

The Challenge of Migration to the Christian Conscience
By Rev. Jose Luis Casal

*“It was faith that made Abraham obey
when God called him to go out to a country which God
had promised to give him.
He left his own country without knowing where he was going.
By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that
God had promised him.
He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob,
who received the same promise from God.
For Abraham was waiting for the city
which God has designed and built,
the city with permanent foundations.
Hebrews 11:8-10 (Good News Bible)*

Introduction

One of the most important topics on the current world-wide agenda is migration. Politicians, sociologists, economists, theologians, Bible scholars, news reporters and the common individual are all interested in what is happening with the migration of peoples and national immigration policies around the world. Migration is and has been a topic of interest and involved large numbers of people since ancient times.

The Bible offers a wide spectrum of migration examples, from individuals, families, and large groups. The Bible tells us about the enforced migration of the Hebrews, sometimes looking for food to survive and at other times taken as slaves. The Bible also tells us about individual migrants, some of them by need, others fleeing as refugees and others obeying the call of God. The same happens with families.

Migration is a common fact in the Bible and is frequently portrayed as an act of faith of the people of God. Adam and Eve are forced to migrate as a result of their disobedience. Cain was condemned to migrate and be a foreigner and a wanderer with a mark on his forehead as punishment for the murder of his brother Abel. Abraham was called to migrate to receive the promise of God for him and his descendants. The Jews migrated to Egypt looking for economic prosperity and survival. Joseph in Egypt was an immigrant serving as a high political leader; the same happened to Daniel in Babylon and Esther in Persia. Moses who was born in Egypt from Hebrew parents, was educated to oppress the people of his own blood, but God transformed him into the leader who led the most famous migration of the Bible known as the Exodus.

Military leaders like Joshua, David and Solomon transformed migrations into military actions to conquer new territories and transform the people there into “foreigners within their own lands”.

Most of the prophets were political refugees fleeing from one place to the next when they were persecuted by the political and religious powers who were not comfortable with the Lord’s message proclaimed by them.

The Lord Jesus experienced during his life the painful process of migration. Immediately after his birth his family migrated to Egypt fleeing from Herod’s political persecution. His life was a constant journey from one place to another with “no place to lie down and rest” (1). During his life, Samaritans criticized him because he was a Jew and Jews criticized him because he was Galilean. His situation was the same experience as immigrants’ today in many areas of the world.

Migration is so important in the Bible that it can be affirmed without doubt that the Bible is the Book of Migrants.

But, where are the immigration regulations in the Bible? The Bible doesn't address the process these individuals and groups had to go through in order to migrate to another country. We know that the Pharaoh of Egypt invited and allowed Jews to cross the borders to enter into Egyptian territory and live there, but there is no mention about processes they had to follow to cross the border to work there. Individuals in the Bible move from one country to another without any explanation about border policies as though there were no laws or policies to follow. Thanks to Paul, we know that Roman citizens in the first century had a set of privileges, and certainly we may deduce that they also had a set of duties. We assume other countries had similar regulations for their own citizens. But what type of rules or processes did those citizens have to follow if they were interested in migrating to another country? What about families? What kind of regulations applied to large groups of people? The Bible is silent about this. The Bible only mentions migration examples within a world that looks to be indifferent to border policies and procedures. If we follow this line of reasoning we may have the temptation to believe and affirm that the borders are not obstacles and everybody is entitled to cross borders any time they wish, but that is not true and is not correct.

Borders in the modern world have economic connotations; a piece of land may represent thousands or millions of dollars. I am completely sure that if the Tsar of Russia in the nineteenth century had known the value of oil reserves in Alaska, he would never have sold this piece of land for such a bargain. Borders in the modern world also have political and cultural connotations. Recently Latin America was close to a war because one country, Colombia, crossed the border line of Ecuador to pursue a guerrilla force camping on Ecuadorian territory. This incident was interpreted by Ecuador as an act of war and was condemned by the Organization of American States. If we analyze this incident closely, you may realize that we are talking about a piece of jungle territory that cannot be controlled by either of the two countries involved in this area. Yes, borders are important!

If we consider Latin America, we will see border litigations and confrontations in the majority of the countries. Sometimes these litigations are at the diplomatic level, other times at the military level and many times at the social level. In the border between Brazil and Uruguay and Paraguay there is a particular situation that has been happening during the last thirty years or maybe more. Farm owners from Brazil who own land on the border with those countries have been buying lands on the other side of the border. In effect the result has been the elimination of the border because those private properties overlap the national boundaries. In these places the population speaks a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish, which they call "Portunol" (similar to our "Spanglish" in the USA). People in the border area live the life of the border ruled by collaboration and peaceful relationships, but certainly governments and countries have different patterns. If we follow the practice and traditions of the Bible, there is no problem in the border of Brazil and Uruguay and Paraguay but that is not true and certainly that situation cannot be solved applying the biblical practice. Similar situations exist in Africa, Middle East, India, China, Russia, former Yugoslavia, and the countries of Indochina.

