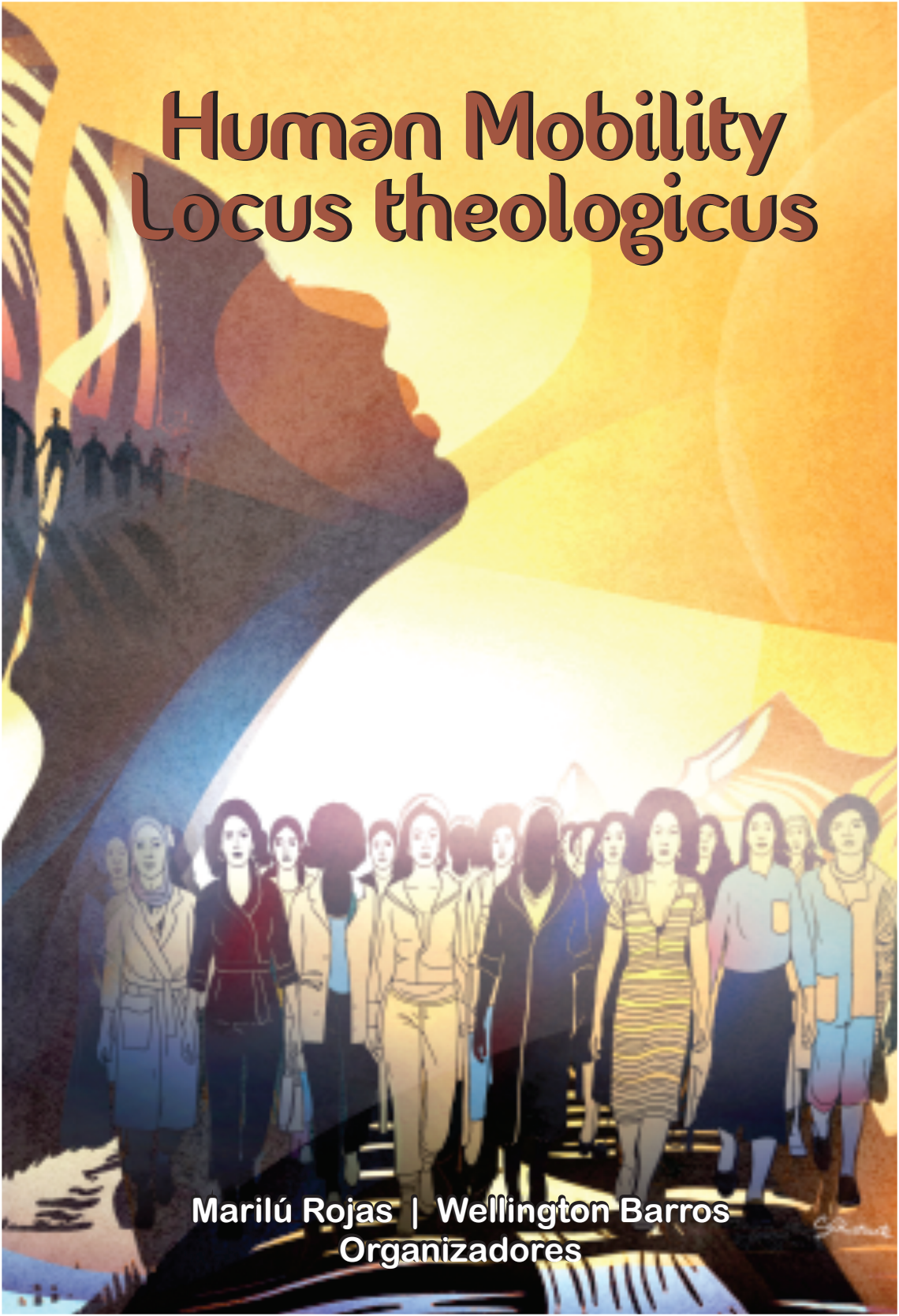


# Human Mobility Locus theologicus

A stylized, abstract illustration. In the background, a large, dark profile of a human face is visible, looking towards the right. The face is composed of various shades of brown and orange. In the foreground, a diverse group of people, mostly women, are walking towards the viewer. They are dressed in various styles of clothing, including coats, dresses, and casual wear. The background is a bright, warm yellow and orange, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall style is graphic and artistic.

