

Franciscans and Refugees: The “Why” of Our Involvement

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In September of 1979, General Minister John Vaughn and his Definitorium issued an encyclical letter to all the friars entitled “The World Problem of Refugees.” Having recently established a General Commission for Justice and Peace, they wanted to impress upon the friars the need for their involvement in the issues that bring suffering to the peoples of the world, and of our call to be instruments of God’s healing. In a particular way, the letter focused on the plight of the world’s refugees, seen as a “grave problem,” which was especially highlighted by dramatic events in Southeast Asia and Nicaragua.

The letter exhorted the friars: “The spirit of the Gospel that is also the kernel of our Franciscan Movement draws us almost naturally to people who suffer and to places where justice and peace are at risk. Wherever people suffer, the Gospel tells the Friars to go and bring consolation.” The friars were also reminded that in terms of working with “marginal” people, we have “the very clear example of Christ, who spoke up for voiceless people and sought the company of the outcast of his society. The same Evangelical spirit penetrated deeply into the whole life of

St. Francis.” The letter went on to deal with the question of who should be considered a “refugee,” and opted to give the term a wide meaning. Refugees are “those who have been forced to leave their homes in violent circumstances [and] natural disaster,” but would also include “that huge number of people who leave their homes in an effort to improve their living conditions, and remain unsettled migrant people, failing to be integrated into their new surroundings.”

In the twenty-one years since promulgation of the encyclical letter, the problem of refugees has become more acute. In an address to Spanish friars meeting in Barcelona in June/July 2000, Pat Hudson, OFM, presented a general picture of the refugee situation: “Today, there are in the region of 220 million such people in the world. About 200 million moved because of natural and man-made disasters or conflicts but remain close-by, often in poor living conditions, in the hope of returning home. They are referred to as displaced persons.... Besides these there are about 20 million refugees and asylum seekers from conflict, injustice and oppression who are not offered any protection by their governments. Their dispersal is the result of political conflict, ethnic tensions, religious intolerance, social unrest, unjust economic conditions and oppression. They seldom return home and have to integrate into their new environments. They, like ethnic minorities already in these places, are often isolated from the surrounding peoples and denied equality

with their neighbors in education, social standing, justice system, and work.”

Such statistics are jarring, and all areas of the world are affected by these difficulties. They challenge us as friars to examine the extent of our involvement with people whose lives have been disrupted and displaced. What is it that inspires us, or should inspire us, as Franciscans, to become involved with refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and ethnic minorities? What rationale can we offer to substantiate a claim that Franciscans should be involved in this work?

This paper will seek to present such a rationale. It will deal first of all with our call to be people of the Word, especially people of the Gospel who look to Jesus Christ as a model for our life and our work. It will examine the invitation that comes to us from the teaching of the church and from those who have taken up this work as dedicated messengers of Gospel peace and justice. Finally, it will look at the Franciscan sources and writings; what is it that Francis and those who have followed in his tradition have to say about such involvement?

From Scripture

Francis loved the Word of God, and was above all a man of the Gospel. His life was oriented by a literal following of the Gospel passages through which he believed God had spoken to him, and the legacy that he left his brothers is clear in its demand: “The Rule and Life of the

Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one’s own, and in chastity.” As Francis turned to the Word in his search for God’s will in the concrete circumstances of his life and ministry, we must do the same in regard to the issue of refugees. What do we find in Scripture that encourages us to take up the cause of these suffering people?

In the Old Testament, we are reminded that our common roots are grounded in a history of displacement and dispossession. Seamus Mulholland, OFM, in his address to the Spanish friars meeting at Barcelona in June/July 2000, calls Adam and Eve “the proto-refugees.” They had everything in paradise, but erred in judgment and lost it all. Expelled from the garden, they were forced to wander in unfamiliar surroundings and to eke out an existence in a hostile land. In the same tradition, Abraham left his own land at the call of God and set out to fulfill the promises that God held out to him. Mulholland describes him as a foreign migrant in a foreign land.

In his paper, Pat Hudson calls to mind the Joseph story: he was a stranger in Egypt, and he and the Israelites will always remember their time as aliens. They are reminded over and over of their responsibility to treat foreigners well. In Deuteronomy (10:19) they are exhorted to love the alien in their midst. In Exodus they are told: “You will not molest or oppress aliens, for you yourselves were

once aliens in the land of Egypt.... You will not oppress the stranger; you know the heart of a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (22:20; 23:9). From Leviticus they hear: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.... He shall be to you as the native among you and you shall love him as yourself” (19:33-34). The attitude of the Biblical authors was further molded by the fact that the people who left Egypt after their sojourn in that land were a “mixed multitude” (Ex. 12:38). The very word Israelite “stood somewhat vaguely for a blending of various peoples whose only common bond consisted in their status (or lack of status) as refugees, resident aliens and dispossessed people uprooted from their original homeland and frequently at the mercy of the local residents or landlords” (D. Senior and C. Stuhmuller, *The Biblical Foundation for Mission*, 1983, p. 56).

