

THE QUEST FOR A THEOLOGY OF MIGRATION

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Abstract

Theology as an academic enterprise is shaped by contexts and new circumstances of God's people, which creates the platform for a relationship between God and His people. This piece focuses on the theology of migration, and by theology of migration it is meant a theological reflection on the issue of migration. It is a reflection that is based on the Christian spirituality. Theology supplies a way of thinking about migration that keeps the human issues at the center of the debate and reminds us that our own existence as a pilgrim people is migratory in nature. The question looming at the horizon of this research is: what has theology to say within the context of migration, which is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored? This piece will therefore go through the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, the Magisterium and Scripture to see what God is saying about the particular context of migrants, refugees and displaced persons of our time, and in this way, recast the migration issue theologically. For the purpose of this study, the historical and contextual methods of inquiry would be employed. This study discovered that the theological analysis of the complex issue of migration can bring about the restoration of the dignity of the human person.

Keywords: Africa, Theology, Migration, Context, Church Fathers, Magisterium

Introduction

Etymologically, theology is from two Greek words Θεο (God) and λογία (study). Brought together, it means the study of God. Far back in history, Plato understood theology as an instrument for demythologizing the Greek Poets. Aristotle on his part saw theology as an aspect of philosophy that explains the cosmos in terms of an Unmoved Mover. When theology began to assume a Christian tone, Origen defined theology as a tool for expressing the Christian understanding of God as distinguished from Christian faith. St Thomas Aquinas used the concept in the context of a methodical elaboration of the truth of divine revelation by reason enlightened by faith (Kanu 2018).

St Anselm defined theology as "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quarens intellectus*). A branch of learning in which the Christian, using his reason enlightened by divine faith, seeks to understand the mysteries of God revealed in and through history (Ephesians 1:9). These mysteries encapsulate the revelation of God himself and his love for humanity - mysteries hidden in God but revealed to humanity through the spirit (1 Cor 2:7-16). Christian theology began with the Apostles, because the Apostles had to reconcile themselves with the message of Christ and because they had to preach the Good News. With the edict of Constantinople in 313, the Church acquired a legal status and its theology began to show the marks of the Church's new situation. As circumstances changed, so too did the character of theology. With the desolation of the Roman Empire in 476 and breakdown of traditional social and political institutions, theology passed to the Monasteries and to theologians like St Anselm, Bernard of Clairvaux, etc. Later, a new theological enterprise began to emerge from the universities

headed by figures like Albert the Great. This spelled the emergence of scholastic theology. As theology has been changed or molded by contexts and new circumstances of God's people, the question looming at the horizon of this research is: what has theology to say within the context of migration, which is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored? This piece will therefore go through the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, the Magisterium and Scripture to see what God is saying about the particular context of migrants, refugees and displaced persons of our time, and in this way, recast the migration issue theologically.

Migration- Trends and Dynamics

The word migration came from a Latin word *migrare*, which means to change one's residence. As the concept took centre stage in discourses after the First and Second World Wars, scholars have tried to define it from their specific perspectives. The geographers lay emphasis on the time and space significance of mobility; sociologists have laid stress on social consequences of mobility whereas importance to economic aspect of migration has been given by the economists (Ndubisi 2013). This notwithstanding, Bhugra and Becker (2019) define migration as "the process of going from one country, region or place of residence to settle in another". The duration of this new settlement varies, but the central focus is on those who move either semi-permanent or permanently to another geographical region. Migration is the movement of a person or group of persons either across an international border or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes. It includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants and persons moving for other purposes including family reunification (Kanu 2019a).

Year	Number of migrants	Migrants as a % of world's population
1970	84,460,125	2.3%
1975	90,368,010	2.2%
1980	101,983,149	2.3%
1985	113,206,691	2.3%
1990	152,563,212	2.9%
1995	160,801,752	2.8%
2000	172,703,309	2.8%
2005	191,269,100	2.9%
2010	221,714,243	3.2%
2015	243,700,236	3.3%

UNDESA 2008 and 2015 2018- 258,000,000 2019- 272,000,000

While the proportion of international migrants globally has increased over this period, it is evident that the vast majority of people continue to live in the country in which they were born.

From the statistics of 2015, with 244 million international migrants out of a global population of 7.3 billion, it meant that 1 in every 30 people were migrants.