Migration is no longer a simple problem that may be solved by applying the practices and traditions of the Bible. Migration today has economic, political, cultural, and social implications that complicate the solutions and force us to think in more realistic and less romantic ways. "Is a world without migration possible?" This was the main question discussed at the Twenty-Seventh Congress of the Association of Theologians John XXIII in Spain (2). The obvious response is No; so the solution has to be addressed by eliminating dramatic challenges and trying to be realistic about the rights of immigrants as well as the rights of each country to control its borders. I think this problem has a solution, but the solution cannot be

a reproduction of Biblical practice because there were a lot of things possible in Biblical times than we cannot do in today's world. We cannot affirm that because of Joseph's migration of his family to Egypt, we have the right to do the same with our families, crossing the borders of any country to settle there avoiding border regulations and controls. We also feel that is not correct for any country to close its borders and prohibit the entrance of people from other countries in order to enjoy job opportunities and prosperity within the new country. We have to find a fair balance for this problem of world migration that has become too often a world tragedy. "Within the world population, at least 200 million are immigrants (this is one out of 35 people). A majority of these 200 million is in Europe and represents 7.7% of the population of that continent" (3). These numbers indicate the dimensions of the tragedy I mentioned.

A Holistic Approach to the Migration Problem

On May 10-14, 2008, the 13th Regional Conference on Migration was held in Honduras. The Conference denounced the terrible situation on the border between Guatemala and Mexico where "migrants crossing from one country to the other, trying to continue to the USA, are abused, robbed, raped and humiliated by Mexican functionaries and police. Women are the most vulnerable and when they denounce the perpetrators, they are deported to the other country without any legal vindication" (4).

The most commented on situation during the Conference was the "Oaxaca Operation" that happened on March 31, 2008, when a train load with 200 migrants was stopped on the border with Guatemala and migrants were brutally beaten by the police. The incident was made known thanks to an American reporter who was traveling the route with the undocumented immigrants trying to cross the border into the USA. He offered graphic testimonies of this incident.

One of the leaders of this Conference, Blanca Fonseca, president of the Council of Evangelical Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD) declared to the press: "the raids to identify and deport undocumented immigrants in the USA are copied by the countries in the region, violating the human dignity of these people" (5).

Here on the Mexican/USA border, we know about deaths, the stories of families separated, testimonies of agricultural and construction workers who are exploited and abused and live crowded together in a small apartment or in huts in the countryside near to big cities. We all know that these people cross the border with the dream of a better life for themselves and their families. We all know they are not terrorists, we all know that the majority of them never perpetrated a single act of felony against property or individuals. We all know that the wall the USA government is building along the border is an insult to friendship, dialog and peaceful relationships in a civilized world. And what is worse, we know the wall will never solve the problem.

We also know there are "human traffickers" who use the dreams and hopes of innocent people to increase their profits, adding more pain and suffering to those who cross the borders to pursue the American dream. These human traffickers charge the immigrants with enormous amounts of money to the point that many of them have to work several years in the USA only to pay the cost of their "trips". Sometimes these innocent undocumented immigrants are abandoned in the desert or are sold as sexual slaves (women) or farm workers (men).

In August 2007, I visited Spain and I had the opportunity to see what is happening in that country against Arabs and blacks from Africa and the Middle East, as well as, with Latin Americans who are arriving looking for job opportunities. Xenophobia and hatred are appearing more visibly every day in that country. Some of the comments I heard in Madrid were similar to comments I have been hearing lately in the USA. This is an indication that we are dealing with a global problem. We are not only talking about the situation in Agua Prieta/Douglas or Ciudad Juarez/El Paso or any of our borders with Mexico. This is a world tragedy and requires a holistic approach if we want to solve the problem.

On May 20, 2008, a meeting with ecumenical leaders was held in Guatemala to discuss migration and the responsibilities of the churches concerning migration. The priest Mauro Bazeletti, Director of "House of the Migrant", said in that meeting: "We need a holistic view for the immigrants and for their families that stayed in their own countries. We need to be clear and challenge the governments to provide legal, social, and cultural care and support to this people" (6).

The National Council of Churches in the USA is just beginning to promote consultations and communications among the State Councils of Churches to create a data base with what is happening in each area of the country. The idea is to promote educational materials to help congregations and the population in general to understand the migration phenomena in the USA (7).

