

‘Behold, I Stand At the Door and Knock’: Responding to the Challenge and Opportunities of Migration

In the entrance to the small, roughly made Church in the ‘jungle’ migrant camp in Calais stood a large painting of Christ, the light of the world. The image depicted Jesus, holding a lantern, standing knocking on a door. In the background of the painting was a peaceful image of green rolling hills and to the far horizon, the sea. To all intents and purposes the image was a jarring contrast set against the frozen mud and makeshift tents that made up the camp on the bitterly cold February morning when I visited the camp with the Catholic agency Secours Catholique. Secours Catholique was one of a handful of voluntary organisations with offices and welcome facilities within the camp. Each day - until the camp was demolished by the French authorities - Secours Catholique provided warm drinks, a welcome and information to those who lived there.

The painting itself is significant in all sorts of ways. Painted by a resident of the camp, it represents a long tradition of refugees depicting their experience in dialogue with religious traditions. Migrants are not only those who receive religious care, but also those who interpret faith in the light of their experiences. This should not surprise us, for in the Scriptures God has a rather interesting and revealing tendency to use migrants as his messengers and prophets. God’s people are those who are sent by God to new places (Abraham), those sent to new communities in order to offer them a model of more faithful living (Ruth), and rather more darkly, those called to bring a message of repentance to their own people, but who find themselves displaced, detained or persecuted in the process of remaining faithful to this most difficult of tasks (Jeremiah). These are profoundly resonant stories for many of those who find themselves migrating.

It is also interesting that it is this particular image that the refugee artist should choose. The image draws on both the image in Revelation of Jesus knocking on the door of the soul, proclaiming ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock’ as well as the words of Matthew 7:7 ‘Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you.’ In the lead up to Christmas in Germany there used to be a tradition in which, drawing on this passage from Revelation, Christ would be understood to be knocking on the door of the house, visiting as a migrant in disguise looking to see who would take him in. The themes of waiting, journeying, mystery and the cry that Christ come to us to dwell with us and to overcome the evils and sufferings of the world are core Advent themes. That such themes should take us up into both the experience of the Holy Family themselves in a new way and also into the contemporary chaos and stasis experienced by those seeking refugee from war and collapse of governance, is surely not surprising.

Pope Francis has chosen to make the theme of care and justice for migrants and refugees central to his papacy. He has established a new Vatican body to coordinate the work of the Church in direct assistance and care for migrants and refugees. He has also insisted that the Church should be at the forefront of advocacy work at an international and regional level. The new Vatican Migrant and Refugee Section has been making representations as part of the search for a new Global Compact on Migration. This Compact seeks to ensure that states (the bodies capable of granting protection to those who are displaced) renew their commitment to settling and resettling refugee populations in a manner that safeguards their rights and dignity. The Vatican has issued a twenty point agenda to guide the discussions taking place within the international community on the Compact. The Pope summarises the task through four active tasks that face the world community, shared tasks that belong to both the Church and state: to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate migrants and refugees. He has called for new safe and legal pathways to prevent the growth of illegal and unsafe routes, he has called for action against exploitation for those on the move and for opportunities for work and contribution for those displaced. He has also called for particular attention to the plight of the many unaccompanied child migrants who are especially vulnerable and unable to access rights. Access to education and healthcare are emphasised as vital to safeguarding dignity of migrants and refugees. Finally recognising the need for flourishing local communities the Holy Father writes of the need to ensure a culture of encounter between settled local communities and incoming migrants in order to ensure the common good of all be met.

This contemporary work sits within a much longer tradition of Catholic social teaching on migration that stretches back into the mid 1800's and connects with the foundation of many religious orders. As migration began to change the face of Europe – emigration as much as immigration – the Church recognised the Gospel mandate to care for those on the move. She founded new missions, congregations and teachings in order to respond to this characteristic of modernity. The work of religious orders through education, health and social care amongst migrants was a defining contribution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – often for good, although when reflecting on the child migrant schemes we also need to note often also for ill. The Church is not a solely neutral or heroic actor in the drama of recent migrations. The best of the Church's work with modern migrants built upon the much earlier tradition of sanctuary and hospitality taught by the Patristic fathers and modelled by the early and medieval Church.

Our own challenge is perhaps to imagine how these multiple traditions of Christian life might take form in a new age, an age likely to be defined in new ways by intense waves of migration caused by political violence, famine and climate change as well as economic volatility and by a new climate of fear and hostility. Discerning a new path for the Church in our own times will require us to turn back to the image of the Advent Christ, light of the world, who stands and knocks and bids us find a way to let him transform our lives as he guides a way where there appears to us to be no way.

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