With world population at 7.7 billion (World Population Report 2019) and the number of migrants reaching 272 million, 1 in every 28 people are migrants.

Church Fathers on Migration

This section would focus on the thoughts of the Fathers of the Church that has relevance for our understanding of Migration within the parameters of theology.

a. The Epistle of Mathetes

“They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.” (Epistle to Diognetus 5, 1.5)

b. Origen’s commentary on the Letter to the Romans

Origen writes on our duty towards being solicitous and active in offering hospitality: “When it says that we should be solicitous in hospitality (Romans 12:13), it doesn’t only mean that we should receive guests who come to us, but also that we should seek them out, that we should be solicitous, that we examine and inquire diligently everywhere, lest by chance there be a guest in a public square who would have to sleep without a roof.”

c. John Chrysostom on hospitality

“Think of this, then, regarding Christ. He is wandering and a pilgrim, needing shelter; and you spend your time adorning the floor, the walls, and the capitals of the columns, and hanging lamps with golden chains ... All of these treasures can be taken away ...; what you do for your brother who is hungry, an immigrant, or naked, not even the devil himself can take from you.”

d. Saint Augustine on hospitality

“Let no one become proud because he welcomes an immigrant: Christ was a migrant. Christ, welcomed and aided, was greater than those who welcomed and aided him ... Let no one then, my brothers, be proud when he helps the poor, not even in his spirit.”

e. Saint Ambrose of Milan

“We tried everything possible, striving, urging, entreating, pleading, and appealing directly to the heads of governments to prevent the disastrous war. Even when this tragic war broke out and spread horror throughout the world, we still sought by word and deed to mitigate and restrain it; as much as we could. In these sorrowful circumstances, the Church, as a universal mother, failed neither in her duty nor in what was expected of her. She, the "Head of the universal society of love," became, as was her custom, a comfort for the afflicted, a refuge for the persecuted, a homeland for the exiled. No matter how enormous the difficulties that faced us and how impossible the times, we left nothing untried to bring some aid to our suffering sons, without discrimination as to their status or nationality” (Exsul Familia 3).

“We also exerted great efforts for the displaced Jews who were victims of the cruelest persecutions. We approved, initiated, and furthered many works of charity for the relief of countless untold wartime disasters and hardships from which practically no one escaped. But in all these works of charity, we were especially solicitous for prisoners of war, refugees, exiles and our other sons who, for whatever reason, had to wander far from their homelands. And along with these, our chief concerns were children and orphans. Yet this being well known to all, since the record is amply documented, there is no need to recount it further. We can however touch on a few specific items. We also appointed a number of other commissions, among them the commission for the victims of war, for civilian refugees and for those detained in custody. This one was later replaced by the Pontifical Commission for Relief for all those who were in need. Equally worthy of mention are the missions arranged by our Secretariate of State and sent more than once into Germany and Austria, chiefly to provide for the welfare of refugees and displaced persons. Then when peace was finally restored, at least in part, the necessity of providing for millions of refugees became daily more urgent” (*Exsul Familia* 18).

The Magisterium on Migration

This section would pay attention to major church documents and teachings that have consequences for migration.

a. Migration in *Exsul Familia*, 1952

In the apostolic exhortation *Exsul Familia*, 1952, Pius XII offers the Holy Family in exile in Egypt as the icon of massive forced migrations that we are seeing today: “The émigré Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.”

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b. Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World "Gaudium Et Spes" 27, 66 (Dec. 7, 1965).

“In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception, and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee,...or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, “As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you

did it for me" (Matt. 25:40).

"... [W]hen workers come from another country or district and contribute by their labor to the economic advancement of a nation or region, all discrimination with respect to wages and working conditions must be carefully avoided. The local people, moreover, above all the public authorities, should all treat them not as mere tools of production but as persons, and must help them to arrange for their families to live with them and to provide themselves with decent living quarters. The native should also see that these workers are introduced into the social life of the country or region which receives them."

c. Paul VI, "Populorum Progressio," 67, 69 (March 26, 1967)

"We cannot insist too much on the duty of giving foreigners a hospitable reception. It is a duty imposed by human solidarity and by Christian charity, and it is incumbent upon families and education institutions in the host nations...[T]hey should be welcomed in the spirit of brotherly love"