The solution for the illegal crossing of the Mexico/USA border will come when we address the roots of the problem. If the people don't have better job opportunities in their own countries, it will be impossible to dissuade anyone from migrating. We need a global crusade to develop new areas with job opportunities, fair remuneration, with good social services and medical care. These are the kind of alternatives governments need to offer to their citizens. Transparent policies are also needed because the immigrants are now used as national investments in the economies of highly developed countries. It is easier to "export" immigrants who will generate millions of dollars than to grow their own economy. This is another factor that defines the problem of migration. Governments are involved, as well as, private industry, the churches, and the cultural and social institutions. All of them are essential parts of the solution.

Changing the ethical patterns

In the first part of our presentation, we mentioned that we cannot put into practice the traditions and practices of biblical times to solve the migration problem, but we can indeed promote the ethical pattern of the Gospel to solve contemporary problems.

We also have to work in the re-education of our society to eliminate the philosophy of individual accumulation that destroys and eliminates the common wealth. The only way to reach this goal is changing the ethical patterns of our societies.

In the global world with the global economy, the market has been transformed into a kind of god that controls lives and properties of everyone. The market is also in control of the legal system to protect profits and capital. If we use this principle it will be very easy to understand that the wall between Mexico and the USA not only tries to stop the arrival of new waves of undocumented immigrants, but also is protecting money, resources and goods that every year go to different countries as a result of the presence of immigrants in the USA. The small "help" immigrants are sending to their families represents million of dollars and in many countries an important line of the national economy. But this is only the surface of the problem, the real reason of the wall is to protect the profits of mega companies that are the only beneficiaries.

The confirmation of what we said before is the fact that while the USA government restricts the access of people to our territory, it gives free access to merchandise across the border. The Free Trade Agreements that reduce expenses, paperwork and time to facilitate free access of merchandise between the countries contradicts the restrictions and controls we are putting on people. This means that the underlying purpose of the wall is the accumulation of capital while sacrificing human beings. This is the ethic of accumulation.

Maybe the fundamental question is, “How do we change the ethic of accumulation that rules in our society?” The Bible give us an example with the incident between Jesus and his disciples collecting heads of wheat on the Sabbath and a group of Pharisees (8).

The ethical pattern proposed by Jesus in this incident is the only one that may help us to get involved in this multilateral dialog that will solve the problem of migration. The Jewish Law in Jesus’ day had lost its human side. It was not important if a human being was hungry, as long as the Law was honored and respected. This is very similar to the rules of the modern market. For instance, look at the solution to solve the high price of gasoline. The market is saying let us find cheaper energy, so let us sacrifice foods like corn, sugar or rice to produce ethanol. So the alternative energy is produced by sacrificing human beings. These experiments have generated numerous protests around the world, but big corporations and the market are interested in profits not in persons; as an old proverb says “Free access to merchandise not people” (9).

We need to understand the ethical pattern of Jesus and apply it to our daily life. For Jesus, Humankind is more important than Jewish Law. In the Bible passage we used at the beginning of this presentation, it says that Abraham migrated to find the promise land “without knowing where he was going” (10). The ethical pattern of Abraham didn’t rest in geographical knowledge but in the promise of a collective welfare for his people. In the same way the ethical pattern of Jesus didn’t rest in the letter of the Jewish Law but in its applicability to solve the essential needs of the society and peoples of his time.

Action and commitment of the church.

With this complicated scenario, what is our role as Christian churches? I believe we have two areas of action:

1- The first area is the Ministry of Prophetic Presence.

This ministry of prophetic presence has already been assumed by different churches around the country, members of “Santuario Movement”. The Movement challenges the legal system of the country but I feel that we are missing the real target here. Certainly this is a way to be present and take a prophetic stand so I don’t want to argue about that. But for the sake of the efficacy on what the church does, I feel we need to invest our energy in a different direction. We need a type of national crusade challenging churches to be present in the political life of the country playing the role of social and moral conscience of the country. We need to be present in those places where we make policy and determine the future of the country. The church must be the voice of the voiceless in the places that the voiceless cannot access.

The church has the responsibility constantly to bear witness to the historic memory of the nation and the historic memory of the Christian faith. In other words, the church is called to educate our communities about the ethical options we have.

The church is called to be a facilitator for national dialog about migration. The real danger we have before us is not the building of a wall of separation between Mexico and the USA, the real danger is the ideological wall of separation we are building in our cities, towns and communities, creating distrust, planting hatred and bigotry, segregating people by the color of their skin or by the accent or culture they represent. We need to have a real dialog in which we have to recognize honestly that the United States of America is a country with open hearts to the immigrants. We need to share with our modern immigrants the same generosity demonstrated by the real owners of this land, the American Indians, when they welcomed the pilgrims and offered them a piece of their land to work in peace. We need to reaffirm the soul of America.

