



INFORMAL LITURGY OF THE MIGRANT JOURNEY
AN ESSAY ON THE EXPRESSIONS, GESTURES, AND RITUALS
OF THE UNDOCUMENTED AND REFUGEE COMMUNITY
FROM CENTRAL AMERICA TO THE NORTH

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INTRODUCTION

Traveling along the trails of migration, sitting at the same table with the undocumented, so many of whom are children of the wind and of no one, in the Scalabrini Migrant Shelters, in refugee camps or looking in on the world of refuge seekers, I have tried to be their ears, eyes and hearts. Sharing their hopes, dramas and tears, their suffering from failure and exclusion, their dream for a

homeland which can provide their daily bread, I found myself many times celebrating a liturgy without rules, where the rituals were born from the tales of these people on the road. These celebrations were at times silent ones, where sobbing was the background music for a mystery which transcends us all. At other times, the tears of mothers or children, broken by hunger or profound wounds to their dignity caused by corruption or rape, became the holy water for a baptism or blessing.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Translation by Anna Maria D'amore y Maureen Harkins.

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These shelters are hospitality centers for all types of migrants and offer sleeping accommodation, food, first aid medical attention, human rights information, among other services, with the purpose of making the immigrants' journey to foreign soil a little less difficult and cruel. Father Rigoni is currently the director of the Tapachula Shelter in Chiapas (<http://www.migrante.com.mx/Tapachula.htm>) which can accommodate 45 immigrants, (generally Central American), protecting them from abuse by the authorities and criminals and providing them with the basic necessities. Father Rigoni has written this article based on his experience in this facility, created in 1997, as well as previous experiences.



Throughout different stages of my missionary life, I was immersing myself in a message that had a common unifying thread and at the same time the specific characteristics of various ethnic groups; a distinctive historical moment where themes of pain and praise are spun together in speech or in the celebratory pause. It was a series of traditions, passed on from mouth to mouth, from memory to memory, until they resembled the primary core of the gospels, marked with fire by primitive communities. In my experience with migrants, rather than a gospel, I think it is more appropriate to speak of an informal *corpus liturgicus*, an accumulation of expressions which I have attempted to record, organize and interpret into a theological and ecclesiastical plan.

My missionary being, son of Scalabrini and son of a pilgrim church, has been captivated by migrants, an attraction transmitted to me by the God of the Way, by this Yahweh who reveals himself by walking. Along this path with my migrant brothers and sisters, colliding with walls and borders, with discrimination and rejection, I have arrived at a new threshold in my life. I contemplate a horizon imbued with the simplicity of the poor, intoxicated by the audacity of those who set their hearts beyond borders, transcend barbed wire and cross minefields. It is a new dawn filled with hope and liberation.

Because of the exile experience in our camps put up at times on ground

burnt by the application of a soulless law or by legalized abuse sealed with impunity, I feel compelled to give a voice and a face to this migrant humanity deprived of a name, of rights and of personal traits,¹ yet still these camps are the camps of Emmanuel, where a novel whisper can be heard of a God who continues to be born in the different Bethlehem stables of our time.

MIGRANT TYPOLOGY

The Undocumented

The undocumented is the new migrant of our time. He arrives at the border of two states, rich only in hope. His passport is the open heart of whoever will take him in. He has no name or identity; today he is Pedro, tomorrow he is Paco... his place of origin could be Honduras or Guatemala, El Salvador or Nicaragua, Mexico or Colombia. He disguises himself according to need. He has nothing to lose: he has already wagered his life on a limitless deck. All of his existence is crammed into a backpack or a plastic bag from the last store where he bought some tacos. Sometimes a whole native country and culture are expressed in the *descamisado* who crosses as one would get into a bath.

The undocumented is nobody's child, he doesn't count nor does he

¹ See *The Clamor of the Undocumented*, Mensaje de la Red Casas del Migrante Scalabrini, Ash Wednesday of Jubilee Year 2000.



have a voice, not even in his homeland which saw him off; quiet, indifferent, perhaps by choice or perhaps by force. He is nobody to the open land which he sees before him, he is only somebody for statistics or for the fierce and contradictory game that is the exploitation of his labor.

The undocumented exists who is simply the fruit of that disguised and massively persuasive process of publicity, which has been convincing them that the good things in life can only be found in the North. A boomerang process looking at the third world while on its way to conquering an El Dorado, which the Western world sold at a bargain and now wants to defend by tooth and nail. There are persecuted politicians, considered enemies, ideological terrorists only because they are on the other side of the barricade. There are people who flee from their homeland because they don't know where else to go anymore, victims of a samba of revolutions and counterrevolutions, of ideological contradiction and confusion. Today, the already large distinction grows more and more between *undocumented*, or economic migrant as referred to in technical language, and *refugee*.

In Central America, for example, because of generalized illegality throughout the continent, a lack of a reliable justice system, and corrupt authority, we can speak of an undeclared civil war, from which many people now flee for their own survival. Sociologists and the United

Nations define the new phenomenon as *mixed migrant flow*.

The Refugee

The refugee is the lowest of the poor: he has no rights whatsoever, not even in his own homeland, or from his fellow countrymen travelling with him. This turns his exodus into a desolate Calvary. He carries the stigma of being a revolutionary marked with fire on his flesh, a potential criminal, an "other" from another ethnic group with a different creed and ideology.