"Emigrant workers should also be given a warm welcome. Their living conditions are often inhuman, and they must scrimp on their earnings in order to send help to their families who have remained behind in their native land in poverty."

d. Pope Paul IV, "Octogesima Adveniens" 17 (1971)

"Right to emigrate: We are thinking of the precarious situation of a great number of emigrant workers whose condition as foreigners makes it all the more difficult for them to make any sort of social vindication, in spite of their real participation in the economic effort of the country that receives them. It is urgently necessary for people to go beyond a narrowly nationalist attitude in their regard and to give them a charter which will assure them a right to emigrate, favor their integration, facilitate their professional advancement and give them access to decent housing where, if such is the case, their families can join them. Linked to this category are the people who, to find work, or to escape a disaster or a hostile climate, leave their regions and find themselves without roots among other people. It is everyone's duty, but especially that of Christians, to work with energy for the establishment of universal brotherhood, the indispensable basis for authentic justice and the condition for enduring peace: "We cannot in truthfulness call upon that God who is the Father of all if we refuse to act in a brotherly way toward certain men, created to God's image. A man's relationship with God the Father and his relationship with his brother men are so linked together that Scripture says: 'He who does not love does not know God' (I Jn. 4, 8)".

e. Pope John Paul II, "Laborem Exercens" 23 (1981)

"Man has the right to leave his native land for various motives--and also the right to return--in order to seek better conditions of life in another country. This fact is certainly not without difficulties of various kinds. Above all it generally constitutes a loss for the country which is left behind. It is the departure of a person who is also a member of a great community united by history, tradition and culture; and that person must begin

life in the midst of another society united by a different culture and very often by a different language. In this case, it is the loss of a subject of work, whose efforts of mind and body could contribute to the common good of his own country, but these efforts, this contribution, are instead offered to another society which in a sense has less right to them than the person's country of origin...

Every possible effort should be made to ensure that it may bring benefit to the emigrant's personal, family and social life, both for the country to which he goes and the country which he leaves. In this area much depends on just legislation, in particular with regard to the rights of workers. It is obvious that the question of just legislation enters into the context of the present considerations, especially from the point of view of these rights...

The most important thing is that the person working away from his native land, whether as a permanent emigrant or as a seasonal worker, should not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the other workers in that society in the matter of working rights. Emigration in search for work must in no way become an opportunity for financial or social exploitation."

f. *Refugees and displaced persons in Ecclesia in Africa 1995*

"One of the most bitter fruits of wars and economic hardships is the sad phenomenon of refugees and displaced persons, a phenomenon which, as the Synod mentioned, has reached tragic dimensions. The ideal solution is the re-establishment of a just peace, reconciliation and economic development. It is therefore urgent that national, regional and international organizations should find equitable and long-lasting solutions to the problems of refugees and displaced persons.(230) In the meantime, since the Continent continues to suffer from the massive displacement of refugees, I make a pressing appeal that these people be given material help and offered pastoral support wherever they may be, whether in Africa or on other Continents" (No. 119).

g. **Message of John Paul II for World Migration Day, 1996-1997: "Faith Works Through Charity" 2, 4 (Aug. 21, 1996)**

"The task of proclaiming the word of God, entrusted by Jesus to the Church, has been interwoven with the history of Christian emigration from the very beginning. In the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, I recalled that 'in the early centuries, Christianity spread because Christians, traveling to or settling in regions where Christ had not yet been proclaimed, bore courageous witness to their faith and founded the first communities there.' This has also happened in recent times...Today the trend in migratory movement has been as it were inverted. It is non-Christians, increasingly numerous, who go to countries with a Christian tradition in search of work and better living conditions, and they frequently do so as illegal immigrants and refugees ... For her part, the Church, like the Good Samaritan, feels it her duty to be close to the illegal immigrant and refugee, contemporary icol of the despoiled traveler, beaten and abandoned on the side of the road to Jericho. (Lk 10:30)."

