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Pastoral Service of “Open Hands”: Chaplaincy for Immigrants

Church of the Miraculous Medal of Pamplona (Navarra - Spain)

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The history of humanity is a history of immigration. During the last few years, in this globalized world, migration has become a phenomenon of great magnitude that challenges the international community, the local society and, in a special way, those who call themselves Christian (Episcopal Conference of Ecuador, 31 October 2003, *Our immigrant brothers and sisters in Spain*).

Many people have abandoned their homeland, their family and their cultural environment. They have become the victims of a political and/or economic crisis that is rooted in selfishness and corruption. Pope John Paul II, in his message for World Migration Day in 2000 stated: *In many regions of the world today people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate: men and women, often young, who have no alternative than to leave their own country to venture into the unknown. Every day thousands of people take even critical risks in their attempts to escape from a life with no future. Unfortunately, the reality they find in host nations is frequently a source of further disappointment.*

1. The Reality to which this “Pastoral Service” responds

Spain finds itself at the crossroads of being a nation where a significant number of its citizens live abroad and an increasing number of people from other lands arrive at its shores to take up residence here. In the last decades, Spain has become a land of

immigrants, thus transforming the time honored tendency of being only a land of emigration.

Just as the Church of Spain was concerned for its emigrants, so now the Church is equally concerned during this period of immigration. From the beginning, the Church has stood beside these new immigrants, defended their rights and welcomed them into its institutions. *As has been affirmed on many occasions, a variety of perspectives must be considered when approaching the phenomenon of immigration: political, social-economic, and cultural. Above all, we must consider the ethical and moral perspective that has as its supreme and normative point of reference the human person, created in the image and likeness of God. From this perspective we must examine the dignity of all human persons and the respect that is due to them and to the primary and fundamental social institution of the family. For the Church and for Christians, there is no other way to plant the question, no other way to resolve the problem of immigration. In fact, this is the demand of the Gospel we preach, the Gospel in which we profess our belief, the Gospel that we attempt to live in the midst of this world to which we have been sent, the Gospel of love of our Lord Jesus Christ (A.M. ROUCO, La Prioridad del Hombre).*

In the Church of Navarra, this concern for immigrants was also present, though dormant. As more parishes were giving greater attention to the new immigrants, the idea arose of organizing a pastoral approach for immigrants: *As this problem has become more serious, we have seen that it would be good to have a point of reference that would make it easier for all those who wish to have contact with the life of the Church (Msgr. FERNANDO SEBASTIÁN, Archbishop of Pamplona and Tudela).*

After several meetings and in order to celebrate the Jubilee Year, Fr. Corpus J. Delgado, C.M., Superior of the Vincentian Community, and the Archbishop of Pamplona and Tudela created the "Pastoral Service of Open Hands." The Archbishop and the Provincial of the Zaragoza Province of the Congregation of the Mission signed an agreement on 1 June 2000.

This "Pastoral Service" became part of the diocesan structure dealing with immigrants and was constituted as a "Chaplaincy for Immigrants" that would minister to those persons proceeding primarily from Latin America and the Caribbean. This "Pastoral Service" would care for the immigrants in the best way possible for as long as they lived in Pamplona and the surrounding area.

The objective of this "Pastoral Service of Open Hands" is to promote a greater pastoral care for immigrants in our local churches.

The expression "open hands," which is used to describe this pastoral service, was inspired by the gesture of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal, a gesture that clearly reveals the demands of the

Church's evangelizing mission on behalf of the Christian community and, in a particular way, on behalf of our immigrant sisters and brothers: *In the Church, a sacrament of unity, no one is a foreigner. Therefore, the Church's action on behalf of immigrants is not a supplementary action, but a right that is rooted in the very mission of the Church* (Episcopal Commission on Migration, 1999; cf., JOHN PAUL II, *Message for World Migration Day, 1995*). *As Church, we want to be a place of reference and a bridge so that as new immigrants begin to settle in different areas, they can also establish a relationship with the parish and with the community where they decide to live. In the meantime, we believe we can offer them a great service* (Fr. CORPUS DELGADO, C.M.).

On the pastoral level, "Open Hands" has the following objectives:

- To care for the immigrants in a human and pastoral way, in the name of the ecclesial community of Navarra;
- To open the life of the diocesan Church to these immigrants who are mostly Catholic;
- To assure the pastoral attention that they require is extended to them by the Catholic Church;
- To work for their integration into the local parishes where they reside;
- To promote the dissemination of information into the local parish through the establishment of networks of communication about the existing initiatives, especially the diocesan and parish *Caritas* [Catholic Charities] programs and also to coordinate our work with them;
- To provide for the basic, urgent needs, not yet covered, of immigrant individuals and families.