Sometimes, when the refugee has ended his journey of illusions and reaches the new land, the search for an unknown dimension between past and future begins, between his roots and the need to be someone else in another place. He often feels like he is being watched, even inside the safe borders which have opened the doors to him. He is doubly a foreigner because he has brought with him something from his homeland that he has been keeping inside.

While for the undocumented making the leap outside or to the North means a journey to a dream of wealth and improvement, the refugee is a pendulum vulnerable to the four winds: his destiny could be north or south, east or west, acceptance or deportation. He has burned all his bridges and arrives like the beggar who appreciates any crumbs he is given.

The refugee is an undocumented who is persecuted and banished. He



leaves his homeland without even being able to curl up with the nostalgia of returning: the borders are closed behind his back with a mixture of emotions that range from euphoria to failure and even doubt, when not feeling regret for having betrayed his mother. The refugee, like the undocumented, soon ends up fleeing from himself and the drama ends with the alienation of an entire population.

Liberation begins with saying goodbye to the place of oppression, shaking off institutions and memories, and yet taking them with him along the road of exodus. He develops the complex of being a victim, of being a special case, and frequently becomes demanding, a violent critic of the new society, firm in the belief that everything is owed to him. He ends up being alienated from himself, from his community and from his homeland. The necessity to justify his leaving and the profound yet silent question thrown in his face at point blank of whether or not he is a coward because he abandoned the fight, his loved ones, friends, and ideology, push him to the point of manic schizophrenia.

The refugee is thus a victim of a game that he perhaps does not understand. He is someone who does not fit in the mosaic of new categories; someone marginalized and abused, not accepting that he is in this situation by choice. He is the last link in a chain of debris which topples every peak and crushes all diversity. He is the ugly duckling of the new

order: everyone claims the right to reject, ignore or persecute him.

The Displaced

We can call him the “exiled” in his homeland. He is the victim of “unavoidable circumstances” or of so-called “national security”. I am fundamentally referring to situations of civil war. However, with natural disasters, when the situation of squatters is prolonged, the conditions are very different from those of a civil or ideological war.

The displaced has to move, uprooting himself from his vital environment, from a self-determined freedom, to zones which look more like concentration camps because of the military or government control exercised. The displaced doesn't even have the luxury of being able to turn back and have a look at what has become of the land of his captivity. His drama is consumed in his homeland, in his wound that still bleeds with blood flowing from confrontations that turn him into an impotent and estranged victim.

Common Elements

Solidarity among the poor has been fractured. The long road of the refugee or of the undocumented has become a solitary fight, a jungle path with all of its doubts and dangers. It is the result of a *war between the poor*, where everyone wants to win at any



cost. Central America is the smallest area of this Continent and yet is the setting for a game which surpasses its size. It is the chess match of an ideological and political clash which originates far away, a strategic wedge where the big pieces are challenging each other in a battle of giants. Military exercises have turned into war, where now the targets are entire populations and simulations are real.

Their silence reveals the other voiceless element which doesn't count, doesn't conform and may be the setting for a prophecy of truth, beginning with our story and ending beyond our time and policies. It is the silence from which many must leave quietly, feeling superfluous, and that, with the exception of their families, very few will lament their departure. From the very beginning it is the experience of being defeated.

This migration is a sign of our times, the tip of an iceberg which remains submerged below the daily reality of our Latin American population. A migrant of any type is an expression of a third world with no rights or voice in the chess match between the large political and economic powers. He is not autonomous; in our Latin America, personal political and cultural freedom, rooted in the wisdom of our past and popular tradition, disappeared a long time ago: one must choose between capitalistic or Marxist

ideologies, or, according to the Cantinflas expression, *between greens and reds*.

After having made the decision to leave, they find themselves hungry and thirsty, traveling along a road unfolding with prayers while lifting their hopes to the sky. It is the classic context of many undocumented migrants, those who are deported and even some refugees. Today it is difficult to think of a liturgy that is not guided by tradition, Church scriptures, and defined rituals. I have seen some tattoos on migrants of the Virgin of Guadalupe or an angel which is their attempt to guarantee protection and display devotion through this modern method, if we may call it so.² The migrant may thus have his rightful place in the religious expression of the people of God and of the pilgrim population.

RELIGIOSITY OF MEXICO, CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE MIGRANT

Religiosity is without a doubt one of the principle elements of Mexican identity. If we consider the violent structuring that had been taking shape since the colonization of Mexico, religion was always the justification for this violence and the antidote against it. The symbols of Mexican identity have their origin in religion and historic Mexican heroes

² It is worth distancing ourselves here from a trend seen among gang members, for example, the Maras Salvatrucha, of using tattoos of the Virgin or other religious symbols, because of a superstition that the tattoos will protect them from enemy bullets. Otherwise, we would have to analyze their esoteric rituals, some satanic, for the purpose of defeating others.



are draped with strong religious connotations.