"This is the Church's missionary path: to go to meet women and men of every race, tongue and nation with friendship and love, sharing their conditions in an evangelical spirit, to break the bread of truth and charity for them.... It is the apostolic style which shines through the missionary experience of the first Christian communities ... [Paul] active in the city of Corinth whose population was largely composed of immigrants working in the port, is urged by the Lord not to be afraid, to continue to 'speak and not to be silent' and to trust in the saving power of the wisdom of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:26-27)."

h. **Migrants, displaced persons and refugees in *Africae Munus*, 2011**

“Millions of migrants, displaced persons and refugees are searching for a homeland and a peaceful country in Africa or elsewhere. The scale of this movement, which affects every country, reveals the hidden magnitude of the different types of poverty produced by deficiencies in public administration. Thousands of people have tried and continue trying to cross deserts and seas, searching for an oasis of peace and prosperity, better education and greater freedom. Unfortunately, many refugees and displaced persons encounter all kinds of violence and exploitation, even prison, and all too often, death. Some states have responded to this dramatic situation with repressive legislation. The precarious situation of these poor people should awaken everyone’s compassion and generous solidarity; yet it often gives rise to fear and anxiety. Many regard migrants as a burden and view them with suspicion, seeing them only as a source of danger, insecurity and threat. This perception provokes reactions of intolerance, xenophobia and racism. As a result, these migrants are forced, through the precariousness of their situation, to do low-paid work that is often illegal, humiliating or degrading. The human conscience can only respond with indignation to these situations. Migration inside and outside the continent thus becomes a complex drama which seriously affects Africa’s human capital, leading to the destabilization or destruction of families” (No. 84).

“The Church remembers that Africa offered a place of refuge for the Holy Family when they were fleeing the murderous political power of Herod, in search of a land that could offer them security and peace. The Church will continue to make her voice heard and to campaign for the defence of all people”. (No. 85).

Theology of Migration

Theology of migration is simply a theological reflection on the issue of migration. It is a reflection that is based on the Christian spirituality. Theology supplies a way of thinking about migration that keeps the human issues at the center of the debate and reminds us that our own existence as a pilgrim people is migratory in nature (Groody 2018). Very often, migrants are criminalized and their human dignity diminished, theology bridges the gap between these stereotypes to create a civilization of openness, understanding and hospitality. Theology offers not just more information as do the economic, sociological and anthropological analysis of migration, but a new imagination that is profound, one that reflects at its core what it means to be human before God and to live together in

community. Thus, *Groody (2011)* avers that the theology of migration crosses over several divides:

- a. First, a theology of migration crosses over the nonhuman-human divide and so brings out the dignity of the human person, especially those who, like migrants, are treated like insects, dogs or slaves.
- b. Second, it crosses the divine-human divide, and thus helps us see the utter gratuity of God, who moved from his homeland with a love that could not be limited by legal or political policies and reached out to those whose lives are most threatened – the sinner, the tax collector, the prostitute, the outsider and the poor.
- c. Third, it crosses the human-human divide, as is revealed in Jesus' ability to cross racial, religious, political, economic and social barriers to foster a vision of human solidarity that highlights our interconnection as one family of God.
- d. Fourth, it crosses the country-kingdom divide, where we begin to see beyond national identities in recognition that the Christian's true citizenship is in heaven; our true calling is to cross borders as agents of God's reconciliation (*Daniel Groody 2011*).

The Sources of the Theology of Migration

The sources of the theology of migration are basically the Scripture, the experience of migrants and the teachings of the Church.

1. Scripture

The Scripture is one of the most obvious sources of the theology of migration, particularly the Old and New Testaments. The church understands the two Testaments as having the same authority. According to Stinton (2004), the Scripture is the final authority on religious matters. It is the final court of appeal and constitutes the common to all controversies in migration theology. It is literally and authoritatively definitive of all that is affirmed within migration theology. The Scripture thus stands out as the principal source of migration theology.

Sermons on passages of Scripture also contribute to the development of Migration theology. More effective in this regard are dialogical sermons, which allow for a high degree of interaction between the preached word and the congregation. Clarke (2011) states that it is through this dialogue between the preached word of God and the response of the congregation that the written word becomes the living word. Relevant scriptural passages include:

- a. **Images of God:** In Genesis 1:26 we read that on the sixth day God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have

dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." This has implications for the dehumanization of migrants. They cannot be *Imago Dei* and yet be referred to as illegal.

