?

Rather than trying to provide fuller answers to these questions, it may be helpful to just acknowledge the fact that migration is amongst the strongest social drivers of this century – “an epoch making phenomenon” as defined in Caritas in Veritate - which is changing patterns of behaviour in a world marked by fading traditions and the coming into existence of new bench marks not always providing the same levels and feelings of security. The then emanating need fully confirms the ecclesial mission to accompany and guide humanity. Major questions today are therefore about the tools that truly serve mankind in making the right choices.

Asia, a region marked by fast changes

Before highlighting some possible paths and options, it may be useful to picture how much migration is already deeply impacting and fundamentally changing traditional society in Asia and how fast the ongoing changes will lead to new relations and new responsibilities at community, national and regional levels.

Asia is the continent where migration has become a structural, a social and an economic reality. Of the 235 million international migrants Asia displays the highest numbers in human mobility. Major reasons for this mobility can be found in the strong and very traditional craving for higher education, in the search for self-development through labour and thirdly, not so surprisingly, in family reasons. The following three examples may indicate how much these three factors deeply modify societal structures and cultures and how deep they impact on the traditional social tissue and cohesion:

- In China there is an annual growth of around two million new Chinese university students. A simple calculation shows that it would take two new universities per week to be built for an average of 20.000 students over the coming five years to effectively respond to this need. This explains an outward bound movement of young Chinese to other countries offering a chance for their further education, even far beyond Asia. It is obvious that their training in a different cultural environment will contribute to modify traditional culture and society upon their return home or – in case of stay after the period of studies- contribute to further changes in the host society. It is obvious that at least all of these students and many of their family members are to be understood as catalysers for change.

- Some 11 million Philippino's are at work as international migrants in nearly all countries in the world. This is to say that the economic growth of countries is partly carried by strangers doing the jobs often for lesser money while gaining more than what they would at home. There is an economic time limit to such a situation. Furthermore, the impressive number of Philippino migrants (20% of the active population) indicates a double fragility: the dependence on the job overseas and the slow but steady breaking up of social cohesion. The total annual figure of remittances (435 billion US\$) constitute not only a considerable amount of money but the related human reality shows an ever growing number of migrants in all societies and therefore an intensifying weaving of what is to become a new and more global social tissue.
- During the last ICMC Asia Working Group meeting we were informed that 25% of the marriages in Taiwan are of international nature with a nominal increase of some 5.000 per year. This means that by 2020, 1 million people in Taiwan will be defined by the so-called 'mixed blood'. While this may today still be negatively judged by the traditional community, reality is that these children will be growing up enriched by two traditions (and the opposition against their present situation) thus gradually contributing to generate a new tissue and cultural references which will define the bench marks for future generations.

These three examples may sufficiently indicate how much migration impacts on present and future societies: migrants studying in other cultural environments bringing these experiences home while also facilitating further and future economic contacts and development; migrants leaving families behind affecting the cohesion of their own society while contributing to the building of some other nation's economy; marriages and children born out of these marriages who – through love and the opposition they at times face - have a clearly different view on traditional cultures and cultural differences. A new social tissue is being woven at global level. It is of the greater importance for the Church to interact and accompany this movement.

Migration has a social cost to be recognized and countered in new policies.

The political world tends to prioritize the debate on development through remittances rather than giving the fuller focus on the social costs of migration and the development that may be built on countering these costs. Both remittances and social costs are indeed part of the same reality. Remittances have become a code word, key to nation's development. But very close attention should be given to how these amounts create new forms of dependency and slavery whereby migrating family members are at times supposed to accept human unworthy conditions for a salary higher than what can be offered in the country of departure. But this process is also changing traditional gender roles and impacts on family relations 'functioning' mainly over modern communication means. These realities do already contribute to the new benchmarks and reference points of the generations growing up in the conviction that migration and separation are a necessity, that children can be raised by neighbors or grandparents distant from the immediate care and the love of parents. How deep will emotional marks anchor in the broader human relations? (... ask the Vietnamese and the boat people now scattered over the world, the Indians organizing commercial society to escape traditional society and the young Philippino who doesn't dream to become a doctor or pilot or policeman, but who wants to be a migrant)

Migration affects family relations within the family, within the traditional picture of gender roles and in its economic sustainability through the vital support offered by a family member living overseas and considered to be the money maker for the material better being of the others. We have seen those money makers working in unacceptable conditions but doing it for family reasons. When asked if they would do it for themselves they decline, when asked how they see the start of their own family, they refer to their 'duty' to those left home, when asked for their vision on their own future they shrug

the shoulders. How long will this last? What does this family responsibility do to their mental health, how deeply does it affect their own integral human development; what does it do to their own concept of family and human relations? One could also wonder how long these appointed 'slaves or heroes' of the family will continue to be of support. The material gain obtained is nearly a guarantee that this responsibility will no longer be carried by the next generations. How much will we then see the further tearing apart of families to seek material comfort and avoid the plunge into new forms of poverty?