The former president of the National Council of Churches in the USA, Bishop Thomas L. Hoyt, addressing the Annual Assembly of the Texas Conference of Churches in 2004 said: "All of us arrived to this country in different ships, but now we are in the same boat and if we want to do something we need to be together around the table and participate" (11). This is what we need, the church acting together to create long range solutions. We have experienced that it is not easy to be together when we talk about beliefs and creeds, but we are mandated by the Lord to be one in him to serve our people.

2- The second area is the Ministry of Compassion and Accompaniment

The church also holds and keeps the memory of the Gospel of Compassion in a practical way. The church in the United States has the responsibility to assist those who suffer the persecution of the law that forgets the human being and is focus on the "Sabbath". The Ministry of Compassion of the church cannot be subordinated to any human law.

I want to recognize the firm position of the Roman Catholic leaders in the USA who have been advocating openly and vocally the solution of the problem of the 12 million undocumented immigrants who live in the United States. The recent visit of the Pope Benedict XVI to New York was used as another opportunity to advocate for this solution and certainly speaks highly about the clear position of that church.

The National Council of Churches USA is still behind. Apart of some statements and events, nothing remarkable have happened. The recent actions contacting states councils of churches to coordinate actions and programs is a very interesting avenue we need to develop. The next General Assembly in Denver Colorado in November 2008 is planning to take Immigration as one of the main issues to discuss and we hope, new ideas will come out of this gathering

The Presbyterian Church made a big move with the creation of the Office of Immigration, adjunct to the Office of the Stated Clerk in the General Assembly, and produced some statements and materials but we need to be more assertive and generate more public presence of the church in the social and political arena.

Maybe its time for the church to convene a wide coalition to find concrete solutions to a problem that cannot be solved with a wall, deportations, and a rigid application of the Law. These actions have generated more injustice creating concerns around the world about the efficacy of our democracy.

Immigrants in the USA are afraid and are suffering and they need to know that they are not alone. We need to provide spiritual and material accompaniment for them. The church has to be in direct relation with those who are suffering.

We are called to be in solidarity with those who cry waiting for deportation, with the families that are tragically separated even when some of the children are American citizens. We have to be in solidarity with those who are hidden not because they are murderers or thieves or terrorists but because they don't have papers to stay legally in this country. We have to be a church that knows how it feels to be separated from your own family, roots, cultures, and countries. That church believes in the human being and not in the Sabbath. This church understands the feeling behind the words of the famous "Canción Huasteca" (Huasteca Song) from Mexico or the sweet melody of "Cuando Salí de Cuba" (When I left Cuba).

The famous poet of the Spanish exile, León Felipe, wrote a beautiful and touching poem that describes the vacuum of national and cultural identity connected with migration processes. Condemned to leave Spain,

fleeing from the dictatorship, he wrote several works that reflect the agony of the immigrant and the sadness of those “who are not from this place, but neither from that place”. He says:

It's a pity that I don't have a homeland!
...so I can sing always with the same tune,
to the same river that carries always the same water,
to the same sky, the same fields or the same house.
It's a pity that I don't have a house!
How I will sing if I am an outcast
that only has a cloak! (12)

How important would it be for León Felipe to count on the presence of a church reminding him with the voice of solidarity of Jesus' saying: “And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak too” (13). This is the challenge of migration to the Christian conscience.

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Notes:

- (1) Matthew 8:20 – Good News Bible
- (2) Quoted by Leopoldo Cervantes in the article “Migration, Globalization and Bible Faith” – World Student Christian Federation in Latin America (FUMEC) Newsletter – April 2008
- (3) Idem
- (4) Latin American Agency News (ALN) – Nicaragua May 14, 2008 – “Migration Network denounces violations in the migrant route”
- (5) Idem
- (6) Latin American Agency News (ALN) – Guatemala May 20, 2008 – “The church has the commitment to help immigrants”
- (7) For more information consult the website of NCCC-USA
- (8) Matthew 12:1-8 – Good News Bible
- (9) Quoted by Leopoldo Cervantes in the article “Migration, Globalization and Bible Faith” – World Student Christian Federation in Latin America (FUMEC) Newsletter – April 2008
- (10) Hebrew 11:8 – Good News Bible
- (11) Texas Conference of Churches – Documents of General Assembly 2004
- (12) León Felipe – Antología de Poesía – México FCE, 1993, p.27 (translated by José L. Casal)
- (13) Matthew 5:40 – King James Version