

Let them feel that our *Church is with them*

[Conference talk delivered by +Ruperto Cruz Santos, Bishop of Balanga and CBCP Episcopal Chairman for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People during the Fourth Philippine Conference on the New Evangelization (PCNE 4) at University of Santo Tomas, Manila on Saturday, July 29, 2017, at 3:30 pm].

My talk this afternoon is about leaving. It is about the people who leave, and the people they leave behind and the people they go to. Leaving always entails some kind of drama. I remember a very old Tagalog movie where a beautiful woman was shown at the airport (of course, the old one where we could still see the people going up the stairs to the plane). She was holding back tears as she waved a white handkerchief towards a man going up the plane, while in the background somebody was crooning: “Kumakaway ka pa irog ng ako’y iwan, upang magtungo sa ibang bayan.” But even simple leaving can bring about emotions.

My brother-priests and religious sisters, do you remember the very first day when you told your parents that you wanted to enter the seminary or the convent? What about the time when you actually left your home, parents and loved ones and took the bus or ship for your religious houses or seminaries? You were sad and lonely, were you not? They cried, did they not? They were anxious and worried. What you, and I, experienced then, is what our overseas Filipinos experience. There is the drama of the long good-bye, at the house, at the airport or at the terminal.

Let me share with you this scenario. Rolando and Luisa had been engaged for several years. They were truly in love with each other. They got their college degrees and found jobs after graduation. But one day Luisa confided to Rolando, *"I want to work abroad, in Italy. It is for my family and also for our future. Will you allow me to go and work abroad?"*

Rolando became sad but managed to reply, *"You know I want to say: Remain here with me. But if it is for the sake of your family, why should I be a hindrance to your plan? Therefore, even if it means separation and heartache, I give you my consent."*

Luisa looked at Rolando with deep affection as she confessed that she was not sure when she would be able to return home because it might take her years to fulfill her goal. She asked him, *"Will you still be here waiting for me when I return?"* With trust and confidence, Rolando told Luisa, *"I know God will bring you back to me."* And that was how Luisa became a migrant worker, and Rolando, a loved one she left behind.

Our migrants are not with us. We only see them in pictures, on Facebook, or when we do Skype or Facetime. We can hear only their voices sometimes. We cannot touch them, hug them, and pat them. We do not see their hurts and pain, because they silently endure them, hiding them in smiles or in the false lilt of their voices. We, too, miss them and are sad and lonely like them. Separated from them we keep faith that God will reunite us; that He will bring us together again.

Man is always moving. He leaves one place and arrives in another. He is a migrant. Migration is defined as *"an actual movement or willingness to move at any given opportunity."* A migrant is a

person who goes to another place or country and remains there for a certain time and for a certain purpose. Saint Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Laborem Exercens* affirms that "*Man has the right to leave his native land for various reasons—and also the right to return—in order to seek better conditions of life in another country*" (23). Blessed Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra* stated "*The right of the family to migrate*" and that "*freer movement of goods, capital and men would lessen inequalities among nations*" (53).

The Philippine Church's Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People addresses the concerns of those leaving to work abroad and of the families who are left behind. The commission has chaplains who accompany them and attend to their spiritual and sacramental needs. Along with giving this pastoral care, the commission also works so that the migrants' rights are protected, their well-being upheld and their dignity respected.

Our migrants belong to three categories: The First are the permanent migrants. They leave our country, settle and reside in the countries that receive them. They continuously work, and perform whatever is necessary to acquire citizenship. Examples of permanent migrants are most of the Filipinos in the United States, Canada and Australia. **Second** are the temporary migrants. They go abroad only to work in order to be able to earn more, or in some cases, to simply have jobs that can provide for their own needs and the needs of their families and to ensure a better future for them and for themselves. Once they fulfill their goals they return home to their families and, hopefully, to enjoy with them the fruits of their labors.

And in the third category are our Filipino overseas workers who are in unauthorized situations or those who are considered undocumented. They are also known as TnT, or "*tago ng tago*" because they always play hide and seek with the authorities of the countries they are in. And sadly, there are also migrants in these category who, because of material gains, resort to another form of TnT or "*turo ng turo*" to point to authorities the undocumented workers.

According to the latest statistics there are about 10.2 million Filipino migrant workers. This makes the Philippines rank number 8 worldwide as a migrant sending country. The top five migrant receiving countries are Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, Kuwait, Singapore and Qatar. Women account for 51.5 percent of these migrants, and most belong to the 25-29 years old age group. One out of three Filipino migrant workers is a laborer or an unskilled worker as household service provider.

