



The Holy See

MESSAGE FOR THE 85th WORLD MIGRATION DAY 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Jubilee which we are rapidly approaching is an extraordinary moment of grace and reconciliation. In a very particular way it also involves the world of migrants, because of the close similarities between their condition and that of believers: 'The whole of the Christian life', I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, 'is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father' (n. 49). On this World Migration Day, which falls in the third year of preparation for the Jubilee, I would like to develop several thoughts in the light of this observation, thereby helping to "broaden the horizons of believers, so that they will see things in the perspective of Christ: in the perspective of the 'Father who is in heaven' ... from whom the Lord was sent and to whom he has returned" (ibid.).

2. "The land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (*Lv 25:23*). These words of the Lord, recorded in the Book of Leviticus, contain the fundamental reason for the biblical Jubilee, which, for Abraham's descendants, corresponds to their awareness of being guests and pilgrims in the promised land.

The New Testament extends this conviction to every disciple of Christ who, as a citizen of the heavenly homeland and a fellow citizen of the saints (cf. *Eph 2:19*), has no lasting dwelling-place on this earth and lives as a wanderer (cf. *1 Pt 2:11*), constantly seeking a final destination.

These biblical categories have become significant again in the present historical context, which is strongly marked by substantial migratory flows and a growing ethnic and cultural pluralism. They also underscore that the Church, present in every clime, is not identified with any particular race or culture since, as the *Epistle to Diognetus* recalls, Christians 'live in their homeland, but as guests; as citizens they participate in all things, but are detached from all things as strangers. Every foreign country is a homeland to them and every homeland a foreign country.... They dwell on earth but are citizens of heaven' (5, 1).

By her nature, the Church is in solidarity with the world of migrants who, with their variety of languages, races, cultures and customs, remind her of her own condition as a people on pilgrimage from every part of the earth to their final homeland. This vision helps Christians to reject all nationalistic thinking and to avoid narrow ideological categories. It reminds them that the Gospel should be incarnated in life in order to become its leaven and soul, also through a constant effort to free it from the cultural incrustations that inhibit its inner dynamism.

3. God reveals himself in the Old Testament as the One who takes the side of the stranger, the side, that is, of the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt. In the New Law he reveals himself in Jesus, born in a stable on the outskirts of town, 'because there was no place for them in the inn' (*Lk* 2:7), and who had nowhere to lay his head throughout his public ministry (cf. *Mt* 8:20; *Lk* 9:58). The Cross, the centre of Christian Revelation, is the culminating moment of this radical condition as a stranger: Christ dies 'outside the gate' (*Heb* 13:12), rejected by his own people. However, John the Evangelist recalls Jesus' prophetic words: 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself' (12:32), and stresses that precisely by his death he will begin to 'gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad' (*Jn* 11:52). In following the Master's example, the Church too lives as he did in the world with the attitude of a pilgrim, working to create communion, a welcoming home where the dignity conferred by the Creator is recognized in each human being.

4. The ethnic and cultural differences found within the Church could be a source of division or disunity, if she did not have the cohesive strength of charity, a virtue all Christians are invited to practise, particularly during this final year of immediate preparation for the Jubilee. In the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, I wrote: "It will therefore be necessary, especially during this year, to emphasize the theological virtue of charity, recalling the significant lapidary words of the First Letter of John: 'God is love' (4:8, 16). Charity, in its twofold reality as love of God and neighbour, is the summing up of the moral life of the believer. It has in God its source and its goal" (n. 50).

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (*Lv* 19:18). In the Book of Leviticus this commandment occurs in a series of precepts which forbid injustice. One of them warns: 'When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God' (19:33-44).

The reason, 'for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' which constantly accompanies the command to respect and love the migrant, is not only meant to remind the chosen people of their former condition; it also calls their attention to God's action: on his own initiative he generously delivered them from slavery and freely gave them a land. 'You were a slave and God intervened to set you free; you have seen, then, how God treated migrants; you must treat them in the same way': this is the implicit thought underlying the precept.

5. In the New Testament all distinctions between human beings vanish when Christ breaks down the dividing wall between the chosen people and the pagans. 'For he', St Paul writes, 'is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility' (*Eph 2:14*). With Christ's paschal mystery there is no near or far, no Jew or pagan, no accepted or rejected.

For the Christian, every human being is a 'neighbour' to be loved. He should not ask himself whom he should love, because to ask 'who is my neighbour?' is already to set limits and conditions. One day Jesus was asked this question and he responded by turning it around: it is not 'and who is my neighbour?', but 'to whom should I become a neighbour?' that is the right question. And the answer is: 'anyone in need, even if he is a stranger to me, becomes a neighbour I must help'. The parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk 10:30-37*) invites everyone to reach out beyond the bounds of justice in the perspective of gratuitous and unlimited love.

For the believer, moreover, charity is God's gift, a charism which, like faith and hope, is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Rom 5:5*): as God's gift, it is not utopian but concrete; it is the Good News, the Gospel.

6. The presence of migrants challenges the responsibility of believers as individuals and as a community. Moreover, the parish is a privileged expression of community. As the Second Vatican Council recalls, the parish 'offers an outstanding example of community apostolate, for it gathers into a unity all the human diversities that are found there and inserts them into the universality of the Church' (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 10). The parish is the place where all the members of the community come together and interact. It makes visible and sociologically identifiable God's plan to call all people to the covenant established in Christ, without any exception or exclusion.

