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Migration

Alan Hilliard

As a third level Chaplain today one is very aware of the increasing diversity in the student population. Among these there are many immigrants who have left their home countries and have seized the opportunity for education and advancement. They are very aware of the fact that this opportunity would never have been possible in their former homelands. The story of one particular student who spoke to me about his experience at the hands of traffickers and of crossing the Mediterranean in an open boat was made bearable by the touching way he talked about his life, his journey, his love for his homeland, his people and his family.

I told him about Saint Patrick and how he was trafficked and how he escaped back to his home country on a boat not unlike those who cross the Mediterranean today. He, like countless others today, was in search of a reasonable life that is free from torture and oppression. The student was enthralled by Saint Patrick or at least he was enthralled with the version of Saint Patrick we chatted about. He was grateful that he can call Ireland home and was deeply appreciative of the hope that Ireland offers him. I caught something of the spirit of Patrick in him when he expressed a desire to give back to this country that has given him so much. We have cloaked Saint Patrick in so much tinsel that we forget the power and dimensions of his story. Isn't it strange that the Irish Church began with a migrant and not 'one of our own'.

Originally this student was a member of the Coptic Orthodox Church but like many other migrants and in keeping with global trends he is now a member of a Protestant Church. The cosiness of established Churches makes many migrants feel like strangers. They continue to pray, they continue to worship, but they create their own spaces of welcome and expression. As a nation and indeed as a Church we said the right things when necessary but we couldn't look into the eyes of the migrant and meet the hope in their hearts. With a few notable exceptions we have failed those who were hungry to belong.

OWNING OUR OWN MIGRATION STORY

Pope Francis has befriended the migrant. Maybe he finds it hard to disengage from the plight of the migrant because he knows the migration experience. His parents left Portacomario near Asti, Italy in 1929. He was born to these migrant parents in Buenos Aires in 1936. As he grew older he was immersed in the stories of leaving the home they loved, the people they cherished and the culture they craved. He was also immersed in the story of loss because following the 1932 crash the family were thrust into poverty. Like most migrants they were without the support of cousins, in-laws and neighbours. His parents stood on that threshold of darkness, where everything they lived for and hoped for was taken from them. Yet within this experience they discovered that God was with them and God led them through this darkness to a place of new possibilities. The mind of God and their hearts were at one. Maybe one reason why Pope Francis doesn't forget the migrant is that he hasn't forgotten his own migrant roots. There is a particularly important lesson for Ireland. We too often don't embrace the story of our own emigration when we address the issues of immigration.

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THE FURROW

We can think that emigration and immigration are two different sciences, that one is a right and the other is a burden.

‘ERROR’

Ireland has seen some very positive pockets of response to the needs of migrants but at most levels the response to migrants lacks vision and direction. Over the last few years we have seen some Irish clerics pilloried because they are perceived to be ‘in error’. At this stage it is obvious that there is a league table in ‘errors’ as one great error among some in the Irish Church is the perception that pastoral care is solely about the provision of the sacraments. The teaching of the Church is clear; pastoral care includes the care of the entire human person. Archbishop Oscar Romero, a great human being who has been brought out of an ecclesiastical wilderness brings clarity to this matter:

There is a criterion for knowing whether God is close to us or far away: all those who worry about the hungry, the naked, the poor, the disappeared, the tortured, the imprisoned – about any suffering human being – are close to God¹.

PROPHETIC PRESENCE

The migrant has a lot to teach us about the world we live in. This is outlined in the Church’s document on migration; *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* (EMCC). The document tells us that the movement of peoples has a prophetic dimension which opens us up to the presence of God by surprising us and ‘by interrupting the regularity and logic of our daily life’ (Para 101). If a clearer direction is needed for the Church today it will not be found without prophetic interruptions. The migrant’s presence is prophetic as many situations they find themselves in bring attention to the wrongs and evils of the world. In short their situations are crying out for a new order.