Latin American indigenous populations had a profound sense of the sacred. The nucleus of the evangelization, without condoning of course the elements of imposition and violence, was to transfer and conciliate sacred elements of Prehispanic religions with Christian beliefs and symbols. When the missionaries first arrived, the indigenous people believed in natural elements, deeply rooted in their gods and goddesses. The daily life of the indigenous people was already essentially religious: with the Conquista it became Christian.³

This testimony from a Honduran farm worker, survivor of Hurricane Mitch, is one of the reference points which precedes and celebrates the moment of departure. His journey has been debated and dreamed of for a long time. But suddenly, dread and sadness come over him and his dreams are turned into nightmares. He returns home, doubtful and unsure but sees hungry mouths asking for food, *coffee now priceless and the crops completely destroyed by weevils*.⁴ He knows he must go, looking lost and forlorn with a staff in his hand and one foot on the threshold of the door.

Everything was washed away by the river, even the dead. My mother said:

Son, sell this old radio, take a handful of lempiras and go North..., this is what she told me, as if to give a face to hope. She told me goodbye, laying her hands on me and giving her blessing. A knot in our throats joined us together: I had just lost my wife and three children, and now it was like burying my mother alive. I was left with only my poor man's sweat; now transformed into my silent weeping.⁵

The truth is bitter. It is the last train station in one's life, which is hanging by a thread from the gutter. He has tried everything and everything has gone wrong at the same time; the loneliness, the moonlit nights and the stormy nights have dried the hidden flow of tears. The image of his mother when they said goodbye becomes a faded memory. The drama reaches its climax. *Forgetting his mother is to forget that God exists*.⁶

On the one hand, every son would like to stay at his mother's side, on the other hand, he suffers from her misery, that of the woman bent under the bundle of firewood, burnt out herself by the fire for the tortillas or *popusas*; it's the straw that broke the camel's back: *She told me: I'll be right back, I'm going to look for our daily bread; she left with only one 'Sol' (the currency of my country). Later, she came back with a basket of fish and rice. I asked her, 'How did you do it,*

³ Alessandrini, c.s. Manuscriptum.

⁴ Motivation of an Salvadoran farm worker before leaving for the United States.

⁵ Testimony of a Honduran farm worker, 2003.

⁶ Guatemalan migrant, 1998.



*Ma? She answered: God gives to those who have not.*⁷

Once again, migration is portrayed as a mission and assumes the characteristics of an answer to a calling. The migrant leaves in order to return to his parents a dignity lost. In the subconscious, this means obeying the fourth commandment: *Honor thy father and mother*. They are not ashamed of poverty, no, because many of them were still living it as beatitude. It is the poverty filled with pain, it is the home and streets turned traveling hospitals daily which drive these migrant Christs to embark on their journey.

For the migrant, the difference between living in poverty with dignity or in shame depends on different factors. First is the perception that poverty has crossed the line between survival and death; then there is the bombardment of the media, of current trends, of those who return from the North flaunting shallow wealth: whoever has stayed behind is now the object of ridicule, of silent accusation that hints at failure and even cowardice.

There is, on the one hand, the perception of being an object of scorn, of being worthless and on the other hand, the feeling that he has an unexpressed right to have and even to be what the others flaunt. Thus begins the dramatic and complex process which will ultimately lead to the decision to leave. There is a

confusing call inviting him to leave a now intolerable situation, there is a break with his environment and with himself which clamors for self-improvement. The eyes of his loved ones—parents, children, spouses, look absent and tired, and this is interpreted as a plea for something more.

*I looked around my village, a stump destroyed by a war between brothers. The milpas, destroyed, the mother land divided to the core, ripped apart by the rage of brothers at war.*⁸

The civil war in Central America indeed left devastation, enemies and poverty; however, it also caused people to reconsider ancestral values such as land and brotherhood. This “land divided to the core” is perceived by the departing migrant as leaving Eden, as abandoning the place chosen by God because of a repeated sin. It is the same concept expressed between sobs and with dignity by a Honduran from Ceiba, when he told us: *If I have to die of hunger in my country, I prefer to die taking a step towards the horizon and leaving behind a homeland made bitter by the squandering of its leaders*. In this passage and others like it, there is an unexpressed desire to rescue this homeland, to one day return its dignity. Here the exodus once again becomes a mission. *Yes, there is no reason to hesitate because it is God’s will and though we may leave crying we want to return singing.*⁹

⁷ Peruvian migrant, 1989.

⁸ A farm worker from Tenancingo (El Salvador) after the peace accords, 1992.

⁹ Nicaraguan refugee in a camp in Honduras, Easter 1989.



This element of God's will plays a part in the decision to emigrate, accompanies the migrant along his long journey, and stays with him even after having crossed the border and settled in the new land. The migrant lives the will of God, a will that our Western, or modern logic unloads on the malice of those that plan the economy or determine policies. The Latin American has long since created a relationship for his daily and historical world where he draws water as if from a personal well. This relationship is perhaps virtual for philosophers and at the same time, too real.

