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SECULAR FRANCISCANS IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGES

THE SECULAR FRANCISCAN AND THE IMMIGRANT

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Introduction

For many centuries many people have been forced to live an exodus, the emigration from their land, and this problem still remains today as a real suffering for entire populations. Emigration therefore continues to be a topic of constant debate, which feeds more discussion than practical action. It is the paradox of our times in which globalization makes us say that “the world is a global village”, but in which nations are still divided, closed and hostile more than ever. Emigration and its consequence, immigration which is rooted in the opposition “between us and others” are increasingly causing a large number of internal conflicts. They are manifested in clashes between nationalities, ethnicities, political affiliations or religious beliefs, especially causing disadvantage to those who are persecuted in their country of origin, with consequent aggravation of problems in the countries of refuge. Unfortunately, people seem to have no memory of history and often refuse to learn from the past. It would be nice and constructive for everyone to be aware that they are pilgrims in the world, so as not to consider anyone as “different” because they belong to another nation.

Emigrant by nature

Since the beginning of creation, human being has always been ‘itinerant’, a ‘natural’ attitude that can be driven both by pleasure and forced by the need to set off on a journey to seek new spaces or new opportunities to improve one’s conditions of life. The Bible provides the greatest example in history of a migrant people looking for a permanent home! Man found himself free to live and move anywhere on the whole earth, and live wherever he wanted, because he understood that God had entrusted the whole world to him, confirming this entrustment with the seal of his blessing “...fill the earth and subdue it; and **have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth...” (Genesis 1:28). In this context, the term “**have dominion**” does not mean that man must abuse power over other creatures that have been transmitted to him, but must behave towards them as a wise and good administrator

who has been entrusted with the care of the whole Creation. This “gift”, part of God’s plan, makes humankind fully part of the very work of Creation! Here we are witnessing a divine invention of great originality, that is, of investing Man in an “integral participation” in human and creative life, entrusting him with the task of custodian and administrator of Creation, and to cooperate in spreading the Gospel message¹. However, one cannot ignore the fact that, sometimes, it is the vices of selfishness and jealousy that can change man’s behaviour, altering him from a good and stable administrator to a ferocious and constantly moving wolf. It should also be noted that the ‘man’s journey’ has often been caused by attitudes attributable to his ‘ego’ or to attitudes taken in response to the ‘challenge’ of the other. An example of this modality is found in the story of Cain and Abel. “Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4, 16). Also emblematic in this sense is the story of Abram and Lot, son of his brother. They set off towards the country of Canaan and there, for social and family reasons, they are forced to be separated and this leads Lot to choose another way for himself (see Genesis 12; 13). Among the many other stories of emigrants and emigration of which the Bible speaks to us, the story of the flight of Joseph and Mary with Child Jesus to Egypt is very relevant (Mt 2:13).

Even today our history is a story of emigrations and immigrations that continue to repeat, in various forms and ways, confirming that, over the centuries, the exodus of man never had an interval. This situation was and is caused by social, political or economic reasons. Of course, as Pope Francis says, “from that time forward, the history of God’s people – the history of the Church – has always been marked by new beginnings, displacements and changes”². After the two World Wars, due to the persistent civil wars in Africa and in Latin America, for some peoples the story of emigration is a scar etched in their hearts. Although many of them have been integrated into a specific society, this will never take away the pain caused by being forced to leave their homeland. For some, the arrival in a new country marks the dawn of a life full of new opportunities, while for others, it marks the beginning of an unjustified intrusion. Obviously, in any type of displacement or change, regardless of the reasons or motives that justify it, it will be impossible to evade the nostalgia for the home country and the pain of the wounds that this fact has caused in the persons involved. Sometimes, this nostalgia and these wounds can be made even more profound both by the utopia of ideologies and by those nationalist attitudes aimed at creating supremacy of one side over the other in an unequal confrontation that is generated between populations who have to live together in the same geographical space.

Humanity has always identified itself with belonging to a tribe, ethnicity, culture, religion, nation, etc. “Birds of the same feather flock together”! The fact of desiring to “defend” one’s identity must not be considered negative until this does not become a reason for the ghettoization of the other, a reason for considering as not belonging to the same “lineage”, with the constant attitude of refusal and limitation of those rights which are proper to them as human beings. Consequently, men and women are forced to walk and move in search of places where they can live their life with dignity in unity and in peace. “It is estimated that world-wide the majority of migrants today remain within their own nations, in some cases moving about on a seasonal basis”³. It is still there, in the countries of origin, that the social, economic and political conditions are so serious that compel the

1 Cfr. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, on the vocation and the mission of the lay faithful in the Church and in the World, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Roma, 1988, 15.

2 POPE FRANCIS, *Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia*, Clementine Hall, Saturday, 21 December 2019 [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana) documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.

3 STEPHEN FUMIO CARDINAL HAMAO, Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Instruction, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, (The love of Christ towards migrants) no.10; [www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/document/rc_pc; host.uniroma3.it/progetti/cedir/Eventi/Erga_mig.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/document/rc_pc_host.uniroma3.it/progetti/cedir/Eventi/Erga_mig.pdf)

emigrants to journey to distant countries, at the risk of their own life in the illusion of finding better living conditions.

