

01-8624 1/10



WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

With the compliments
of the Migration Secretariat

I'm just leaving to Swaziland and Lesotho.
I send you the Christian reflexion on uprootedness.
The book will be published at the end of august
too late for your meeting -

Kind Regards,
André.

P.O. Box 66
150, route de Ferney
11 GENEVA 20

Tel.: (022) 98 94 00
Telex: 23 423 OIK CH
Cables: OIKOUMENE GENEVA

1.8.86

(JN)125268 (CL)168 (LI)0050 (SI)02881 16.07.

4. A Challenge to Christians



Strangers and travellers on earth

Situations of uprootedness are described throughout the Bible. Abraham was the first: "Abraham's descendants shall live as aliens in a foreign land, held in slavery and oppression for four hundred years. And I will pass judgment on the nation whose slaves they are" (Acts 7:6-7).

It was hunger which first forced the Hebrews to move. Abraham and his family left Canaan and migrated towards a richer country: "There came a famine on the land, so severe that Abraham went down to Egypt to live there for a while" (Gen. 12:10). Later, the same reason impelled Isaac to leave his home and seek a living in the land of the Philistines. He soon encountered mistrust and rejection from his host country. He "sowed seeds in that land" and became so successful that the Philistines were envious of him, and their king told Isaac: "Go away from here, you are too strong for us" (Gen. 26:16). As a deterrent, the Philistines filled in all the wells dug in Abraham's time. Joseph was a slave in Egypt when Pharaoh recognized in him the "shrewd and intelligent man" he was looking for to save his country from the impending crisis. Joseph, the stranger, did in fact manage to save Egypt from famine (Gen. 41 and 42) and was appointed Egypt's chief administrator. Once well established in his country of immigration he sent an invitation to his father Jacob and to his brothers to come to Egypt. Today this is called "family reunion".

Not long after, these migrants had to face persecution. The Israelites increased in number and the new Egyptian king felt threatened. "These Israelites have become too many and too strong for us. We must take precautions to see that they do not increase any further; or we shall find, if war breaks out, they will join the enemy and fight against us, and they will become masters of the country" (Ex. 1:10-11). Pharaoh was also thinking that "the boat was full" and that the security of his country was endangered by these foreigners. But they were economically useful and necessary. So Pharaoh decided to tighten his control over them, and started exploiting the Hebrews. "So they were made to work in gangs with officers set over them, to break their spirit with heavy labour. In short they made ruthless use of them as slaves in every kind of hard labour" (Ex. 1:11-14). This story, parallels to which are easy to find in today's world, illustrates the vulnerability of aliens in any foreign land. The relationship between an indigenous population, often defensive of its privileges and obsessed by security, and a migrant population, obliged to adjust, negotiate and prove its worth, is always a difficult one. Once problems appear — a bad harvest, drought, unemployment — there is trouble, and the first to be blamed are the foreigners who are either subjected to rigorous control or expelled.

The Psalms recall another important aspect of life in exile, experienced by the uprooted throughout the ages: nostalgia and longing for their homeland.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion...
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither away;
let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you (Ps. 137).

Whatever the reason behind their departure, the uprooted are faced with a dual existential crisis their identity and their hopes for the future. What is left of their own identity when familiar and symbolic support systems have disappeared, when recognition by the society they belonged to is of no value in the new land?

Through their experience of rejection, hopelessness and exploitation in a foreign land, God's people in the Old Testament learned at least three things:

First, aliens are easy prey for unjust treatment in the receiving society, which tends to protect itself against "others".

Second, God condemns this behaviour and considers that the right attitude towards strangers is a criterion of fidelity to God's Law. "You shall not wrong an alien, or be hard upon him; you were yourselves aliens in Egypt" (Ex. 22:21). "When an alien settles with you in your land, you shall not oppress him. He shall be treated as a native born among you, and you shall love him as a man like yourself, because you were aliens in Egypt" (Lev. 19:33).

Third, God stands by the unprotected, whom the Old Testament refers to as "the widows, the orphans and the aliens". "He secures justice for widows and orphans and loves the alien who lives among you, giving him food and clothing" (Deut. 10:18). But the aliens not only deserve compassion; they also deserve to be received into the community and given equal treatment: "You shall distribute this land among the tribes of Israel and assign it by lot as a patrimony for yourselves and for any aliens living in your midst who leave sons among you. They shall be treated as native-born in Israel and with you shall receive a patrimony by lot..." (Ezek. 47:22).

In giving Abraham and his descendants the experience of being uprooted, God wished them to learn through their own lives that faithfulness to God, to God's Law of love and justice, should prevail over the security of having a land of their own. The place God wanted for the chosen people was a place where their whole life would glorify God. The story of Exodus reveals God's design for the chosen people. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and led them to a land where they would be God's people and Yahweh would be their God.