God walked with the refugees of the Exodus as they sought a land free of slavery and oppression. We believe that God continues to walk with today’s refugees in order to accomplish his loving plan together with them. The heritage that we share with the Hebrews, our ancestors in faith, encourages us to be aware of the plight of refugees, and to be solicitous of those who find themselves in such disorienting and difficult circumstances. This encouragement is reinforced by our unwavering belief in the inalienable dignity of every human person who is created in the image of God (cf. Gn. 1:27).

The New Testament builds on the longing of the People of God for a place of their own, and for a community that would provide stability and the conditions necessary to live in dignity and peace. At the same time, there is a recognition that we are all fellow pilgrims on a journey to the Father, and as such are impelled to welcome into our local faith communities those whose lives have been turned upside down by the trials of displacement. We are inspired in our task by the history of the Word made flesh, which “did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness...” (Phil. 2:6-7). Having opted to come among us as one like us, the life of Jesus is marked at the outset by rejection and flight. While still in the womb, he and his family are turned away because there is “no room in the inn;” the infant Jesus is soon exposed to the harshness of refugee life as he and his family fled to Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod. Further, once they make their way back to Israel, they cannot return to their own home for fear of the political situation, and are forced to depart for the region of Galilee (Mat. 2: 13-23).

The teaching and public ministry of Jesus is distinguished by its concern for those who find themselves on the margins of society for whatever reason. At the outset of his ministry he clearly declares to whom his message is addressed: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to

the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." (Lk. 4:18). Jesus takes up the cause of the downtrodden because of his conviction that human beings have the same origin and destiny, since they have the same heavenly Father (Mat. 23:9). This creates a kinship that needs to move beyond the limitations of social standing, race, ethnicity and nationalism. God has created us to be social and communal, and this gift brings a corresponding responsibility to care for one another.

Inspired by the Gospel message, John Paul II finds in the story of the rich man and Lazarus a reminder that those who enjoy freedom and relative prosperity have special obligations that arise out of participation in the same human family (Origins, vol. 9, no. 19, pp. 310-312). And we know how Jesus stretched the concept of "neighbor" in his ministry, reaching out to Samaritans, tax collectors, and sinners of all sorts, because they are children of the same Father. We journey together toward the goal of creating communion as at the first Pentecost, when people "from every nation" were assembled by the Spirit to become church (Acts 2:5-11). Paul builds on this idea. He sees God at work forming a people of his own: "For you have put on the new man...there is no longer Greek or Jew...but Christ" (Col.3: 10-11). He further elaborates this theme in his letter to the Romans: we, though many, are united in the one body of Christ with gifts that differ according to the grace given to

each of us (12:4-6). All followers of Christ are called to the task of building up his body, paying special attention to those parts that are in distress.

The general injunction to build up the human family is made more specific to the plight of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and ethnic minorities in the story of the final judgment. In the only Gospel passage that deals specifically with the criteria to be used for salvation or damnation, Jesus welcomes into the kingdom those who welcomed the stranger into their midst, and sends to eternal fire those who turned their backs on the stranger in need of compassion (Mt. 25:31-46). The author of the letter to the Hebrews highlights the same concern: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:1-2). He adds, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (13:16).

The Word of God shows how the missionary task of Jesus is made concrete in the love and compassion that he extends to all those with whom he comes into contact, especially the poor and marginalized. His entire life is an invitation to those who would be his disciples to take up the same mission, and after his resurrection Jesus passes on the task entrusted to him to the disciples: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). Francis heard this injunction loud and clear. He loved the Word of

God and modeled his life on a literal adherence to it, and enjoined his followers to do the same.

From the Church

Grounded in God's Word, the Church has taken up the cause of refugees, immigrants and other wanderers. In *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI set the tone for Catholic response to men and women who find themselves far from home and suffering the effects of being "foreigners." In the context of concern over growing selfishness and the consequent failure to recognise the universal kinship of all peoples, he wrote: "We cannot insist too much on the duty of welcoming others (#67)." It is not enough simply to allow immigrants into our communities; we need to welcome them and look out for them. Pat Hudson follows up on this insight: "By her faith in Jesus Christ, the Church also takes on unlimited and unreserved responsibility for these poor strangers that have appeared in her midst. For a Christian to remain silent and unmoved in the face of such tragedy, such violence and destruction, would be a denial of the Gospel (Barcelona, 1)." Our faith vision speaks to us of the human family, its unity, the dignity of every human person and the universally beneficial purpose of the goods of creation. If any brother or sister is suffering the ill effects of unjust policies and/or structures, we are convoked by our beliefs to speak up for them and to pursue lines of action that will both alleviate their suffering and

strike at the underlying structures that allow such injustice to exist.