*One day we will return to our homeland, this is the hope which keeps us alive.*¹⁰

*Hope cannot fill our stomachs, but it sustains us!*¹¹

The migrant joins the matrimony of faith and hope in his life in an ever-harmonious swing. In his stories of blind faith fed by hope that illuminates and sustains him, I am reminded of flying trapeze artists swinging in the abyss. Every minute one has the impression that they will fall and then with one hand they always grab onto a crossbar which appears out of nowhere. Their hope is a hope which lights up the night, anticipates the end of the tunnel, infects the nocturnal gloom and so

many now determined migrants who wish they could sit and rest along their journey. Sometimes this hope becomes a stone you have to kick along to keep in front of you.

Everything seems to close in around your dreams; the trails become traps, the checkpoints authentic Caudine gallows.

The Farewell Ritual

The farewell ritual begins with one last visit to the countryside, to the *milpas* which in most cases have been mortgaged or sold to pay for travel expenses or to pay the *coyote*.¹² This last look at his country just before saying goodbye to his mother is filled with sadness. For the Latin American farm worker, his land and his mother still epitomize the elementary project of Creation, it is a filial relationship.

I've lost everything, Father, everything I had with me has been stolen, even those four Colones I was paid for my little piece of land. It had been the breast that fed my children and my wife, but it was starting to dry up.¹³

I felt like crying, but I couldn't speak and tears wouldn't fall. That land was left to me by my father, the place of his labor and the sweat of his brow.¹⁴

¹⁰ Guatemalan refugee in the Tziscaw camp, Chiapas.

¹¹ Farm worker in the war zone, Chalatenango, El Salvador.

¹² In migrant and common slang, as well as that of immigration authorities, the *coyote* or *pollero* is a person hired to take migrants to their destination, passing through check points, traveling out of the way routes and crossing borders. It is a human trafficker or people smuggler.

¹³ Salvadoran migrant from the Departamento de la Unión.

¹⁴ Nicaraguan campesino.



These testimonials precede the farewell to his mother and to his home. Families gather together, often the neighbors as well: among the poor there are no borders and no one is a stranger. They share a few sweets, a drink, they give last minute advice. Then comes the time for receiving packages to give to relatives and friends who have already gone North. This is followed by gifts of saint images or prayer cards belonging to a loved one, the bestowing of the Scapular or the Rosary, small photos of his children, his mother, of his home, and an entire series of contacts, addresses, telephone numbers written on scraps of paper, wrinkled and worn from pants pockets. (They remind me of the *litterae comunione* in the first Christian communities, when they bade farewell to someone going on a journey). Now it is time to give his children, wife, and mother one last embrace. This is accompanied by the sprinkling of holy water and a blessing, making the sign of the cross on the forehead or chest, if they are Catholic.

In this migrant farewell ritual, with its spontaneous prayers and prayer cards carried in pockets, we have a simple Sacramentary, with no scriptures but in its own liturgical language. The small village sends him off like the elderly Tobias sending off Tobit, accompanied by the archangel Raphael, who in our case, changes names: it is the guardian angel, the

patron Virgin of the village or country, a thaumaturgic protective saint or patron saint of his grandmother or village priest, the Blessed Scalabriniano when they pass through our Migrant Shelters, and many more.

*I left laughing, even making jokes with some fellow travelers, but inside my sadness seemed like a heavy stone that was crushing me and I couldn't get out from under it. I didn't want to turn around and look back. I could hear my mother sobbing; even the birds seemed to cry.*¹⁵

Roots have been cut: pieces of flesh and land leave for the North. — *The sweat of the poor is their silent weeping.*¹⁶

The decision to migrate penetrates the migrant's heart and the refugee's heart even more, almost like experiencing death; it crushes his roots until it pulls them out. He knows he will have to jump over a large ditch, open a void between him and those he left behind, disappear over the horizon, accept being swallowed up by the silence of time, by the uncertainty of tomorrow. At the same time, he wants to be attached to his home: he does this with promises, memories, with kisses followed by tears.

Too often we are spectators, watching a river of migrants flow over our borders, loitering around our plazas and squares. We ignore their tragedy, the wound which is still

¹⁵ A young man from San Marcos, Guatemala.

¹⁶ Undocumented from Ecuador, 1999.



open because of a decision the majority wish they never had to make. This rupture, when the migrant, reminiscent of Christ, departs, has as his final destination the mouths of his home, the whining of little children who plead to Divine Providence to intervene, to become a guardian angel.

Every migrant is recognized in this prayer of Christ. He asks God to protect his family, to take care of them, that one day he may be reunited with them. It is a bridge which stretches until all its seams groan under the emotion of the farewell before going North: the Lord's Prayer, the Sign of Peace, Communion and Final Blessing.

So many times we have witnessed this breaking of the bread among the undocumented, everyone sharing what they have, putting their hand out to a stranger, lifting up those who have fallen, giving everything, even their poverty. It is the silent sacrifice of thousands of migrants, that later, though not always, becomes a memorial service. Following a death that leaves no trace, defeat and oblivion confine this sacrifice in a mass grave that only the resurrection will deliver in new skies and new land.

¹⁷ Blessed J.B. Scalabrini, 1897.

¹⁸ These are nicknames used by undocumented Central Americans arriving at the Mexican border: the uniformed vultures are the Mexican soldiers who are the first to ask for a bribe, the beast is Mexico in general with all its obstacles, the minefield refers to the endless amount of checkpoints which form a vertical border stretching from the Suchiate river, which separates Mexico from Guatemala, to the Rio Bravo in Texas; the Greens and the Blues are the Immigration officials or sector agents; the Mara Salvatruchas are ruthless gangs who attack migrants along the way; the steel guillotine is the freight train used by most migrants and has taken lives and limbs.