There are about 1.8 million Filipino workers deployed every year. And according to the Department of Finance our migrant workers poured in a remittance of 24.7 billion US dollars during the first quarter of this year, 2017.

Truly, man is migrant, always on the move, ever seeking what is good for his loved ones. And life is basically a journey. We travel to some place which is prosperous, to somewhere peaceful. We journey for the sake of our family to sustain their needs, to achieve a stable life for them and to secure their future by providing them the necessary support towards achieving success. Now as our "*brother's keeper*" (Genesis 4:9) we must accompany them and contribute our time and talent for their good. As their pastors, we shepherd and serve them to make them feel and assure them that the Church is with them. Indeed the Philippine Church walks with them, and working

for them such that wherever they are, here or abroad, they can confidently proclaim, the "*Church is with us.*"

We are with our migrants when we see and share in their pain and help them out of their predicaments. When we listen to their experiences, we learn a lot and this should move us to do something to uplift their social situations. In my many years of being with migrants, most especially in Europe, and also as I was a migrant myself, I have identified the difficulties and irregularities besetting migrants, first in the sending countries, like us:

1. Illegal recruitment, that is, recruitment without any job offer
2. Excessive placement fees (in some countries, fees are allowed but regulated)
3. Loans that are offered but come with almost usurious interest
4. "*training*" in the form of unpaid labor, in our term "*kaltas o sahod*"

Migrants face difficulties not only in their home country but also in the country that receives them. These include:

1. Withholding of their passports
2. Substitution of Contracts.
3. Delayed or non-payment of wages
4. Withholding of food (you have to buy or procure your own food).

In relation to food, allow me to digress with this story that a Filipina migrant worker related to me about the her ward, a five year old girl whom she had been taking care of since the time she was born. The girl went to the grocery with her mother and in there the mother asked her what she wanted to get. The girl replied that she needed bread and water. The mother was surprised.

“Why bread and water and not chocolates or ice cream which are the usual things children crave for? Besides they have so much bread and water in the house,” the mother said. The girl told her mother that she needed the bread and water to give to Tata, her nanny, the Filipina migrant worker. The mother told her daughter that Tata can get and eat from their supply of bread and biscuits.

The girl then confided to her mother that she always heard her Tata and her friends often asking each other when and where there is bread or when and where there is water. The girl didn't understand that for Filipino migrant workers in those places "*saan mayroon tinapay*" or "*saan may tubig*" means the celebration of the Holy Eucharist for tinapay and of Baptism, for tubig.

To continue...

5. There are NO days-off, but there are long working hours
6. Working for more than one employer (or also working for the parents or extended families)
7. Kafala system in Gulf regions

From this enumeration you can already see some of the usual travails of our migrant workers. Migrants are not statistics. They are not numbers. They have names. They are persons. And they have life stories. But others look on them differently, or with indifference. This is how others see migrants:

1. For the governments of migrant sending countries, they are sources of remittances
2. For the government of migrant receiving countries, they are workers, just laborers, their properties, thus one may say, slaves.
3. To recruitment agencies, migrants means business
4. For the non-government agencies, migrant are victims
5. And for their families, migrants are their hope and source for more economic opportunities and a better future.

Let me introduce to you Rosalinda. At the very early hour of five in the morning, Rosalinda would already at the *fermata* (bus stop) to wait for the bus that would take her to her place of work. Once, there was a *sciopero* (bus strike). So she had to walk from Baldo degli Ubaldi to Via del Corso, a distance of almost five kilometers. She could cancel and call her employer, and excused herself from work because of the *sciopero* and it would be but just and fair. But she did not. She chose to walk to reach the house of her employer.