United in Synod in 1971, the bishops could not have been any clearer in regard to the requirements of Gospel living: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." While the bishops' statement does not deal directly with the issue of refugees, its call for the liberation of the human race from every oppressive situation most certainly includes the plight of those who have been uprooted from their homeland for whatever reason. As believers in the Gospel we are called to be a voice for the voiceless, and to make known the underlying structures that cause such situations of injustice.

In the United States of America, where the question of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and ethnic minorities is a highly volatile political and social issue, the bishops have entered the public debate. They see immigration as a sign of our times, given the large numbers of people who are involved; but they also contend that immigration is merely the tip of the iceberg, which points to underlying violations of human and civil rights, distorted and exploitative economic relations, and personal and national tragedies. It presents us with the challenge "of providing teaching and

service adequate to understand the demographic change of the population base of the church; of responding to the spiritual needs, rights and duties of the newcomers who are already baptized Catholics; of opening its doors and of extending its outreach to the increasing numbers of non-Christians among immigrants and refugees” (Origins, vol. 14, no. 31, p. 518).

The bishops hold up as the ideal Paul’s reminder in his first letter to the Corinthians: “... if one member suffers, all suffer together” (12:26); the problem is that our divided world finds itself far from the ideal. With John Paul II, they see the refugee problem as “a shameful wound of our time” which continues to worsen in spite of the efforts of many individuals and organisations. To address this situation, they remind us that as local churches we are called to incarnate the demands of the Gospel, reaching out without distinction toward these people in their moment of need and solitude. We have a responsibility to offer refugees hospitality, solidarity, and assistance. (Origins, vol. 22, no. 18, pp. 310-311). We need to work at creating a culture of solidarity and hospitality, which brings benevolence, respect, trust and sharing, and at overcoming fear and suspicion toward refugees and being able to see in them the Savior’s face.

Francis was always attentive to the recommendations and the necessities of the Church. As his followers we need to respond generally to the Church’s call to be ministers of justice and peace, and to

respond particularly to her invitation to care for and defend the rights of displaced people, and to eradicate the causes that lead to such displacement.

From Franciscan Sources and Writings

When we look to Franciscan sources and writings in an attempt to present a rationale for working with refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and ethnic minorities, our greatest obstacle is that we find very little that deals specifically with this issue. Yet there are some indications in Francis’ writings and attitudes that can help us ground our own approach, and it is there that we will begin our overview. Afterwards, we will turn to other more contemporary sources for illumination.

In Chapter VII of the Earlier Rule, Francis deals with the way that the brothers are called to serve and to work. In verses 13 and 14 he writes: “Wherever the brothers may be, either in hermitages or other places, let them be careful not to make any place their own or contend with anyone for it. Whoever comes to them, friend or foe, thief or robber, let him be received with kindness.” Thus hospitality is a cornerstone of the way that friars are to interact with the world. Wherever they are, whatever they are doing, friars are to make a point of receiving well all who come to them.

But there may be more than a simple call to be hospitable behind these words. In an article entitled “Franciscan Eremitism”

written by Thomas Merton and published in *The Cord* (Dec. 1966, and reprinted in *The Cord* 50.1, 2000, pp. 23-29), Merton attempts to put the Franciscan concept of hermitage into historical perspective. Eremitism in the West was traditionally identified with the monastic orders; in the tenth century, however, a new movement arose, mostly independent of the monastic orders, and composed of lay people and secular clerics. They withdrew into solitude without any formal training, and moved into the woods. Merton continues: "...they remained in rather close contact with the poor (that is, generally speaking, with their own class), with outlaws and outcasts, and with the itinerants who were always numerous in the Middle Ages. Closely identified as the hermits were with the under-privileged, the oppressed, and those for whom the official institutions of society showed little real concern, the non-monastic hermitage quickly became a place of refuge for the desperately perplexed who sought guidance and hope – if not also a hiding place and physical safety. Thus the non-monastic hermit, by the very fact of his isolation from the world, became open to the world in a new and special way."

As the movement evolved into the eleventh and twelfth centuries, these hermits became itinerant preachers, and some thought of going to preach to the Saracens and even attempted to do so in the hope of being martyred. It is easy to hear echoes of the eremitism of Francis and the first Franciscans. By the thirteenth century the movement had died

out or had been absorbed back into monasticism; but Merton claims that Francis reaches back into the earlier hermit tradition. He cherished solitude, contemplation and prayer, but for him this was not an excuse to be isolated from the world. He charged all friars, including those in hermitages, with the task of receiving everyone with kindness. Francis made sure that his brothers would be open to the poor and the outcast, to refugees and itinerants. Francis reconciled a life of solitary prayer with warm and open fraternal love: Francis and his brothers were not in it for themselves. Thus at the very foundation of the Order we find an openness to the outcasts and the refugees of that world.

