

Theology in the age of migration

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Undocumented migrants caught in the United States are lined up along a wall at the border crossing between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Diego in 2008. (CNS/David Maung)

Essay

Migration has always been part of human history. But because of widespread changes caused by globalization, more people are migrating than ever before, prompting some to call our own generation "the age of migration."

In the last 25 years the number of people on the move has doubled from 100 million to nearly 200 million people. One out of every 35 people around the world are now living away from their homelands. This is roughly the equivalent of the population of Brazil, the fifth-largest country on the planet.

Many migrants are forcibly uprooted: Approximately 30 million to 40 million are undocumented, 24 million are internally displaced, and almost 10 million are refugees.

As one of the most complex issues in the world, migration underscores not only conflict at geographical borders but also between national security and human insecurity, sovereign rights and human rights, civil law and natural law, and citizenship and discipleship.

Hotly debated, much has been written about the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of immigration, but surprisingly very little has been written from a theological perspective, even less from the vantage point of immigrants themselves.

Yet the theme of migration is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. From the call of Abraham to the exodus from Egypt and Israel's wandering in the desert and later experience of exile, migration has been part of salvation history. From Jesus' birth, understood as the movement of God into this alien world as a human being, to his resurrection as a return to the Father, and from the Holy Family's flight into Egypt to the missionary activity of the church, the very identity of the people of God is inextricably intertwined with the story of movement, risk and hospitality.

Migration shapes the heart of who are as human beings before God.

The current global economy precipitates situations that push people out of their homelands while at the same time pulling them toward places of greater opportunity. At present 19 percent of the world lives on less than \$1 a day, 48 percent lives on less than \$2 a day, 75 percent lives on less than \$10 a day, while 95 percent live on less than \$50 a day. The richest 1 percent of the world has as much as the poorest 57 percent taken together. And the three wealthiest individuals have as much as the poorest 48 nations combined.

Given this economic reality, migration must be understood not as a problem in itself but as a symptom of deeper issues rooted in widespread inequities. Because the density of global capital resides in the Northern Hemisphere, migration flows tend to move in a South to North direction, not so much because people want to become rich but because many are seeking just to survive and live beyond the minimal exigencies of daily needs.

Two of the major "hot spots" along this South-North migration are at the U.S.-Mexican border and the Gibraltar Straits between Spain and Morocco. For many migrants around the world, these two areas mark the gateway between the slavery of their homeland and the promised land of better opportunities. After listening for many years to migrants talk about their experiences along these frontiers, I have tried to discern the spirituality of migrants and a theology of migration.

Last year in the Spanish-occupied colony of Ceuta along the Moroccan coast, I met a refugee named Emmanuel. For migrants and refugees like him, Ceuta marks the outer limits of fortress Europe. If he can cross over an 18-foot razor wire fence, he can avoid having to risk death by swimming across the boundary waters between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, where thousands have died in the last decade. Similar risks exist for migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border due to the terrain and climate in the deserts of the American Southwest.



Emmanuel spoke with me about his journey through Africa to Ceuta. He talked

about leaving his homeland, crossing the Sahara desert on foot, the death of his sister due to the extreme heat, hiding out in mountains, living off plants and wild animals, going a whole year with only one shower, suffering human rights violations and many other indignities. He asked me about my priestly ministry at the university. I told him that I teach on the subject of theology and migration, which led him to ask something he had pondered a long time: "Some people say the reason we are suffering so much in Africa is because we are descendants of Judas, and that because of what we did to Jesus we have to go through so much struggle. Is that true?"

His question only made me more aware of how migration needs to be recast not only politically, sociologically, culturally and economically, but theologically as well.

The basic premise of a theology of migration is that God, in Jesus, so loved the world that he migrated into the far and distant country of our broken human existence and laid down his life on a cross so that we could be reconciled to him and migrate back to our homeland with God and enjoy renewed fellowship at all levels of our

relationships. Reading the Christian tradition from a migrant perspective involves perceiving what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ and understanding God's desire to cross over the various barriers that divide and alienate our relationships.

In linking the Christian tradition with his experience, I outlined four foundations of such a theology: the *Imago Dei*, crossing the problem-person divide; the *Verbum Dei*, crossing the divine-human divide; the *Missio Dei*, crossing the human-human divide; and the *Visio Dei*, crossing the country-Kingdom divide.