The parish, which etymologically means a house where the guest feels at ease, welcomes all and discriminates against none, for no one there is an outsider. It combines the stability and security people feel in their own home with the movement or transience of those who are passing through. Wherever there is a living sense of parish, differences between locals and strangers fade or disappear in the overriding awareness that all belong to God the one Father.

The importance of the parish in welcoming the stranger, in integrating baptized persons from different cultures and in dialoguing with believers of other religions stems from the mission of every parish community and its significance within society. This is not an optional, supplementary role for the parish community, but a duty inherent in its task as an institution.

Catholicity is not only expressed in the fraternal communion of the baptized, but also in the hospitality extended to the stranger, whatever his religious belief, in the rejection of all racial exclusion or discrimination, in the recognition of the personal dignity of every man and woman and, consequently, in the commitment to furthering their inalienable rights.

Priests, called to be ministers of unity in the parish community, have an important role in this regard. They 'are given the grace by God to be the ministers of Jesus Christ among the nations, fulfilling the sacred task of the Gospel, that the oblation of the Gentiles may be made acceptable and sanctified in the Holy Spirit' (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 2).

Priests encounter the mystery of Jesus, who gave his life to gather into one his scattered children, in their daily celebration of the divine sacrifice and are called to devote themselves with ever new zeal to serving the unity of all the children of the one Father in heaven, striving to see that each has his place in fraternal communion.

7. "If we recall that Jesus came to 'preach the Good News to the poor' ... how can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the Church's preferential option for the poor and the outcast?" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51). This question, which challenges every Christian community, highlights the praiseworthy efforts of so many parishes in neighbourhoods where phenomena exist such as unemployment, the concentration in inadequate spaces of men and women from different regions, and the degradation connected with poverty, the lack of services and insecurity. Parishes are frequently visible reference-points, easily identifiable and accessible, a sign of hope and brotherhood among the glaring divisions, tensions and outbreaks of violence in society. Listening to the same word of God, celebrating the same liturgies and sharing the same religious feasts and traditions help Christians of the area and those who are recent immigrants to feel they are all members of the same people.

In an environment which has been leveled and flattened by anonymity, the parish is a place of sharing, fellowship and mutual recognition. Instead of insecurity, it offers a place of trust where we learn to overcome our own fears; in the absence of reference-points from which to draw light and encouragement for living together, it offers a path of brotherhood and reconciliation based on Christ's Gospel. Situated at the centre of a reality marked by precariousness, the parish can become a true sign of hope. By channeling the neighbourhood's best energies, it can help the residents to move beyond a fatalistic vision of poverty to active, joint efforts aimed at changing living conditions.

Many members of parish communities are also actively involved in structures and associations for improving people's living conditions. As I express my deep appreciation of these significant achievements, I urge parish communities to persevere courageously in the work they are doing for migrants, to help promote a quality of life that is worthier of man and of his spiritual vocation.

8. When speaking of migrants, we must take into account the social conditions in their countries of origin. They are nations where people generally live in conditions of great poverty, which the external debt tends to aggravate. In my Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, I recalled that 'in the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among

other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations' (n. 51). This is one of the aspects which most directly link migration with the Jubilee, not only because migration is more intense in these countries, but especially because the Jubilee, in offering a vision of the earth's goods that condemns the exclusive possession of them (cf. *Lv 25:23*), leads the believer to open himself to the poor and the stranger.

In the past, the growing gap between rich and poor, which makes social harmony impossible, required that the balance be periodically restored to allow for an orderly renewal of social life. Thus a new form of equality was established by abolishing the mortgage on persons reduced to slavery because of their debts. The ordinances of the biblical Jubilee are one of the many remedies for the social imbalance caused by the perverse spiral ensnaring those who are forced into indebtedness for their own survival.

This phenomenon, which once concerned relations between citizens of the same nation, is made more critical by the current globalization of trade and the economy, involving relations between the world's States and regions. Lest the imbalance between rich and poor nations become irreversible, with tragic consequences for all humanity, the biblical precept must be translated today into concrete and effective forms leading to an appropriate review of the poor countries' indebtedness to wealthy nations.

I hope that the forthcoming Jubilee, as many people wish, will be a fitting occasion to find appropriate solutions and to offer the poor countries new conditions of dignity and orderly development.

9. 'The Jubilee can also offer an opportunity for reflecting on other challenges ..., such as the difficulties of dialogue between different cultures' (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51).

The Christian is called to evangelize by reaching out to people wherever they may be, to meet them with warmth and love, to shoulder their problems, to know and appreciate their culture, to help them overcome prejudices. This concrete form of outreach to so many of our needy brothers and sisters will prepare them to encounter the light of the Gospel and, by forging bonds of sincere esteem and friendship, will lead them to ask: 'we wish to see Jesus' (*Jn 12:21*). Dialogue is essential for a peaceful and productive society.

In view of the ever more pressing challenges of indifferentism and secularization, the Jubilee requires that this dialogue be intensified. In their everyday relationships, believers are called to show the face of a Church which is open to everyone, attentive to social realities and to whatever enables the human person to affirm his dignity. In particular, Christians, conscious of the heavenly Father's love, will heighten their concern for migrants, in order to develop a sincere and respectful dialogue aimed at building the 'civilization of love'.

Against this vast horizon of commitments, may believers always keep their gaze fixed on Blessed Mary, 'who accompanies the Church with her motherly love and protects her on her journey homeward until the glorious day of the Lord' (*Roman Missal*, Italian edition, Preface of the Blessed Virgin Mary III)!

With these hopes, I affectionately impart my Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 2 February 1999.