Francis of Assisi and the unknown brother

In every human being there is an attitude of self-defence and a sense of fear towards the other, especially if the latter is a stranger. The reaction to these situations, if supported by poor knowledge, is that of not wanting to meet others. This attitude sometimes becomes a reason for repudiation and intolerance, causing the closure towards the newness of the other who is seen not as a gift but as a problem. The unknown, in some cases, is even considered as a danger. The history of the Israelites exiled to the land of Pharaoh confirms the drama of the fear of the human being towards the unknown.

Then a new king arose over Egypt, who had not known Joseph. And he said to his people: "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." (Exodus 1: 8-10).

The brother who comes from another nation is often seen as a stranger, an invader, an individual who can break down and put at risk our securities, those of the law, of the rules, of the culture, etc. Even Francis of Assisi experienced this 'fear' towards the other, represented, in his case, by the lepers of his time. He was not paralyzed by any fear, neither of ignorance, nor by the nausea of having to meet an 'unknown-leper'. Instead he opened his whole heart by recognizing the leper the right of identity as a human being who must never be denied the dignity that derives from being a creature of God. Also the meeting of Francis of Assisi with the Sultan is a reason for reflection to see how 'a meeting can lead to renewal'. Here Francis refuses the pre-judgment to see 'the other as an enemy' but puts himself in the attitude of considering him as a friend, a brother to meet, to listen, to embrace and to share with him the gift of friendship and peace. In this sense it can be said that 'the Poverello of Assisi' becomes 'a very rich man', a good and just man who understood that only 'the love of the other and for the other' is the fruit of a renewed relationship, which is stronger than the power of weapons. As Pope John Paul II said; "The challenge is to combine the welcome due to every human being, especially when in need, with a reckoning of what is necessary for both the local inhabitants and the new arrivals to live a dignified and peaceful life"⁴.

To lead the gospel life in our daily lives every Christian, as member of the Church and of the Order, can be aware of the importance of promoting "an authentic culture of welcome capable of accepting the truly human values of the immigrants over and above any difficulties caused by living together with persons who are different"⁵. We still have a lot more to learn from Francis of Assisi.

A Secular Franciscan in today's world

The Second Vatican Council and the Rule of OFS given in 1978 have made clear the role of the laity in the church and in the world. They recall all the faithful to the baptismal mission to which, without any exclusion, all are called: "They are in their own way made sharers in the

4 POPE JOHN PAUL II; Message for the celebration of the XXXIV World Day of Peace 2001, 13.

5 *Erga Migrates Caritas Christi*, no 39.

priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world”⁶. And it is in this context that all members of the Secular Franciscan Order, on the day of their Profession, are called to renew their baptismal promises. Thus they commit themselves to live the Gospel in the world according to the example and teachings of Christ, inspired by the *Writings* of Francis and following the *Rule of OFS*⁷. In their secular condition, the Secular Franciscans must therefore witness that the Franciscan charism and spirituality are lived according to the different aspects of life, such as family and work, in joy and suffering, with the presence and participation in social life, in the fraternal relationship with all creatures, up to the meeting with all, who are brothers and sisters in the same Father (GGCC art.12). The challenge generated by the rapid change and sometimes by the deterioration of the moral and traditional values of the family and the society, must involve every member of OFS to live authentically their identity as a Franciscan secular. This must be rooted in the Gospel of Jesus which continually invites them to the highest, visible and effective witness without ever forgetting that the mission entrusted to each baptized person requires a continuous search for the face of God in one’s brothers and sisters and in every situation of life. Jesus reminds us of this when he says that: “...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I **was a stranger and you welcomed me**, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt 25: 35-36). In all these situations, the coherence of faith helps and encourages us to see each one as brothers and sisters, to love them as we ourselves would like to be loved, in deepest respect for the Gospel commandment of love. An ethics of reciprocity can help us to find permanent solutions to the many discriminations and indifferences of our time. The world needs ‘*persons renewed in love*’ who are not afraid of getting their hands dirty by serving others, people who recognize that they have been called to live not for themselves, but for Christ and for the world.

Secular Franciscans are therefore called to “...commit themselves to a faith-inspired reflection on the Church, her mission in today’s world and the role of Franciscan laity in the Church”. (GGCC art. 14.1). In order not to frustrate the commitment of one’s mission in the world, each Secular Franciscan should never forget the fact that although he/she is called to live in an atheist world, wounded by the indifference of division and individualism, “baptism does not take them from the world at all, as the apostle Paul points out: «So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God» (1 Cor 7:24). On the contrary, he entrusts a vocation to them that properly concerns their situation in the world. The lay faithful, in fact, «are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others»”⁸.