¹⁹ Manuel, from the Departamento del Paraíso, was killed when he was dragged by a freight train in Matías Romero, Chiapas, 1999.

Experiences on the Road

The migrant's experiences on the road towards an unknown land, imagined only from what he has seen on television, from the exaggerations of many who claim to know it without ever actually having been there, or from those who have returned and describe it to be like a another planet, combine the route of the Patriarchs and God's people in their exodus on the one hand, and Christ's Via Crucis on the other.

The problems start as soon as the migrant takes a step outside of the village, from nostalgia and *the subtle ill (tuberculosis) that accompanies the migrant*,¹⁷ to the officer seeking a payoff, or the fellow traveler who claims to have no money and asks you to buy him a bite to eat. Then the borders, the *uniformed vultures, the beast, the minefield, the Greens and the Blues* (the INS and Police uniforms) *the Maras Salvatrucha and the steel guillotine (the freight train)*.¹⁸

Altars and Votive Stones

*Pious hands put up a cross along the train tracks for Manuel.*¹⁹

Manuel's brother found him six months after his death, in a mass



grave in the Matías Romero cemetery in Oaxaca, Mexico. Someone, however, had put up a small cross with his name on it. These are tombstones of resurrection, the last broken cry towards the beyond. It's not an animal, or an anonymous nobody who has died, which is what many people consider the undocumented to be: it is a call to life. In other cases, the name of the undocumented, or simply *friend-companion*, is written on a rock. I have been very moved in front of a small mound erected by some friends on the border between Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, California to remember those who have died attempting to cross this border. It is a celebratory altar, where nature chants and liberates their liturgy and song.

Signs, flowers and candles are frequently placed on specific points along the border to mark and remember a story, an encounter, a dangerous escapade, or as an expression of thanks. Migrants wish to leave this memory behind in the churches or chapels that take them in. They want to pay for it; they want it to cost them something.

*At times, birdsong seemed to be our own chained, pilgrim lament.*²⁰

Another account, which perhaps reaches a dramatic peak in a historical context and for a group of committed Christians, reveals how the liturgy of the people can express trust, faith and abandonment at the same time.

Looking into space, as if going back in time, the eldest began:

There were various groups, Catholics and Evangelicals, who met up along the way until there were almost 800 of us. We walked for an entire month, not knowing where or in what direction we were going. There were times when we wanted to turn back because we didn't have anything to eat; some of the elderly were unable to continue walking. However, we kept on going. Daily prayer sessions, the joining of hands and pleas to God sustained our hope. Sometimes we sang hymns, but in a low voice, for fear of being discovered.

We arrived at a point where the "Contra" (guerrilla movement against the Sandinista revolution and its government) that was ahead of us had clashed with the Sandinista troops who had been waiting for them. We started to read the Word of God and to sing while the leaves were falling off the trees like rain because of the explosions. We had to get out of there, to cross between the two opposing sides because if we didn't they would kill us all. So, feeling the Lord's powerful hand protecting us, we crossed between the two enemy lines. We could feel the bullets flying past us, making the grass dance as we ran or crawled across the ground. We were able to cross unscathed, with the exception of one woman who was hit in the ankle by a bullet. The psalms set the rhythm of our steps in the pilgrimage of hope towards life and freedom.²¹

²⁰ Story of a group of Salvadoran farm workers escaping military persecution, 1986.

²¹ Testimony of a group of Nicaraguan refugees en Guásimos, Departamento del Paraíso, Honduras, 1987.



Peacemakers

*Believing in peace, the fruit of justice and love, is an expression of faith in God and at the same time, a way of believing in Mankind. Peace is possible.*²²

One common, discriminatory aspect working against migrants, perhaps on a global level, is turning them into scapegoats for all negative events which occur in the country that took them in. An analysis, albeit superficial, of the glottology of expressions used to describe a migrant who tries to cross the U.S. border, shows us a downward trend. During the years of the farm worker program, the expression was simply *wet back*, later it became *undocumented*, then *illegal* and today *criminal* or even *terrorist*.

The migrant comes looking for work and above all, is not looking for confrontations or to relive conflicts which he has left behind, especially if fleeing from civil war. It is this same insecurity, the fear which forms his second skin, which fosters a peaceful attitude and at times, submission.

*We have two calloused hands which want to work, and become like the blades of a plough. Why do they accuse us of being criminals or ideological terrorists?*²³

Latin American farm workers and migrants innately fulfill the vocation of continuing to contribute to God's work of creation. Peace is the context for the religious framework on which they model their plans and dreams.

The Earth is for Everyone

*The Earth was made for walking on from one end to the other, which is why God created it. Why shouldn't I be allowed in? Man has invented borders. The earth is our mother who gives birth; she herself is life, which is why we love and protect her.*²⁴

The two beliefs regarding the earth, one, that it is a possession, and the other that it is a place where a human being can walk and interact with others, come into conflict. The concept of Mother Earth, so strong among the indigenous of Latin America, especially in the Guatemalan Highlands, does not allow for the idea of imposed boundaries, that the Earth is bound by the few, that it cannot speak everyone's language because it was forced to wear a muzzle in the name of national sovereignty, regional economies or national security. It is the cosmic vision of those who do not roam the Earth as invaders, declaring war on all rivals.