We defend the family as a corner stone, "a fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another" (Evangelii Gaudium 66) but how does that link with the concept of family ties forcing some of the family members to accept labour in remote locations and accepting labour conditions that are inhuman? How does that ideal coincide with the concept of some of the family members to work for the family instead of thinking of starting their own family? How can a disrupted family still be fully considered as an active agent for society contributing to community?

Many of these trends and challenges have been identified during the last AWG meeting. I e.g. recall Bishop Pibul Visitnondachai (Thailand) pointing at the fact that schools are changing faces because of poorly performing immigrant children and therefore draining more resources from the educational system. Or Bishop Lewis (India) who indicated how much the family as a unit is undergoing constant pressures. "Families have become smaller" he said, "ties with relatives have become weaker, there are fewer contacts, social and vocational mobility have increased, recreation has shifted outside the home, there are increased instances of separation, divorce and remarriage, parents are more and more ambitious for their children, status symbols have gained greater significance, information has increased manifold etc. All this takes a toll on the basic unit of the family leading to a host of social and economic problems such as drug addiction, suicide, alcoholism, child labour and abuse."

There are plenty of reasons to further study this reality, to network with civil society and political partners, to develop the care for families left behind - those decomposed and those recomposed- for visionary advocating and ensuring the necessary protection levels, not only for the individuals but for humanity as a whole.

We all recall how "Ecclesia in Asia" mentioned the worries of the bishops of Asia on the external influences being brought to bear on Asian cultures through media. They then identified some of the new patterns of behaviour as a result of what was then considered "over-exposure to the mass media" and which the bishops considered to be a threat for the "traditional values and in particular the sacredness of marriage and the stability of the family". Migration is impacting in even deeper ways on these social and cultural layers than media can; simply because - and unlike media- it cannot be 'switched off'. The foreign element in migration is no longer only an alien introducing new and different perspectives, it is also carried by Asians leaving their traditional environment and returning with different perspectives and understanding.

National and more traditional references will inevitably further disappear to be integrated in different cultural environments. What we will witness in the coming years is a further increase of moving people making the social mix even more intrinsic. New reference points will be needed as much as the development of better practices in integration, labour, social rights, their respective values and their transferability. Migration will further modify the relations between states and nations; affect relations within intergovernmental institutions; set new mechanisms and standards in the labour and employment market and generate new migrant labour rights!

Fundamental for the Church is the question how to position; how to 'translate' the Christian message, how to be "permanently in a state of mission" (E.G.23) and face "the challenge of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage" (E.G 71)

1. Towards new relationships

A first answer to the question 'how?' may be found in the very Christian tradition to encounter the other beyond who and what we are: "The Christian ideal will always be a summons to overcome suspicion, habitual mistrust, fear of losing our privacy, all the defensive attitudes which today's world impose on us. ... The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction" (E.G. 88) The encounter of the stranger, the welcoming of the stranger and the love of our neighbour are core paths to improvement. Translated into modern society, it means that there is a need to network beyond the converted and the well-known, to carefully choose, mix and mingle with the many ongoing efforts to help forge the global discourse and the shaping of future communities.

As already mentioned above, this challenge is fundamentally human and part of every one's genuine and just efforts to make the world a better place for their children and for the next generations. It is a simple reality and a very human ideal, part of human history. Yet this craving for a better life very often leads over material security and wealth which in fact has often proved to be a divider distinguishing those who have from those who have not. This may well explain why the poor will always be with us: not only as a reminder of our mission as Christians but also and equally important, as a reflection of our human condition and divisions. It furthermore explains the growing societal attitude which opposes to the presence of migrants from a self-defensive perspective. Finally it explains the migrant in his/her battle against poverty confirming a just craving for life improving conditions. This means that the very same ideal for development generates different and even contradictory behaviour and that the very human ideal to make the world a better place to live in is therefore also a ground for division and opposition. It may also help us understand that in our daily cravings, not so much the ideal is important but that the process is, which again reminds us of our mission as Church in the definition of Christ: "I am the way". Even if there are some timid signs that the Western world is gradually waking up from the illusion related to materialism, economic crisis and the further growing uncertainties and even fear are rapidly bringing populations and communities back to the self-defensive mode. What is true for the western world no doubt finds its reflection in the growing materialism in Asia and it will take major efforts to make the necessary changes in mentality.

2. Accompany the process of making liberating choices.

The many divisions and oppositions in this world raise important questions which will not only be answered by economic processes or by political parties but which call for a liberating message of a much higher and even spiritual level. The Church has therefore an important role in these tension areas to effectively accompany and guide all peoples to achieve a sea change in mentality and to contribute to renewed community building. Let me be clear: the Church is not to design the new society: that is not her work, but rather to accompany humanity in making the liberating choices.