But disobedience to God's Law would break the covenant and cause them to be uprooted once more. The passionate declarations of the prophets bear witness to this:

Shame on you] you who make unjust laws
 and publish burdensome decrees,
 depriving the poor of justice,
 robbing the weakest of my people of their rights...
 To whom will you flee for help...? (Isa. 10:1-3)
 Shame on you who live at ease in Zion,
 and you, untroubled on the hill of Samaria,
 ...now, therefore,
 you shall head the column of exiles;
 that will be the end of sprawling and revelry (Amos 6).

Yet God's plan is redemption and Jesus came to bring "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18).

The Son of God demolished traditional ideas of power, and spent his life as an "exile". As a child he sought refuge with his family to escape Herod's threat, and he spent his ministry on the move with "nowhere to lay his head". He refused the false security of "royalty", and until his crucifixion he identified himself with the poor. In identifying himself with the victims of the society of his time — including the aliens — Christ broke down barriers and made people understand the universality of human rights. The weakest and the humblest men and women in society are entitled to full respect of their rights. The whole of humanity is contained in any one of its members because there is "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

The universality of God's message for humankind and this "partiality" for the poor may appear to be a contradiction. "But it is one of the deepest insights of the biblical picture of God that His universality finds concrete expression in His 'partiality' in favour of the poor, the oppressed, the disadvantaged, the powerless, the marginal."¹

By identifying himself with those not "rooted" in the "establishment", and by calling his disciples to follow him, Jesus highlighted the hypocrisy of the law as it had been taught, revealed and denounced injustice, and proclaimed a new kingdom: "Come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made. For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home..." (Matt. 25:34-35). How one treats the poor and the stranger is a way of testing one's understanding of the covenant between God and God's people.

Uprooted and poor

They sit on the side of the road, their personal belongings hastily gathered into a bundle; they put their case on the station platform, lost in a country whose language they do not understand.

Refugees or migrants, they will all have to face, one day or another, poverty in a foreign land. Many of them will never escape. Their poverty is above all material. Who has not seen pictures of Asian, African or Latin American refugees stripped of everything they owned in the camps? Who has not seen migrants in the overpopulated shanty towns of big modern cities?

But apart from the lack of bread, they also suffer the poverty of solitude and rejection. The poor, according to the dictionary, are those not able to provide for themselves. In a foreign country a refugee or a migrant needs shelter and food, but also to be recognized as a human being with his or her own history, with a desire to share and a longing to belong. The suitcase may be light, but the loneliness is heavy.

"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and did nothing for you?" In this parable of the last judgment (Matt. 25) Jesus condemns all ignorance, indifference and disregard vis-a-vis any of "his brothers, however humble". And today these words cut us to the quick, for no one can say "I did not know". Indifference, however, is what so many exiles experience, thrown as they are into a rich and busy world where people are, as Dorothee Solle puts it, "behind a soundproof wall, so that they do not hear the cries of the oppressed or the poor".

Let us not romanticize: injustice, poor living conditions and persecution have often hardened the victims and made them over-sensitive. Sometimes only when an incident causes them in their bitterness to explode into violence do we begin to take notice of their presence in our midst. And then we ask ourselves disturbing questions: How was it that we did not see anything, did not say anything? Was it because we don't live in the same areas or go to the same churches? Or has our capacity to rise up against all that dehumanizes life become blunted and gradually been replaced by cowardice and indifference? Or are we taking the easy way out and delegating our responsibilities to "specialized agencies"? Once the feelings provoked by tragic events reported in the media fade away, what is left of our faithfulness to the One who identifies himself with those who are suffering day after day?

Christ's identification with the poor and the deprived is a clear, final and radical expression of justice and love. He made himself poor so that "through his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). By identifying himself with those who had nothing, he became a living example of a great challenge: to respond through love and with love to those who stand knocking at our door. Our response is inadequate and irresponsible if it is limited to giving a little money. We are challenged to establish a genuine human relationship.

In the letter to the Hebrews the writer recalls the importance of loving one's neighbour: "Never cease to love your fellow-Christians. Remember to show hospitality. There are some who, by so doing, have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb. 13:2). The uprooted are sometimes poor to the point of being hungry and thirsty, but more often than not the poverty is the state of being strangers in an unknown and unwelcoming society. To be denied participation is a form of deprivation.