*Why do they use barbed wire and vicious dogs when all we want to do is provide two able hands to work the earth that God made for us all and where there are areas that are still neglected?*²⁵

It is a bitter truth which goes beyond a simple complaint or the anguish of clashing with an absurd world. It is the still innocent awe of the farm worker who feels joined by a filial love to Mother Earth, the source which feeds him and his children, and someone, on the other hand, who irrationally destroys this vital

²² Salvadoran Delegate of the Word, who went to the Canadian Embassy in Mexico seeking asylum.

²³ Migrant from Copan, Honduras, 2001.

²⁴ Undocumented migrant from Guatemala, 1998.

²⁵ Excerpt from a prayer of the faithful in Caños Zapata, Tijuana, right on the line that divides Mexico and the USA, during an outdoor mass, closely watched by US Immigration agents (1986).



relationship. Furthermore, the undocumented is facing a land that is fenced in and militarized which he cannot enter, rejected like a criminal or a dog, wondering what sin he has committed or what fault it is of his. Reliving the Genesis experience, being banished from Eden, naked and ashamed, is like a recurring nightmare. Why? It is a question which has no answer.

Whoever turned this land into your exile and your prison knows nothing of your pains, your feelings, while your smile fades, but never completely... This land is your paradise and your exile, your prison and your freedom, your life... and your death. Perhaps someday, somehow, somewhere, we will be able to turn gunpowder volcanoes into green mountains, so we can plant vegetables in minefields, pray to the many crosses and, above all, carry our children in our arms and take up the ploughs that we pushed before.²⁶ We took off our shoes, covering our feet in the dust of the road that was leading us to this land which would provide us with bread to eat, even if it also made us sweat.²⁷

The undocumented does not consider the new land as the end goal of his migration or as a promised land; it is simply a land where he will earn his daily bread for himself and for his family, a workplace, where, perhaps due to inexplicable circumstances, he

is paid more there than for doing the same job in his homeland. It is an extension of the land he just left, the same earth God lends to humankind, if you will. While Egypt symbolized a land of slavery and exile for the people of Israel, for the migrant the land left behind remains the cradle of his roots, the object of nostalgia, where he can curl up with his loneliness, find refuge from his depression and sustain the hope of returning tomorrow with bread that is less bitter.

The Memorial—Celebration of the Past Being Lived Today

The testimonies of our companions from the camp and the stories they told us was what sustained the hope for our new tomorrow. The hymns begun in our villages and invented along the road remind us of the psalms of exile from Babylonia and transform the soul in a torment of freedom.²⁸

Memories, stories and even legends that circulate among the undocumented represent a deviation, a divide I would say between the Biblical-Liturgical memorial and the illusion of El Dorado. There is a razor's edge which at times separates the two dimensions, if only in contradictory appearances. Those who were the first to travel the road, those who write or call, those who use internet chat with digital photos and even use the language of their new country, have the power to unravel a dance of dreams that later translates into the impetus to make

²⁶ Poem written by a Nicaraguan refugee in Teupasenti, Honduras, 1987.

²⁷ An undocumented migrant crossing into the United States, taking off his shoes so the Border Patrol wouldn't hear him (not knowing that they have sensors in the ground).

²⁸ Words of some the Delegates of the Word, exiled by the civil war in Nicaragua.



them reality. They are stories mixed with pain, which do not hide defeat or the urge to throw in the towel and yet always end in an encounter with Divine Providence. It seems as though the motto of many migrants is the expression of Abraham: *God will provide!* (Gen.22,14)

Listening to their experiences, becoming a pseudo journalist, gives you the impression of entering a surreal world, listening to reports of war, achievements and joy. They have their own vernacular, a series of nicknames and codes that they use to identify you as one of them, or on the contrary, as an outsider who has not experienced the same adventure. In this case, the curtains are closed: you could be an infiltrator, an Immigration official, a *coyote* or someone sent in reconnaissance so they can rob you further down the road.

Checkpoint locations and how to get around them, the most reliable bus companies, who and how to bribe, food stands that won't deny you a taco, contacts who always have pseudonyms and never give their real name; all of this forms the framework of a memorial which does not pretend to be liturgical, but does have all of the components for becoming a celebration.

Migrant Faith

Sitting with migrants, their faith has inspired me, a faith that surpasses

many philosophical and conceptual categories and I have been forced to rethink the theology of faith itself.

Thank God we are alive! This is the typical expression of many migrants who survive the daily war taking place on borders, roads, trails, out of the way routes, facing all types of harassment at every turn. This faith shows humble hearts the way towards a God who surpasses all failure and all logic, giving them a second skin and putting them in a constant liturgical dialogue with God.