The changing reference points and drivers in social cohesion including the modified family and community life are the heralds of a new type of community: a community less defined by proximity and stability and much more by opportunity and fluidity. The new forms of proximity are no longer

measured in 'walking distances' but in long distance communications. There is much at stake here, sociologically, psychologically, politically and faith inspired community building. The quality of our future communities will largely depend on how much this change through migration can be anticipated and accompanied to guarantee morality and justice; much less by how much of the change can be countered. It therefore seems important to pick the right battles.

3. Making choices calls first for analysis and understanding.

All this invites to further study the issues of concern and subsequently to develop proper action. The well-known social cohesion references are under siege; family unity is no longer regarded as a continuity or security but rather as 'a temporary option', community building is becoming much more flexible and develops new bench marks and reference points different from what we are traditionally used to. Communities are no longer living along traditional village rules and reference points. Even the frequently heard comparison of a 'global village' is only seemingly innocent as it leaves the impression that we know the global world through the village concept but a new kind of proximity, hardly comparable to the proximity that contributed to the village rules of earlier days has come into existence.

Statistics and analyses show that many migrants in the Asia region work in low skilled, low wage and low security jobs. Starting from these facts the Church traditionally acts in charity upon the many abuses, the need for care and protection of victims but the insufficient understanding of the many symptoms pointing at the profound changes in social cohesion calls for more and better analysis. While much of the analysis is developed by all kinds of actors including non-faith organizations and institutions, the Church has a specific dimension to be added: an indispensable moral viewpoint that helps configuring the new and changing social responsibilities.

4. The need to advocate

A fourth important answer to the question 'How?' is the need to be an advocate, to be a voice for the voiceless, but even more than this, to be a voice for the future, a voice of vision and wisdom. A Church which is poor and committed to the poor must not fail to make her voice heard, not only to defend the poor, but mostly to offer new perspectives. This is not just about lobbying to gain the one or the other point; it is about defending and advocating for a vision and an understanding of the value of life. Advocacy through networking and the many multipliers of the message is a strong tool yet insufficiently developed. It may e.g. be said that many of the recent efforts of civil society in Asia have provided a regional picture on the challenges related to migration and even enabled growing convergence between governments and other stakeholders in the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). This platform for policy makers and civil society is a round table of exchange to discuss practices and experiences; building new global partnerships and dynamics, questioning responsibilities and shaping global solutions. It seems essential for the Church to be present and intensely interact. The International Catholic Migration Commission has been the coordinator for civil society of this platform which today includes a network of over 800 partner organizations worldwide. Yet, what we most need is incorporating regional identity and testimonial support in building a case on the still too much ignored social costs of migration. Here again the Church can play a major role.

These four tools or pathways (global networking, human guidance and accompaniment, developing sound analysis and engaging in visionary advocating) are not to be considered as separate entities or work volumes but as a dynamic and interactive unit. Allow me to end this introduction to the debate with some of the recommendations the ICMC Asia working group has made and which I have chosen to organize according to the pathways indicated above:

1. Families affected should be an ordinary concern for the Church.

- Help families prepare for immigration and follow up on the families left behind.
- Contribute to contacts to be maintained between the migrant worker and the family left home.
- Orient return migration when jobs are available;
- Organize various activities (religious activities, sport, social activities, summer camps for children, shelter, educational services) where families left behind can find some support for their needs and meet to find support in each other.
- Organize to assist the returning migrant workers: help find jobs; help reintegration in family roles.
- Prepare for welfare services and counseling centers in dioceses
- Accompany children of parents working abroad in their specific behavioral issues and educational needs.
- Strengthen cohesion of communities on other values than material wealth only

2. Empirical studies on migration related issues including reintegration are to be encouraged and integrated in the training curricula.

- There are so many Catholic universities yet very few departments or faculties dealing with the subject. Invite these institutions to study these societal challenges and to contribute as an integral part of Church to develop useful societal answers.
- Help establishing data for empirical studies on reintegration
- Include the migration issues in the training of seminar students
- Educate migrant workers how to save money to start their own business in their own country

3. Advocate for legislation to protect migrant workers and better inform receivers of remittances of building ways to use this new income in escaping structural poverty.

- National legislation, worldwide frameworks and legal procedures that protect family unity in context of migration and mobility need to be supported through better relations with national governments and interaction in global processes.
- Advocate for the reunification and implementation of the Convention for the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families
- Promote the human rights of the migrant worker
- Advocate for the recognition of the educational levels obtained in other countries
- Existing social security conventions between countries should be extended to include the transfer of benefits and recognition of years of work and advocate upon the retirement benefits not to be lost when returning.

4. Global networking

- Use the media of your country and make a choice to contribute to the other global networks.
- The FABC to promote and support the small Christian communities. Need to be working with families for the promotion of Family. "The whole issue about children left behind is not only about material poverty but also about moral poverty."
- Support the International Catholic Migration Commission in its advocacy work

There is one line that came from that meeting which I wanted to keep for the last sentence; a line which has more to say than what I could bring to introduce the debate; a line of missionary value: a line of two words only: "Act prophetically".