OFS and the signs of the times today

The socio-political world seems overwhelmed by the flow of immigration statistics with the consequence of generating conflicting debates that do not lead to beneficial and lasting solutions. We are living in a time when, for some, God is not part of their life: a time in which the spheres of religion and politics are totally divergent, unable to formulate a dialogue of encounter and sharing of ideas that can help to seek and find, together, courageous and adequate solutions. The political, social and economic tensions of the world are intensifying every day and they become a real challenge for the members of OFS who are called to live their ‘secularity’ in a deeper sense of

⁶ *Christifideles Laici*, no 9.

⁷ Cfr. *OFS, Rite of the promise of Gospel life*, no. 31

⁸ *Christifideles Laici*, no 15.

witnessing by fixing their gaze on God and by being in solidarity with the needs of the world. This is a duty that must be faced with ‘*Franciscan sensitivity and creativity*’, always seeking new models, in accordance with the teachings of the Church and in coherence with the Franciscan charism. With regard to the pastoral care of the migrants, Church has always offered, and continues to offer, specific guidance. Beginning from the Apostolic Constitution *Exsul Familia*, by Pope Pius XII, published on 1 August 1952, to the many other documents produced by the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II, the Church has, “...worked out important directives for this particular pastoral work. It called on Christians in particular to be aware of the phenomenon of migration and to realise the influence that emigration has on life”⁹. The Church has always tried to face the phenomenon of migration with an evangelical gaze, based on the testimony of the “good Samaritan” who cares for the brother in need with love and availability of resources, inviting the faithful to approach every man as a brother among brothers!

In the pontificate of Pope Francis we are constantly reminded of the importance of taking care of migrants, a continuous challenge for all, both of the church and of the politicians. We should all be aware of the fact that “When we show concern for them, we also show concern for ourselves, for everyone; in taking care of them, we all grow; in listening to them, we also give voice to a part of ourselves that we may keep hidden because it is not well regarded nowadays”¹⁰. The Pope urges us to be close to the migrants, entrusting them to the protection of Our Lady and with this bond of affection, he introduced «*Solacium migrantium*» - (Help of Migrants) into the Litany of Loreto¹¹. With this insertion the Supreme Pontiff once again awakens the attention to the believing world on the mission of our times in which all the baptized must re-evaluate their testimony with a Christian perspective of inclusion. In this specific intercession to the Virgin Mary for all migrants and refugees, we are invited not only to prayer but also to concrete facts, that is, to help and to be close to all our brothers and sisters.

Secular Franciscans, who are called to participate in the mission of the Church in the world, must be inspired by the evangelical form they have promised to live, activating the most appropriate and concrete ways to implement and adapt the teachings of the Church to the reality they live. A careful look at the signs of the times can be of great help for the brothers and sisters of the Secular Franciscan Order in order to recognize the need to renew their vocation in the world, in the church and in the Order. It is really urgent to ask sincerely what it means to be a member of a fraternity: ‘who belongs to this fraternity of God?’, reflecting on Jesus’ provocative question ‘who is my mother and who are my brothers?’ (Mk 3: 33). Taking into consideration “...the present-day phenomenon of migration a significant «sign of the times», a challenge to be discovered and utilised in our work to renew humanity and proclaim the gospel of peace”¹² we realize that migration also forces to a diversified and complex religious restructuring.

The Church, through the Gospel, reveals us the identity of man as image of God, without any distinction of religion or race. In this perspective secular Franciscans can become protagonists in defending human dignity of all those who are forced to abandon one’s homeland. Thus they will

9 *Ergas migrantes caritas Christi*, no. 21

10 POPE FRANCIS, Message for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2019, 29 September 2019. www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_world-migrants-day-2019.

11 ROBERTUS CARDINAL SARAH, Lettera del Prefetto della Congregazione per il Culto Divino e la Disciplina dei Sacramenti ai Presidenti delle Conferenze dei Vescovi circa le invocazioni “*Mater misericordiae*”, “*Mater spei*”, e “*Solacium migrantium*” da inserire nelle Litanie Lauretne, 20.06.2020; press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bolletino/pubblico/2020/06/20/035.

12 *Ergas migrantes caritas Christi*, no. 14.

put into practice the charism “...seeking to deepen their values and choices for Gospel living...”¹³ by witnessing an evangelical life that manages to break down every frontier, knowing that “charity will necessarily become service to culture, politics, the economy and the family, so that the fundamental principles upon which depend the destiny of human beings and the future of civilization will be everywhere respected.”¹⁴

Conclusion

The simple historical fact that humanity has always been characterized by the phenomenon of migration, should in some way be a reason to accept, welcome and help the immigrant to become part of the new community he/she lives in. Unfortunately, in today’s world, diversity, modernity and the exclusive “*I*” that counts more than the inclusive “*we*”, have become a “form of life”. Consoling is the fact that many fraternities of OFS are doing several projects to help immigrants to integrate into the new society even though many challenges remain, also in the face of numerous countries where politicians adopt the “*free movement and free market*” with the consequent increase of prejudices and restrictions towards foreigners, still highlighting the barriers and hostilities against the so-called “*non-belonging*” to one’s own nation, tribe, language, etc.

13 OFS GGCC art. 8.2

14 POPE JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 2001, 51.