If you journey backwards with the migrant you find situations where gangs and guns have more influence than politics or police. These are situations where parents are desperate to protect their child from certain death at the hands of violent people. With little choice they put their children on trains and boats and in the hands of traffickers so that they may have life. This journey into the life of migrants may also take you to places of modern-day slavery where people are working in squalor. They are paid a wage, but the owner of the factory provides housing which absorbs most of their salary. The journey may also bring us to see countries (even Ireland) that tolerate illegality and through complex systems of sub-contracting where people pay tax, receive pathetic wages and yet receive few or none of the benefits and supports that most of us consider to be the foundation of a civilised society. Even more sinister journeys bring us to parts of the world where traffickers harvest migrants’ organs selling them on to some of the most exclusive private hospitals across the world.

FAMILY

Present-day migration is tearing at the heart of the world and a lot of what the Church purports to represent. For instance there is a lot of debate about family at the moment due to the upcoming referendum: what is family? how do we protect family? Yet the needs of the global market are tearing families apart and we stand silent. As consumers we even benefit from this atrocity. The global market-place continues to separate families. The policy of numerous Governments promotes the exportation of people so that they will send home remittances to support their children whom they will meet as strangers in years to come. Between 2010 and 2013 an average of 5,000 people left the Philippines every day. I

¹ Griffin, Michael and Jennie Weiss Block (2013) *In the Company of the Poor; Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Maryknoll NY Orbis Books, pg.1

read what one person said about this experience: ‘Yes, we make it to the first world but we end up in its back yard’. These words could be uttered by families that are accommodated in Direct Provision in Ireland. The impact of these conditions on family life is unimaginable. Lest we forget, we are a people of the incarnation, we believe that God is crying out to us through humanity just as he cried out to us through his son Jesus. Though these ‘insecurities’ are associated with migrants we are all becoming more familiar with new levels of insecurity.

LANGUAGE AND LABELS

Language is powerful because it creates narratives. Narratives are stories that can give life or destroy life. The language of the world has boxed people, pilloried people, dehumanised people, offended and limited people. When we use language, labels, and narratives to make the person beside us out to the ‘other’ then we are on a slippery slope as a society and a world. Whether we are a Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Humanist, whether we are police, media, nurse, doctor or civil servant, once we label others to make ourselves feel superior to them we dehumanise them. Pope Francis is showing us that the way forward for the Church in this world is the language of brother and sister. The mission of the Church is to revert to this language even though the Church may be pilloried and castigated for raising the marginalised to the category of ‘equal in the eyes of God’. Furthermore, some agencies who act on behalf of the Church refer to people as clients and case-loads which is not the language of the Gospel. Surely this is buying into the very processes that dehumanise our fellow sisters and brothers.

LEADERSHIP

One African theologian said that ‘unlike experts, Christian leaders are both inspired by a vision of God’s future and grounded in the thick stubbornness of the now’². As a group of people who highlight the shortcomings of the current world order, migrants need someone to speak for them. Leaders are required who will challenge the conditions that have facilitated their entrapment. Fortunately Pope Francis is offering leadership on these issues. In summary, attention to the plight of migrants not only highlights the shortcomings of today’s economic order, it also helps us open the doors and windows of the Church’s mission to the world? Indeed it is the call to every Christian. It is a challenge to be embraced because Western Society is actively setting people and groups of people against one another and this is a cause of political, social and ecclesial concern. It is a sad aspect of western culture that it is anaesthetising the basic Christian message and is constructing a narrative that is destroying our Christian imagination. In the mind of God one wonders if we are become dull, boring and disinterested.

CONCLUSION

I have learnt a lot from immigrants that I have engaged with. Some in their journeys have stood in open boats on the Mediterranean and others have witnessed the murder and rape of their families in former homelands. I am fascinated by the fact that so many of them who at times felt life was slipping from their hands, never let go of God. These are today’s stories but aren’t they also the story of our National Saint? The story of migrants in every era relates one simple truth, that when the mind of God connects with the heart of humanity the Church is alive. Where this is not the case things fall apart.

² Katongole, Emmanuel and Chris Rice, (2008) *Reconciling All Things; A Christian Vision for justice, Peace and Healing*, Downers Grove IL, IVP Books. pg. 124.