In Chapter IX of the Earlier Rule, which considers the issue of begging alms, Francis provides insight into the way that he would like to see the brothers living. In verse 2 he states: "They must rejoice when they live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside." While Francis moved comfortably among people of all economic classes, he wanted to be sure that the brothers never lost their concern for the "non-people" of his day. In verse 16 of the same chapter Francis declares that "...in time of an obvious need, all the brothers may do as the Lord has given them the grace to satisfy their needs, because necessity has no law." By extension, we must do that which is necessary

to satisfy the needs of our brothers and sisters who find themselves in sub-human conditions. Finally, in Admonition XVIII, concerning compassion for a neighbor, Francis proclaims: “Blessed is the person who supports his neighbor in his weakness as he would want to be supported were he in a similar situation.” Franciscans must always be aware of our neighbors who find themselves in a weakened state, and be prepared to take action to alleviate those circumstances that lead to his or her weakness.

Contemporary Franciscanism, in response to the Word of God and the Spirit of Francis, which nourish us, and to the teaching of the Church that challenges us, seeks to make sense of the signs of the times in our midst. The recently published resource manual of the Order for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, *Instruments of Peace*, is an attempt to highlight the signs of the times, and to point out ways that friars can and are addressing these signs throughout the world. While the manual deals little with the specific theme “refugees,” it nonetheless offers an approach to life and ministry that clearly confronts friars with the necessity of responding to situations like that of refugees. This approach begins by seeing salvation as liberation from everything that oppresses human beings; while the meaning of salvation is not exhausted in such a definition, it must definitely include the idea of liberation from the dehumanizing poverty that afflicts so many in our world today (pp. 16-17).

The manual reminds us of our General Constitutions, which call upon us to follow the example of Francis who was led by the Lord to go among the lepers, to show a preference for the marginalized, for the poor and oppressed, for the troubled and the sick; and which invite us to view what is happening in the world from the perspective of the poor and marginalized, in fellowship with all those considered unimportant (42). Compassion and solidarity are the foundation of a Franciscan option for the poor, and it is essential to remember that Francis’ first conversion was to the poor, and later to Jesus Christ crucified (44-45). One of the ways to foster an option for the poor is through the process of “accompaniment,” that is, actually walking with those on the margins of society. Our physical presence with the poor will allow us to know them better, and to better orient our lives and our work in conjunction with those whom we desire to serve (47-48).

Francis showed concern for each and every creature, because he was able to refer each back to the Creator. This respect for all creation became part of the Franciscan tradition, and is manifested in the stress placed on the inherent dignity and value of each creature, of each person (80-81). For Francis, such concern translated into a life of action that began very concretely with service to lepers and carrying of stones and cement. Because of this, Franciscans and their communities cannot be satisfied with proclamations about justice and peace, about the

poor conditions in which people find themselves. Rather, they need to analyze and understand the areas where they live, and work to promote and defend the human rights of their neighbors, especially the weakest and most oppressed. According to the model of Francis, the brothers do not live for themselves but for others, both within and outside of the institutional Church (94-96).

Friars have applied these general principles to work with refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons and ethnic minorities. The Order, meeting in General Chapter in 1997, spoke its concern for so many of our brothers and sisters who have been forced to abandon their own lands. It also “solicited the General Definitorium, through the Office of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, in collaboration with all the Conferences and Provinces, to create a network of personnel and resources to intervene in the plight of refugees” (Resolution 8.4). The challenge to respond to the needs of these our brothers and sisters have put forth clearly; whether or not, and how, we respond, remains to be seen.

The example of a friar who responded generously and courageously to the plight of refugees might be a good way to end this reflection. A few years back I found myself in Sao Paulo, Brazil, at the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Cardinal Arns’ inauguration as Archbishop of the diocese of Sao Paulo. Many people spoke warmly of a man who had made a great difference in their lives because of his dedication to human rights. One of the groups that stood out as admirers of the cardinal were the representatives of the refugees from all throughout Latin America who had ended up at his doorstep. When he took over the archdiocese, I am sure that Dom Paulo did not foresee the many people who would come to him as a result of the repressive military regimes that had taken control of so many countries in the region. Others might have turned these refugees away for fear or indifference, but Dom Paulo read the signs of the times and responded as would have Jesus and Francis, opening up heart and diocese to these suffering brothers and sisters. May we all have the courage to respond similarly to those that God sends our way.