These foundations give expression to the ways in which God reconciles the world to himself, breaks down the divisions in our relationships, and helps us understand God's movement into our world and our response to God's grace.

The notion of the *Imago Dei* (Image of God) emerges in the earliest pages of scripture, where we learn that human beings are not just what we label them, but people who bear God's own image and likeness. If people on the move are only seen as migrants or workers, or worse, as lawbreakers, aliens or criminals, then their suffering makes no moral claims on us, and we can rest content on our side of the dividing wall because we convince ourselves they are excluded for a reason.

At the core of the problem-person divide is the experience of dehumanization. What migrants often say is most difficult for them is not the pain and suffering of the physical journey, as horrendous as it may be when crossing deserts or oceans and stowing away in trains and cargo containers. "What hurts the most," said one man from Mexico, "are the indignities, when people treat you like you are a dog, like you are a piece of dirt, like you are worth nothing as a human being."

"Many animals live better than we do," said another man from India. "It is as if we are worth nothing to people, and if we die in the ocean, it won't matter."

"Some call us *cucarachas*," said a migrant from Honduras, "but we are not insects, but people who have feelings and families, who hope for a better future." The most difficult part of being an immigrant for many is the experience of being no one to anyone.

God as refugee

The second theological notion central to the immigration debate is the *Verbum Dei* (Word of God). In the Incarnation, God, in Jesus, crosses the divide that exists between divine life and human life. In the Incarnation, God migrates to the human race, making his way into the far country of human discord and disorder, a place of division and dissension, a territory marked by death and the demeaning treatment of human beings. In Matthew's account God not only takes on human flesh and migrates into our world but actually becomes a refugee when his family flees political persecution and escapes into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). Jesus assumes the human condition of the most vulnerable among us, undergoing hunger, thirst, rejection and injustice, walking the way of the cross, overcoming the forces of death that threaten human life. He enters into the broken territory of human experience and offers his own wounds in solidarity with those who are in pain. The Jesus story opens up for many migrants a reason to hope, especially in what often seems like a hopeless predicament.



If the *Verbum Dei* is about God crossing over the divine-human divide,

the mission of the church, or the *Missio Dei* (Mission of God), is to cross the human-human divide. This *Missio Dei* proclaims a God of life by building up, in Pope Paul VI's words, the "civilization of love." In imitation of Jesus, it seeks to make real the practice of table fellowship through which Jesus crosses over the human borders that divide human beings from each other and invites people into the kingdom of God.

Finally, the *Visio Dei* (Vision of God) is about looking at the world in such a way that the Kingdom of God shapes our vision about who we are in the world. It acknowledges the role of national identities but recognizes that the deepest allegiances of Christians are predicated on a mission of reconciliation, meaning that the borders that define countries may have some relative value but are not ultimately those that define the body of Christ.

When bishops, priests and laypeople gather together each year in El Paso, Texas, to celebrate one Eucharist between two countries -- with the border wall in the middle -- they express God's universal, undivided and unrestricted love for all people. In uniting people beyond the political constructions that divide us, such a Eucharist manifests the moral demands of the kingdom of God, the ethical possibilities of global solidarity and the Christian vision of a journey of hope.

When I finished speaking with Emmanuel, he stood up and, raising his arms high in the air, screamed, "Yeah, God. I can't believe you would do that for me." At that moment it became all the more clear to me that the church's mission is simply a participation in Jesus' own ministry, bringing glad tidings to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and announcing the Lord's desire for human liberation (Luke 4:18-19) for all people in this earthly sojourn.

Theology offers not just more information but a new imagination. It 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. In seeking to overcome all that divides us in order to reconcile us in all our relationships, Christian discipleship reminds us that the more difficult walls to cross are the ones that exist in the hearts of each of us. Unable to cross these divides by ourselves, Christian faith rests ultimately in the one who migrated from heaven to earth, and through his death and resurrection, passed over from death to life. If the term *alien* is to be used at all, it has little to do with one who lacks political documentation, but more with those who have so disconnected themselves from their neighbor in need that they fail to see in the eyes of the stranger a mirror of themselves, the image of Christ and the call to human solidarity.

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