The "Pastoral Service of Open Hands" sees its evangelizing action in three areas:

a) *Proclamation of the Word: catechesis and faith education*

- Catechesis of teenagers, young people and adults;
- Orientation and deepening their faith on all levels: pre-baptism, Christian initiation, pre-marriage, family, etc.;
- To assist their full integration into the local parish community, the "Pastoral Service of Open Hands" proposes that its catechetical and educational teams serve as a bridge that moves them toward a normal insertion into the life of the parish and diocese.

b) *Celebration of the faith*

- To promote a more intense participation of the immigrants in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration in the Church of the Miraculous Medal. This celebration is open to the whole community. In the beginning, we had thought of designating a certain time for this celebration, open to the whole community, but assuring that our immigrant sisters and brothers would have a significant role as ministers of hospitality, commentators, lectors, singers, etc. Up to now, all these attempts have been unfruitful;
- To provide others celebrations for the immigrant population: baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, matrimony, funeral services, etc. For this, the chaplain is vested with the faculties and power of jurisdiction in accord with Church law and diocesan pastoral norms.



A meeting of the pastoral service of "Open Hands" with the immigrants (Navarra, Spain).

c) *Christian commitment: charitable-social action*

The majority of the immigrant population, particularly those from Latin America and the Caribbean, have come to our land *because of the precarious social and/or political situation of their country of origin* (Commission on Migration, 1999). In light of this reality, the charitable-social action of the “Pastoral Service of Open Hands” requires a certain delicacy. This action is made concrete in:

- Welcoming personally and caring for each individual person and family;
- Offering them information that provides them with access to the programs of *Caritas* and other social services;
- Coordinating with the Diocesan and Parish *Caritas* to provide for the basic needs not yet covered of the immigrants (housing, work, education, etc.);
- Responding to their leisure and recreational needs, and organizing after-school activities and activities for adults. All these initiatives should promote socialization and community building. At the present time, the “Pastoral Service” and its facilities are the place of reference for meetings, encounters and sports.

On the level of resources, the “Pastoral Service of Open Hands” has at its disposition the following:

Human Resources

- A chaplain named by the Archbishop of Pamplona in accord with Canon 565. The Visitor of the Zaragoza Province of the Congregation of the Mission will propose the name of the chaplain in accord with Canon 557, 2°;
- If only one priest is named chaplain (Rector) then the community charged with the pastoral care of the Church of the Miraculous Medal will be co-responsible for the “Pastoral Service of Open Hands.” “They will undertake this pastoral service with great zeal, and in accord with their charism, and always in communion with the general pastoral norms of the diocese and within the framework of fraternal communion with the priests of the diocese”;
- A social worker who is a Daughter of Charity;
- Vincentian volunteers, composed of Daughters of Charity and the different Vincentian lay groups;
- Other volunteers.

Material Resources

- The Vincentian Province of Zaragoza, in coordination with the chaplain, offers the "Pastoral Service of Open Hands" use of the infrastructure at its disposition: chapel for worship services open to the public, offices, meeting rooms, rooms for the catechetical program, sports facilities, dining room, etc., and will cover the costs for lighting, water, telephone, etc.;
- The Archbishop will pay the salary and health benefits of the chaplain and the social worker;
- Other costs will be covered by donations and the free-will offerings of the parishioners.

2. Our Work

From September 2000, the "Pastoral Service of Open Hands" has functioned with Fr. Julián Arana, C.M., as chaplain, and Sr. Visitación Sola, D.C., as the social worker. Other volunteers include: Sr. María Luisa Fernández, D.C., Fr. Alexis Viera, C.M., Amaya Madinabeitia, Esther Fernández and Jesús Pérez. All are part of the team of "Open Hands" and together have developed the various activities: welcoming, initial outreach, mentoring, workshops, formation, catechesis, celebrations, etc. The "Pastoral Service" is open every afternoon, Monday to Saturday.

At the end of each year, we list the highlights of the year with their positive and negative elements. This enables us to review our activities and come to a better understanding of the reality in which we minister.

One of the most important and fulfilling aspects of our ministry is welcoming the new immigrants. We have attempted to create a physical, human and spiritual space that is welcoming to the whole person. We want the "Pastoral Service" to be a place of reference where these immigrants are able to meet, communicate and share together; a place where they can enjoy their leisure and recreational time; and a place where they can share their faith, their concerns and their joys. This is a slow process but, little by little, people are coming here not only "to ask" for things but, as they say, to rest and dialogue with one another.