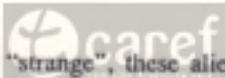
The uprooted can do with less pity but more legal and social protection, less commiseration but more opportunities to be recognized as human beings and full members of a community. The danger is to treat the poor and oppressed as a "problem" outside the competence of the church and to hold "discussions" about them. Jesus described what should be done in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37): *welcome the stranger and, like the Samaritan, take the initiative.*

Because of shyness or ignorance, or because the church has too often been connected with power, aliens do not turn spontaneously to the church, except when church members show practical concern and commitment. To find out how far it is possible to respond as individuals to the needs of the uprooted, not only of single cases but of millions of refugees and migrants, it is necessary to analyze the causes of the structural injustice that has given rise to these population movements. "We have come to treat the struggle of the poor, their problems, the world crisis, in a piecemeal, pragmatic and empirical way. We are now trying for a systematic, coherent, structured approach because we are faced with a global reality in which everything is connected," says Miguez Bonino. To be universally relevant our solutions to specific problems must be channelled through the structures of society. We must question certain socially accepted practices, for example, the system of turning away asylum-seekers at the border as a matter of principle. We must protest against all forms of exploitation of workers, including migrant workers; we must see that equal basic rights be recognized for all human beings, irrespective of their nationality, race or creed. At the international level also there are possibilities for action: speaking out against the arms race which directly or indirectly expels so many people from their homes; denouncing international collusion with the regimes which violate human rights; challenging the unjust distribution of the world's wealth in favour of the privileged few, etc.

Until recent times poverty, exploitation and forced exile were seen by millions of unfortunate people as "inevitable". It was impossible to protest; it would be far too costly and dangerous. Today, liberation movements and social dynamics have helped people understand that poverty is the product of culture and structure and not a decree of fate.

The challenge is serious and calls for long-term commitment. Questions should be put to the powers that be which are ultimately responsible for the protection and living conditions of the uprooted, as much as for the root causes of their exodus.

The mirror



They are often very "strange", these aliens. Contact is not always easy when culture combines with economy to keep "us" and "them" well apart. There is no end to the list of good or bad reasons we can find for locking the doors of our countries, our communities and our hearts. Whether we like it or not, the strangers within our gates reflect our societies like mirrors; our treatment of refugees and migrants reveals our values; our collective or individual behaviour towards them shows where we stand as far as the fine principles of equality, justice and respect for human rights are concerned, not theoretically, or in some other remote land, but here in our own country, in our own neighbourhood. In some cases it is a matter of assisting persons in danger. Asylum-seekers threatened with expulsion, migrants, victims of racism, second-generation migrants still not assimilated by our societies — all these are persons in danger. When radical right-wingers and confirmed racists make a case for inequality of treatment, minimizing aliens' rights, does the church speak out to reaffirm the equality before God of all God's children? If the churches are silent, the image they project is one of betrayal. When conflicts break out revealing the economic and social misery of the migrant communities are these not a living denunciation of a political system unable or unwilling to take into consideration the needs of all members of society?

The presence of aliens provides our societies with a series of challenges:

- *A call to solidarity.* Does the knowledge that people are in danger in their own country (refugees), or does the recognition that they contribute by their hard work to the development of our countries (migrants), make us want them to secure what we claim for ourselves — protection when our life is in danger and the right to live in peace and dignity in the country where we work?
- *A call for justice and respect for legal rights.* How can states be persuaded to abide by the international instruments they have signed which oblige them to recognize and safeguard the fundamental human rights of every human being?
- *A challenge to civilization and culture.* In this era of increasing international exchange and of mixed populations, will each culture learn to enrich itself through conscious acceptance of the contribution of aliens and give them recognition? Will cultures rejoice in diversity rather than lay store by sterile "purity"?

These challenges are addressed to societies to which churches and Christians belong and in which they share responsibilities. In the course of history, however, unfortunate alliances between ecclesiastical structures and Christian leaders and the dominating powers have given rise to theological formulations which have served to defend the status quo and the powers-that-be (the "state theology" of the government of South Africa is an example of the misuse of theological concepts and biblical texts to justify the apartheid regime). Fortunately, new approaches to theology have been developed mainly by the poor and the oppressed themselves, with justice and people's participation as their central themes. "Love of our neighbour and justice cannot be separated," writes Leonardo Boff. "Justice is the minimum of love without which the relationship between people stops being human and turns into violence."

The uprooted, the strangers, the poor, the victims, may create guilt feelings among those who belong to classes or societies which reject or exploit them. But they will do much more than that, if we accept the challenge they bring along with them. Witnesses of the injustices of our world, their cry against indifference and rejection and their thirst for fullness of life are flesh-and-blood reminders of where Christian responsibilities lie, if we are to be faithful to the God who exalts the humble and casts down the powerful.

A challenge to diakonia

The uprooted present a real challenge to Diakonia, "the church's ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation".²

Christians who believe in the eucharist, when Christ gives his body to those who welcome and recognize him as their Saviour, must share this experience with all whom Christ identified himself. This includes aliens.