*He is the only true liberator of our people. His powerful hand has been with us and He will give us victory.*²⁹

Faith is assurance of things hoped for (Hb.11,1): hope is the greatest sacrament of the migrant faith. The migrant himself creates the motives for his hope, imagines a horizon always in sight and within reach, thus maintaining his faith. It is an amazing faith, where misfortune loses heart, like the theologian thief who bets on a defeated Christ. It is the experience of whoever is expecting something or someone, surpassing all types of resignation. Spoken in the evangelical words of the people: *Where there's a will, there's a way...*

*The refugee wears the sackcloth of exile, almost like a modern leper, but Christ will save us for our leprous, Samaritan faith.*³⁰

From various encounters and discussions with thousands of migrants who have crossed my path in Latin America, there are certain

²⁹ Nicaraguan refugee in Guasimos, Honduras, 1989.

³⁰ Commentary of a Delegate of the Word in the camps of Teupasenti, Honduras, 1989.



expressions which may disturb a European and will cause him to stop and reflect on the expression in a philosophical, theological and anthropological context. The use of expressions such as: *God first—God willing—God only knows—God before all—it's God's will—there's a reason I'm here, etc.* to mention only a few, prompts critical analysis among citizens of the so-called first world, so accustomed to categorically separating society and history from faith, therefore considering it from an anthropological perspective, where more often than not it is attributed to simple ignorance or fear of a mystery or unexplained divinity, and finally putting it down to superstition.

I must confess that this last impression was the one I had initially. A mixture of popular religiosity joins resignation in an attempt to escape through God from an inevitable and tragic destiny. It was walking with my ears open and my mind free of prejudice that led me to discover how the Latin American migrant, son of his people and its profoundly religious culture, lives in a subterranean world of religiosity now extinct in many parts of Europe.

In this atmosphere one must ponder, *is it possible to have faith without practicing religion?* Clearly, among the majority of migrants, from the point of view of their ancestral faith, there is no corresponding sacramental praxis, liturgy or communal commitment. However,

the migrant's faith is wagering on a personal, concrete God along with the God of Jesus Christ. He considers his faith simply an inherent option and concentrates on what is fundamental. He barter with God, if you will, for the minimum: a job, food for his family, survival. It is faith with no frills, chained to an anchor in the abyss, hanging over the void between a father-mother God and his children.

*The refugee is a walking dead man who has no name, no homeland, but he has God as his home...*³¹

It is a question of two parallel worlds: the logical world, that of philosophers and mathematicians, different, as Blaise Pascal would say, and the humble world whose only anchor of hope is the mysterious benevolence of God. His house is always open anytime and anywhere, it is a direct link, a *hotline* between heaven and earth.

Look, Father, for me, speaking to God is like going to a cemetery. Now, don't be alarmed: you can go whenever you feel like it, anytime night or day, and you always find the dead, you don't need an appointment, let alone have to spend hours in a waiting room. No one interrupts you, nor do they tell you they have visitors or are waiting for someone more important. You speak to them and you may think they don't answer you, but this is not true. You talk and you listen to them, and you leave with a stronger bridge over the void and the silence. That is how I speak to my God.³²

³¹ Peruvian migrant passing through Tapachula, summer 2001.

³² Migrant from Zacatecas, Tijuana, B.C., 1988.



At first this comparison with a cemetery seemed to be very unsavory, esoteric and somewhat chilling.

However, I had to recognize that once again, the Latin American's perception of his religiosity transcends logic and faith, uniting his present life and his ancestors, who left a guiding light to find the way to this God of mystery, *closeness and togetherness*.³³ There is a direct link with divinity, with the beyond.

*To speak to God, you don't need a phone card: you can always call collect.*³⁴

They seem defeated at times, when they come to our shelters. Even their clothes have worn away, revealing their vulnerable skin, covered with fungus that goes from their toenails to their groin, and if they don't have scars from being attacked, they have bruises from falls or beatings. Out of instinct and compassion we ask them why they want to keep on going, and if they wouldn't be better off going back. They simply look up at the sky and answer: *God willing we will make it. He can open all doors.*³⁵

Nonetheless, I cannot ignore or deny the other side of the coin, where the migrant or refugee, in order to gain passage or resolve his immediate problem, turns to trickery and deceit. A story made up of lies and circumvention. The migrant resorts to this ruse again and again to get out of

difficult situations, gain a little compassion, move hearts made of stone, only to later ask for God's forgiveness.

*Our road runs through the middle of a minefield. Look, Father, there in El Salvador, during the civil war, we knew where the front lines were. Here we are surrounded by an invisible fence; anyone could be your friend or your enemy.*³⁶

The migrant will use any ploy in order to survive. He feels like a caged animal because in this country, the permit for hunting migrants is valid all year round. Given this context, we can understand the lies, the half truths, and the false identities. In any event, for the authorities and for his homeland that exiled him, he is a faceless nobody. One name, then, is the same as another; one identity can be switched for another: I am always clandestine. Here we are reminded of the psalms of exile, for example, by the persecution of the innocent and the injustice suffered by the poor.

*What difference does it make where we come from? What matters is knowing where we are going...*³⁷

Put in the language of modern-day helmsmen, when a migrant sets out he automatically steers the rudder in the direction of his chosen destination; the farewell, the journey, the dreams and crossroads all point towards his goal, towards his future. Hernán Cortés' gesture of burning his

³³ Expression from the Náhuatl religion.