From the beginning of this "Pastoral Service" more than 1,500 persons have passed through our offices, with 2,487 requests: 73% of these requests involved work, 12% asked for information and the remainder were for economic assistance. Others asked to use the Internet to communicate with their families, to view television,

to perform other tasks, etc. and to utilize the sports facilities. The Diocesan Offices of *Caritas*, where Sr. Visitación works every morning, have been able to respond to many of the requests for work.

Behind each number and statistic, behind all this data, there is a real face, a heart that beats, a person with flesh and bones, and a person with a history of suffering. Behind every file there is a world of hope, a lifetime of sacrifices..., and much fear.

From this welcoming that is extended to our sister and brother immigrants, we began to discover their richness, their values, and their counter-values. Contact between cultures supposes a mutual enrichment because we both give and receive.

Our greatest concern is the education in the faith and the celebration of the faith. Each year we organize catechetical groups for teenagers, young people and adults who, because of personal reasons and time constraints, do not always “fit” into the ordinary pastoral approach of the local parishes. They are teenagers and adults who have not been baptized, who have not received Communion or Confirmation.... Indeed it would be difficult for them to enter the normal catechetical program in the different parish settings.

We have proposed that our catechetical program be a process of ongoing formation in the faith and not just a process to prepare people to receive sacraments. Thus our program is a type of catechumenate where those preparing for the different sacraments are given the same content and, whenever possible, celebrate their faith together. When the catechist judges that an individual is ready for the sacraments, then a more intense preparation is begun and there is a dialogue about the meaning and the implications of the different sacraments. Thus every year we celebrate baptisms with teenagers and adults at the Easter Vigil, and first communions on the feast of Corpus Christi. After these celebrations, the majority of the people continue the catechetical process and invite other friends, family members and acquaintances to participate. At the end of 2004, we believe that some persons, who participated in the catechetical program, will be able to receive the sacrament of Confirmation.

We admit that long working hours, change of residence, forgetfulness and other factors contribute to a mixed response from the immigrant population. Yet with all of this, some diligent and committed persons continue their formation and the youth group has grown to include 20 members at the present time.

3. Challenges for the present and future

The service that the Church provides to the immigrant population supposes welcoming, recognition and acceptance of their values, humanitarian assistance, social integration, proclamation of the Gospel, and pastoral accompaniment. Therefore, this "Pastoral Service," from the perspective of our Vincentian charism, will endeavor to put into practice all these points, insisting on:

- Extending a respectful welcome to the immigrants who come to us with fears and hopes of an uncertain future for themselves. A welcome that is concretized in listening to them, sharing information with them and supporting them, and that does not end in material assistance, but in a process of accompaniment that enables the new immigrants to realize their plans in their new social environment.
- Working, by coordinating our efforts, for their integration into Spanish society, respecting their culture and values and thus contributing to an intercultural enrichment. In the same way, we will help them become active in their local parish so that they are able to live and celebrate their faith as members of the community and assume ministerial roles within this community.
- Guaranteeing their religious formation through weekly catechesis for teenagers and young people and the catechumenate for adults. In this way it is hoped that they will learn, will form themselves and thus be able to explain their faith.
- Offering open spaces where people can recreate, play sports, celebrate their *fiestas*, and express their cultural richness; spaces where people can meet and exchange experiences; spaces where people can dialogue, and share their joys, hopes, and pains; *a welcoming space that recognizes the God-given dignity of the immigrant workers..., for in the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere... the Church is the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters* (JOHN PAUL II, *Message for World Migration Day, 1995*).
- Coordinating our work with the Diocesan Offices of *Caritas* and other social services, by participating in the programs that *Caritas* has organized for immigrants (Monday to Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.) and with *Pamplona Abierta*. We also make people aware of different programs that are available to immigrants in their neighborhoods.

In this paper we have attempted to reflect on some of the aspects and realities that the “Pastoral Service of Open Hands” encounters on a daily basis. Throughout the year we have learned that our pastoral ministry and the evangelizing mission of the Church depend on the fundamental gesture of extending a welcome to the immigrant population. As St. Vincent reminds us, we ought to be *affable, cordial and serene towards those who draw near to us so that we might be a consolation to them* (SV XII, 189).

We have also learned the importance of “listening before offering help,” for it is from listening that we come to understand the “real” needs of the people and can then develop lines of action and projects that respond to these needs. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: *The first service that one should offer others in community is to listen to them. Just as God’s love begins with listening to the Word, so to if we want to love our sisters and brothers, then we must first of all listen to them. God loves us in such a way that he not only gives us his Word, but also gives us his ears. Thus, we do the work of God when we take the time to learn to listen to our sisters and brothers.*

May Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal continue to help us minister with open hands and hearts so that the action of the Spirit might continue to be present in our work.

(CHARLES PLOCK, C.M., translator)