Marilú Rojas | Wellington Barros  
Organizadores

# HUMAN MOBILITY LOCUS THEOLOGICUS



Brasilia – Bogotá  
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## ABOUT THE COVERS

The cover and back cover art highlights four main elements:

1. The feminine as a poetic and migratory matrix. The woman figure is the protagonist, not only in the biological sense, but as an anthropological and symbolic force – a deep root that runs through reality, connecting the visible and invisible. It is a perspective that redefines history and the world.
2. The cry of the marginalised. The woman raising her head represents a cry: she denounces and demands change. Female migration becomes a theological place, a turning point in reality, whether through divine or human action. The suffering of migrants is the key to transformation.
3. The road as collective identity. On the back cover, we see a people on the move—not isolated individuals, but a network of connections. The real protagonist is not the people, but the road: a horizon that unites them. It symbolises the corridor of the world, the space of transformation.
4. The spirituality of migration. The large silhouette of a woman enveloping the composition harmonises the scene, representing the spiritual dimension of the journey. Migrating is not just a physical act: it is a metaphor for existence. God is not static; spirituality is internal and external movement – a constant call to leave, to overflow.

We are all migrants. The road unites us, and the feminine reminds us that life is a journey.

**Sergio Ricciuto Conte**

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# INTRODUCTION



This volume, dedicated to migration as a theological locus (*locus theologicus*), is an exercise in parrhesia, as the ability to speak courageously, in the Foucauldian sense, and to speak against a monolingualism that despises migration, such as the speeches of President Donald Trump. Placing migration as one of the main places of revelation of God in contemporary history leads us to recognize the world and its crises, as Sallie McFague once called it: the world as the body of God, a nomadic body, a migrant body and a wounded body that needs to be healed and rebuilt.

The texts that make up this volume are traversed by the territorial bodies of women, children, and LGBTQI+ people, whose corporealities and sexualities constitute the space where God happens. The body of the text we now present to you is constituted, first of all, by the contributions of Jorge Costadoat, Wellington Barros, and Hugo Córdoba, who will lay the epistemological foundations of what we have called the migrant *locus theologicus*; next, we will have the biblical-theological dimension of Moisés Pérez, Marilú Rojas Salazar and Nathália Montezuma in an exercise in hermeneutics of some biblical women: the Shunammite woman, Agar and Ruth, whose bodies were traversed by the realities that thousands of migrant women experience today on the roads and in migrant shelters. Yenny Delgado, Yolanda Chávez, Ana Rita Castro, Alfredo J. Goncalves, Rosiane Aparecida, and Víctor Manuel García will take us on a journey through the contextual situations of the lives of those who migrate to the United States and Central America, placing the border as a space where many situations of pain and suffering occur, and where grace also happens.

Finally, Luz Helena Arozqueta, Conrado Zepeda, Jennifer Gómez, and André Luiz Bordignon challenge us to commit ourselves to very concrete actions in light of theological discourse and the realities that invite us, as Christians, to go out and encounter the God who is present in the bodies of those who migrate in this body, the territory of Africanity called Latin America and the Caribbean. The flow of brown bodies, women's bodies, LGBTQI+ bodies and children's bodies are the image and the revealing act of the God who walks with us at this moment in history. A history marked by aporophobia and by the misogynistic, homo-lesbo-transphobic monolingual discourse that is embedded in the political imaginaries of the far right throughout the world. Without a doubt, today is a time for prophecy; there is an urgent need for a word that opposes these discourses of hate. Through the Ecumene Series, we raise our voices to denounce hate speech against migrant populations and affirm that the bodies of migrants are the place where, today, the nomadic God of the roads and deserts is present in our history.

# 1



## MIGRATION AS *A LOCUS THEOLOGICUS*

*Jorge Costadoat*

Migrations, understood as a “proper theological place,” invite us to discern the presence and will of God within a historical reality. They are not the underlying theological issue is that, like migrants, human beings also merely a context for interpreting the Word but also an experience in which God calls for a humanizing praxis. This article reflects on how, from the perspective of Christian experience and ecclesial tradition, the migratory phenomenon reveals pathways toward an inclusive society, serving as a historical realization of what Jesus announced as the Kingdom of God.