³⁴ Undocumented migrant in Tijuana, B.C., 1988.

³⁵ Undocumented migrant in Tijuana, B.C., 1988.

³⁶ Words of an ex guerrilla from Chalatenango, El Salvador, passing through Tapachula, 1999.

³⁷ Words of a Nicaraguan girl in the Cañón Zapata, Tijuana, 1986.



ships behind him so no one could turn back is the prototype for every migrant.

This became evident to me a short time ago in a rather lengthy encounter, lasting several weeks, with a young man born in El Salvador in the middle of the civil war. When he was 6 months old, his mother managed to escape and flee to the United States, where they started a new life. He grew up, speaking almost exclusively English, attending *gringa* schools (as he put it), until his mother, in still unexplained circumstances, was shot to death. He didn't have any relatives and moved from house to house until one day, when he was 18 years old, he crossed over to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. Upon attempting to return to Texas, he was asked for identification. He nonchalantly answered that he was an American and then realized that he had no papers.

He was deported to Mexico and from there, to El Salvador, having said he was born there. For the next six months, he bounced around like a ping-pong ball; he didn't know where he was born, if he had brothers or sisters, or who his father was: he was an orphan with no roots and no identity. In one of our conversations, I mentioned that he could try to get citizenship by requesting help from the United Nations. To my surprise he answered, *Who cares for a citizenship? I've to arrange my life, first.*

The migrant does not think of his journey in terms of how far he is from his homeland and from his past, but rather how much further he has to go to reach his destination. It is an attitude of freedom which involves much more than just going on a trip or taking a journey. It is, basically, the attitude of someone who never puts his foot down, ready for any exodus.

With this same attitude, he faces the shock of the language of the new land where he has settled. There, the liturgy is celebrated in his "own" language, but it is not the same. The words are difficult because the Church doesn't keep up with the jargon of the *batos*. He therefore feels uncomfortable because he encounters a language that creates a gap between celebration and the popular form of expression.³⁸

We witness here a strange phenomenon seen in the Church, among migrants, as well as certain humble sectors of God's people. The same thing happens on other fronts: popular traditions and religious devotion are deeply-rooted and when change is introduced, strong, even violent, resistance results.

One general reason for this is the uncertainty that change creates. Another, above all among humble people, is found, in my opinion, in the motivation that has led to establishing and imbedding a popular tradition: the concrete and daily experience of problems that can only be resolved by transcendence. This is

³⁸This observation is also valid for children and adolescents who attend mass because their language is very different, changing constantly according to current trends, technology, etc.



the answer to health, to rain which waters the earth, to work, to finding a partner, among others, and generally this tradition becomes legend and sacred testament.

Suddenly, the symbolism and expressiveness used on the migrant's journey is subdued when he settles into his new community, which is no longer a migrant community, even if it is comprised of migrants. Here in the new land and new church, everything is predetermined and is very different from his homeland, not to mention from the informal liturgy of the road. In the new community, the migrant no longer hears his language, the jargon of the *batos* who speak to God or the answers He gives to so many others like him.

Overcoming Creeds and Parish Confines

During the migrant adventure, there is no distinction between Catholics, Evangelicals, Protestants or Buddhists because they all walk the same road and jump into the same human river flowing to the North. This solidarity, the feeling of belonging to the same family, where each member speaks to a God who protects and listens to all, eventually becomes a refuge community. The beliefs that they had lived by in the past have now turned into walls and ditches.

The same may be said of the parish: throughout the journey, a Catholic church or Protestant assembly could be a tent or shed

where people can pray, feel the evangelical embrace, ask for help and find solace. It is a universal church, where no one is a foreigner and everyone is invited to break bread at the table of the Lord. Once migrants arrive at a formal parish, they face the confines of registering, office hours, confession schedules, marriage and baptism preparation classes, making an appointment to speak to a priest, to mention but a few.

I've noticed, for example, that the person who says the blessing before a meal or during a break along the road, is designated as the Delegate of the Word (it should be recognized that the Evangelicals take more initiative than the Catholics).

We have seen before how the migrant is not rebellious and resentful because of his bitter luck. God continues to be merciful, a God of Providence, a God who accompanies and protects us. It is a theological aspect which at least pastors should take into account, especially during their sermons where they run the risk of pushing the undocumented back down the hole that they came out of. The God of Judgment and Fear does not belong in the migrant's religious world.

These not- so- antiquated concepts should be avoided because they could potentially alienate someone who has left a Via Crucis and found in God his Veronica, his Simon of Cyrene, his Mary and lastly, his Christ who instantly promised His kingdom when He was asked for help. A saying has been coined in the



Scalabrini Study Centers that goes:

When migration moves, borders move.

It is a law of socio-cultural anthropology that the receiving society, though perhaps with a discriminatory or even hostile attitude towards the foreigner, adopts new customs, foods, forms of speaking and behaving which gradually begin to change it. Without going into the issue of social integration and

enculturation, this coming together with one another in the Church, where we need no borders, should be recognized as an historic event of salvation. A community which takes in a migrant, in good faith or in bad, must be open to change, just as the migrant cannot expect to impose his entire world on the new community or pretend to transplant the there and then to the here and now.

