



**Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference
Migrants, Refugees and Human Trafficking Office**

**Reflection text for the WMRD
September 29th, 2024**

God walks with His people in migration: a call to synodal action



From the beginning of salvation history, God reveals himself as a God on the move, who walks with his people. We can remember that Abraham was called to leave his homeland and go to a new one, thus beginning a journey of faith and migration that would change the destiny of the chosen people and promising to make them a great nation (Gen 12:1-3).

God reveals himself to Moses as the God of his ancestors and calls him to free the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. He led the Israelites through the desert in search of the promised land (Ex 3:7-12). For 40 years in the desert, God provides food (manna and quail) and water (from the rock) for the people, as well as guiding them by day with a pillar of cloud and by night with a pillar of fire (Ex 16:17-33).

Under Joshua's leadership, God gives the Israelites victory over their enemies, allowing them to take possession of the land promised to Abraham (Joshua 1-11). After disobedience and exile in Babylon, God allows his people to return to their homeland, demonstrating his faithfulness and mercy (Ezra 1:1-11 and Nehemiah 1:4-11).

From the Old Testament, we can also remember the remarkable women who were guided by God, such as Sarah, Abraham's wife, who received the promise of a son in her old age, Isaac, through whom God would establish his covenant (Genesis 17-19-21). Deborah, Israel's prophetess and judge, inspired and led the people in battle against Sisera, ensuring their victory (Judges 4-7). Ruth, the Moabitess who converted to the God of Israel and married Boaz, an ancestor of David, demonstrating God's faithfulness and mercy towards foreigners (Ruth 1-4). Esther, a Jewish queen, risked her life to save her people from persecution in the Persian Empire, demonstrating the courage and wisdom granted by God (Esther 2-9).

In the New Testament, we find Jesus, God himself incarnate, who travelled through the towns and villages of Galilee, announcing the Kingdom of Heaven and welcoming the marginalized and excluded. Jesus identifies with migrants and refugees, with all those who are on the way, affirming that whatever we do to them, we are doing to Him (Mt 25:35-40).

Since its beginnings, the Church has also been itinerant by nature. The first Christians, persecuted for their faith, were forced to migrate from one place to another, spreading the



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Good News to every corner of the world. This can be confirmed in the persecution in Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1-4). God was with them, just as he manifested himself to the apostle Paul on his missionary journey through different regions of the Roman Empire (Acts 9-28); on the missionary journeys of Peter and Barnabas (Acts 13-15), and in so many other facts that we can see in the Bible.

Over the centuries, the Church's trajectory reveals a constant movement, driven by the Holy Spirit and God's compassionate presence. This historical journey is intertwined with migratory flows, testifying to the capacity of the Christian faith to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The Church has been a welcoming force for those most in need, offering refuge and hope to victims of oppression, war, poverty and victims of human trafficking. This ongoing journey reflects the dynamic and inclusive essence of the Gospel, which challenges human limits and resonates with the mission of love and compassion preached by Jesus Christ.

Currently, migration has become a global phenomenon of gigantic proportions. Millions of people are forced to leave their homes because of war, persecution, poverty and climate change. They are brothers and sisters in Christ seeking to save their lives and a better future for themselves and their families.

Pope Francis says that "migrants and refugees are a contemporary icon of the Church on the way". They represent the suffering face of Christ crucified and the hope of a new world. Welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating them into society is a moral duty and an evangelical imperative.

Faced with this challenge, the Church is called to a synodal journey, where all its members - clergy, laity, consecrated men and women - work together to build a more just, humane and welcoming community.

The Church does not encourage migration because of the suffering it entails, but defends the right to "migrate or remain" (Pope Francis, 2023) and offers maternal care to those who are forced to do so. In 1888, St. John Baptist Scalabrini defended the "freedom to migrate, but not to make people migrate, because spontaneous migration is as good as forced migration is harmful" (CS, 1989, p. 362). Good because of the economic and social progress it brings, but harmful because it carries with it dangers and damage. Therefore, the Church is always ready to welcome and assist those who arrive, initially dispensing with the need for documents, although it does ensure compliance with the law and the protection of human rights. In the same way, it seeks to prevent many individuals from becoming victims of dangerous illusions or unscrupulous traffickers, as Pope Francis has pointed out (2023).

In the meantime, the Church calls on governments and civil society to work together to ensure the protection and integration of migrants and refugees, creating dignified reception spaces, offering them shelter, food, clothing and access to basic services. The Church defends the rights of migrants and refugees against exploitation, violence and



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discrimination. It also calls for the integration of migrants and refugees into society, through access to education, work, health and by encouraging cultural exchange and dialogue between migrants and local communities, building bridges of fraternity and solidarity.

By working together in a spirit of synodality, we can build a more welcoming and just Church that is a true reflection of God's love for all his children, regardless of their origin or migration status. And remember that migration is a complex challenge that requires multifaceted solutions. Work with migrants and refugees must be carried out with respect for their culture, faith and values and collaboration between different sectors of society. This is essential for an effective response to forced migration.

May God help us to be companions to the migrants and refugees who have chosen southern Africa to live in dignity and safety.

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