Her friends asked her why she did so. Was it about the money and the dire need to earn more or just to be praised by her employers. "*No, it was not like that,*" she replied. She said, "*My employer has no one to cook for herself, no one to feed her and give her medicines. I walked for work on that day to show this is how much we love our work and how we really care for those we serve and work for. I did that because I am a Filipino, and loving and caring are inherent in our nature.*"

Now knowing the difficult and dehumanizing conditions of our Filipino migrant workers how does the Church help them, care for them and journey with them? We cannot do so simply with ideas, with symbolic acts or slogans. The only way is through actions. And these actions should be more palpably seen from the migrant receiving countries. And these are the four imperative actions:

First, let them come, and welcome them

Second, let them be safe, and protect them

Third, let them develop, and promote their wellbeing

Lastly, let them live fully, fruitfully and integrate them into the local community

First is to welcome. Migrant workers should be able to go freely to another country. They should not be forced or be led there by false promises. Forced labor deprives migrants of their humanity and dignity. Working abroad must be by choice, not the only option. There is an old Benedictine maxim about what our attitude should be towards migrants: "*venit hospes, venit Christus*" that is, "*when a guest arrives, Christ comes.*"

Migrants are not commodities. They are not exports or simply sources of remittances. As the Book of Genesis stated, "*And so God created them the human beings in God's images, in the divine image did God create the human beings, male and female did God create them*" (1:27) thus as in the image of God, all His creatures must be loved, respected and treated like God.

Second is to protect. Our migrant workers should be safe. They should not be threatened or exploited. Their rights must be protected and their dignity respected. A migrant is a person. He

has feelings, emotions and a history. He is created by God, gifted by God with specific talents and individual skills. Thus he is not a tool for profits nor an instrument for pleasure.

To protect is to safeguard. This means that a migrant is not to be abused or used for one's personal benefits. The Compendium of Social Doctrines of the Church reminds us that "*immigrants from less privileged areas of the earth and their arrival in developed countries should not be perceived as a threat to the highest levels of economic growth*" (217).

Let me share with you another inspiring story of an overseas Filipina migrant Worker. Her employer caught her one time praying the Rosary. She also found out that she was keeping a Bible in her room. The employer warned her and threatened her that she could be reported to the authorities and sent back home. She was admonished by the employer to convert to their religion and then she would not have to worry about anything and she could continue working for them. So what did she do? She calmly told her employer, "I do my work properly and faithfully. But I have a fear of the Lord, my God. It is because of Him that I do not do work that would cause resentment on the part of the people I serve" (*Tapat po ako sa pagtrabaho sa inyo. May takot po ako sa Diyos ko. Dahil po sa Panginoon kong si Hesukristo hindi po ako gumagawa ng masama sa boob ng mga taong paglilingkod ko sa inyo.*)

What she said made an imprint on her employer and caused her to think. It was true that in the many years that she took care of her children no harm befell them and they were growing up to be respectful, obedient and well-behaved. And her house was always in order, clean with nothing lost or missing.

So the husband and wife employers made a decision and told her. "When our daughter Sofia continues her studies in London, you can go with her to take care of her. And there you will be able to practice your religion and live out your faith."

Third is to promote. We ask the host country to allow our migrants to develop their skills and talents, nurture their customs and cultivate their culture. When migrants go to another country, it is not only to labor but also to share their knowledge, skills and expertise. Migrants are not a threat to the labor force of the country. They are not a source of disturbance to the community. The pastoral exhortation of Pope Paul VI *Nemo Est* confirms that a migrant as a person must maintain his or her language and their culture, in whatever place they are.

And **lastly** is to integrate. Let them live fully and fruitfully with one another. There should be no attempts to eradicate their ethnicity. This calls for their adoption by or absorption into the community. It is communion with all, a contrast to exclusivity or isolationism.

To integrate is to unite oneself with the group, with the community. This is what the Universal Catechism of the Church asks from all of us, that "*immigrants are to be received as persons and helped, together with their families, to become a part of the societal life*" (2241). Pope Francis challenges us: "*I want to see the Church get closer to the people.*"

Our Church shows her universality, that is, her catholicity by accepting and treating all persons openly and equally. In the Church, no one is considered a stranger since all are her children.

There is no hostility, no discrimination. She is a Church without walls, without borders. Our Church has no favorites yet she has preferential options for the lost, the least and the least. She practices TLC, that is, tender loving care for the marginalized and for the migrants. And when the Church welcomes the migrants, she recognizes Jesus in them who says "*I am a stranger and you welcome me into your house*" (Matthew 25:36).

Our migrants look up to us. In their needs and difficulties they turn to the Church. And it is the Church they trust and depend. So they need us. Let our response is to tell them "*how can I help you? How do want you want me to serve you?*"

We are the Church, the Body of Christ. We are constantly called to communion in His body. Let this communion be felt by our brothers and sisters who work in foreign lands. Let this communion bring to them our concern and our compassion. Let this communion make us one with them in Jesus Christ.

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