- b. **The Visitors of Abraham:** Scripture says: "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." (Gen 18:1-15). It was a result of Abraham's hospitality to these visitors that he was blessed with a child. This has consequences for receiving countries.
- c. **The Call of Abraham:** In Genesis, "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" (Genesis 12:1-3)
 Very interesting is the fact that Abraham was blessed in a foreign land. This tells the story of many migrants whom God has blessed abroad, far away from their homelands.
- d. **The flight of Israel from Egypt:** The book of Exodus (Chap. 14) tells the story of the movement of the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt. The exodus was an escape, a struggle for freedom. This connects with the stories of migrants who have left their home lands in search for freedom and peace.

- e. **Israel's Wandering in the Wilderness:** Scripture says: "The Israelites had traveled in the wilderness for forty years until all the men who were old enough to fight in battle when they left Egypt had died" (Joshua 5:6). In the wilderness, they ate manna and quail. They drank water from the rock. There were times of hunger and thirst.

- f. **The Incarnation of the Son of God:** Scripture teaches that: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-14) Here, Jesus who is God crossed the border between divinity and humanity; He, therefore, migrated to the human race where there was discord, disorder, division, hatred, etc. It was a migration that began a new history for humanity.

- g. **Mary's flight to Egypt:** Scripture says that "Joseph is warned by an angel in a dream to take Jesus and Mary to **Egypt** to escape King Herod's wrath. They escape by night, just before Herod orders the murder of all baby boys born in and around **Bethlehem** during the last two years" (**Matt. 2:13-18**). Pope Pius XII interprets the flight of the Holy Family of Nazareth as the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, alien and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by want, is forced to leave his native land, his beloved parents and relatives, his close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.

2. The Experience of Migrants

The historical experience of migrants is one of the basic sources of migration theology; it provides materials for theology of migration, and further shapes its construction. This is very significant, as migration theology is a lived theology. It is one in which God is revealed in the everyday life of the migrant. Some migrants left families behind, and sometimes with horrible experiences like war and persecution before migration. Many left home as a result of the failure of the government of their country of origin, corruption and greed. Many left home under compulsion. The experiences on the way

are sometimes very horrible: experiences of harsh natural environment, violence and physical abuse, dehydration, dangerous transportation conditions, and sickness and lack of medicine, vehicle accident and starvation. On arriving their countries of destination, some are forced to work low-paying jobs that were very dangerous and impersonal with long hours. Some live in poverty, usually in tenements that were very unsanitary, overcrowded, and dangerous. Some new immigrants faced ethnic discrimination and hardship by nativists and hate groups. They were not valued as highly as the native population. Some immigrants have to learn a new language and the intricacies of a new culture and homeland. They greatly missed their homeland and the people that they left behind. If theology would be relevant, it cannot undermine the experience of migrants.

3. The Magisterium

Magisterium is derived from Latin word *magister*, which means "teacher" in ecclesiastical Latin. In the Catholic Church, it refers to the church's authority or office to give authentic interpretation of the Word of God, "whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition." Christ has bestowed on His Church this revelation through the Apostles. They in turn have handed it down to their successors, the bishops, it is the responsibility of the **Magisterium** to interpret the teachings of the Bible and Sacred Tradition in such a way that it deal with modern issues more appropriately. Catholic Essentials (2008) holds that the magisterium of the Church teaches God's people in two ways:

- a. **Solemn Magisterium:** is Church teaching which is used only rarely by formal and authentic definitions of councils or Popes. This includes dogmatic definitions by councils or Popes teaching "ex cathedra".
- b. **Ordinary Magisterium:** this second form of Church teaching is continually exercised by the Church especially in her universal practices connected with faith and morals, in the unanimous consent of the Fathers and theologians, in the decisions of the Roman Congregations concerning faith and morals, in the common sense of the Faithful, and various historical documents, in which the faith is declared.

Conclusion

Theology would become abstract and irrelevant if it says nothing about the conditions of people. The development of a theology of migration is only another way of saving theology from abstractness and making it relevant to the conditions of people. This relevance is established in three

ways: first is by making theology speak about the meaning of human life within the economy of creation and redemption- creation in the sense that we have all been created in the image and likeness of God, and redemption which should usher in a new order of relationship among human beings. Second is, making theology to say something about the significance of the incarnation in the light of contemporary issues like migration, thus drawing from the relevance of Jesus' stepping out of eternity into time for migration. Third, the theology of migration is a way of speaking out the mission of the Church in a world of disordered political economy, hatred, racism, individualism and fear of the other.

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