Migration confronts the churches with the question of whether they are truly ecumenical, in the sense that they are not so imprisoned within one culture that they cannot be a spiritual home for those who come from another culture. The problems of migration are in reality a test as to whether the church does not only preach the Universal Church, but *lives* as part of the Church Universal.³

From words to deeds

"(Diakonia) demands of individuals and churches a giving which comes not out of what they have, but out of what they are. This exposes them to the risk of insecurity and the cost of justice and freedom." For many years the churches have been trying through, for example, several consultations organized by the Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service (CICARWS), to define what diakonia should be, here and now. The report of the first consultation (1965) reads: "In a sense the challenge of the contemporary revolution to the churches's diakonia today is to develop new policies, concepts, new forms of action which will, on the one hand, continue to meet individual, family or wider social needs, and, on the other, to promote social justice on a community or national and ecumenical world basis, rather than on a strictly personal one."

A year later, a consultation held in Swanwick called for increased support of refugees and migrants in view of the rapidly growing numbers of these two groups: "Christian people and the churches have a continuing concern for all the uprooted and homeless people, whatever the cause of their uprootedness and wherever they are to be found."

To those who might object that the churches run a risk in making a clear stand in favour of the oppressed, the joint consultation of CICARWS and the WCC Orthodox Task Force, held in Crete in 1978, responded: "When the church fails to offer its witness and to be prophetic, the reaction of the world will be indifference and apathy. Diakonia is, therefore, an essential element in the life and growth of the church." The most recent consultation, on the contemporary understanding of diakonia (Geneva, 1982) emphasized preventive action: "Too often we have fought the symptoms of diseases without looking for the root causes. Then diakonia can be misused by the powerful to soothe their conscience, so that the effects of injustice may look less disastrous. Preventive diakonia presupposes a serious analysis of how the systems work.... Diakonia is concerned with structural or political dimensions." What is at issue today is a diakonia which takes into account the whole of the situation leading to injustice, lack of hope and uprootedness. The range of our responsibilities has, therefore, been considerably enlarged, involving more risks for those who dare to "speak the truth to power", more risks for those who uncompromisingly denounce injustices inflicted on the powerless, whoever may be responsible for them.

"Dangerous times call for risky responses," said Barb Lagoni, inaugurating a sanctuary for refugees in a church in Chicago. There is no doubt about it, the questions we have to ask our governors and legislators are hard ones. In the United States, the continuing controversy between the government and Christian congregations about protection for Central American refugees is proof enough that the risks are real.

"Sanctuary is not only an expression of compassion and the opening of our hearts to those in great need; it is not just a means of expanding our horizons or thinking globally; more important, it is a way of speaking the truth to power, of speaking out against the US government's unjust interpretation of refugee laws," wrote Mary Ann Lundy, one of the eleven church workers accused by the US government of transporting and harbouring undocumented Central American refugees as part of their work for the sanctuary movement.

The Sanctuary movement does not have a separate existence from that of the covenant people which is the church. The biblical covenant to be the people of God was, from the outset, an agreement to stand up against the forces denying justice to all. To be covenant people always means acting as advocates alongside the poor and oppressed to ensure that institutions, governments and their leaders protect the rights of the individuals for the benefit of the whole of society and to ensure that all enjoy a full life.⁴

To act for or to act with?

This is another challenging question to diakonia. The great stirring lesson of the Bible is that God wants men and women to be God's partners. The notion of covenant is implied in this mutual relationship. God's Law has to be loved and willingly accepted. This does not mean passive submission. Men and women are called to grow and to become fully responsible for their acts. This teaching applies to our relationship with exiles for, unless we consider them as partners, they will remain mere recipients of charity, which will keep them in a state of dependence.

(JN)125271 (CL)168 (LI)0024 (SI)01126 16.07.

Establishing true partnerships with aliens means recognizing and respecting their identity and their capacity. It means helping them to help themselves whenever possible, often by assisting them with the formation of organizations of their own where they can better identify their priorities and find solutions. In other words, it means allowing the uprooted to develop fully, wherever they are, as individuals and as communities.

The individual and collective responsibility of Christians towards aliens is to take measures to enable them again to be *subjects and not objects* of history. By welcoming strangers, which implies considering them as partners, and by taking action in the public arena, the church makes its struggle for justice, God's will for all, more authentic and credible.

NOTES

- ¹ J.M. Bonino, "Understanding Human Rights", Irish School of Ecumenics, 1980.
- ² World Council of Churches, Sixth Assembly, Vancouver 1983, Doc. GR4.
- ³ W.A. Visser 't Hooft, "Churches and Immigrants", Research Group for European Migration Problems, *Bulletin* No. 5, 1961.
- ⁴ *Concern* (review of the Presbyterian Church in USA), January 1985.