First, the article explores the strictly theological dimension of the issue, focusing particularly on the concept of a “theological place.” Then, it elucidates guiding criteria for new Christian practices.

### **1 A theological question**

#### ***1.1 Clearing up the idea of “theological place”***

The expression “theological place” is recurrent in the field of contextual theologies. It refers to women, Indigenous peoples, marginalized or devalued human groups—for instance, individuals



discriminated against for reasons of gender (LGBT+), and ultimately, the poor to whom Jesus dedicated the Beatitudes. In all these cases, historical events or phenomena are identified as having special significance for interpreting the Word or revelation in general. The “from where” Scriptures are read is crucial for understanding what God intends to communicate to a specific human collective at a particular historical moment and, through them, to the society in which this collective interacts with others.

These theologies benefit from the hermeneutical turn of 20th-century philosophy and theology. They also address acts, ways of acting, or significant practices of these collectives—in a word, the praxis they aim to promote. They are not neutral theologies, as other scientific disciplines might claim to be, where researchers are expected not to influence their results to avoid contaminating them with subjectivity. On the contrary, in theologies that invoke the concept of “theological place,” the intent to give praxis a specific direction is essential. Their theologians are organic intellectuals (Gómez Hinojosa, 1986)<sup>1</sup>, and some are even activists. Their interpretation of the Word is committed. At times, they provocatively declare this “interest,” challenging other theologies to lay their cards on the table as well (Scannone, 1984, p. 373).

In this regard, it is necessary to distinguish the use that contextual theologies make of the term “theological place” from its use in fundamental theology manuals that follow Melchor Cano’s system. In Cano’s framework—dating to the 16th century—theology was meant to be the same for all places around the globe, with possible variations depending on the relationship the theologian could establish between “proper theological places,” fundamentally Revelation contained in Tradition, and “foreign theological places,” namely reason, philosophy, and history (as archives or historical studies). This explains, in turn, why the use of the term “theological place” has led to misunderstandings. The term, such as “history,” may be identical, but the concept is different. For Cano, what directly mattered—the object of theology—was Revelation itself. In contextual theologies, the focus is on the relationship between

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<sup>1</sup> Gómez Hinojosa’s doctoral thesis was titled: *“The Relationship Between the Intellectual and the Base: An Epistemic-Cratic Approach to Antonio Gramsci’s Texts”* (Pontifical Gregorian University, June 12, 1986).

Revelation and its interpreters, that is, the hermeneutical circularity between these two poles.

Another distinction should also be established. In Latin America and the Caribbean, many theologians have gone further. They have argued that certain contexts are not only hermeneutical places “from which” the Word of God is understood but also places “in which” this very Word calls for praxis. In this case, historical events and phenomena constitute a source of Revelation of a nature like what Cano recognized in the “proper theological places.” Thus, while in the Dominican theologian’s view, historical studies served to better understand Tradition, now it is contemporary history that holds the greatest importance for the theologian. This “semantic shift” may have led to confusion (Aquino Junior, 2019, p. 64). What matters most, however, is the core issue: that contextual theologies focus on God’s action within historical events themselves, not merely as specific points of observation and thus functional to a purely local hermeneutic.

In this article, we will consider that in the voices of migrants, God Himself says something new. We believe it is imperative to hear their words, as they, when well discerned, are the Word of God. If God speaks in history, it is essential to hear His voice in those who knock on doors because they come from afar and have nowhere to sleep. It is also necessary to listen to the dialogues that take place between hosts and their guests. These dialogues constitute, in principle, “theological places” where testimonies can be discerned that have the potential to evangelize the rest of society.

How can we tell the poor that God loves them? According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, this is the fundamental question theology must address<sup>2</sup>. How can we say this to migrants? How does God hear

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<sup>2</sup> “How can we speak of a God who reveals Himself as love in a reality marked by poverty and oppression? How can we proclaim the God of life to people who suffer premature and unjust death? How can we recognize the free gift of His love and justice in the face of the suffering of the innocent? With what language can we tell those who are not considered persons that they are daughters and sons of God? These are the pressing questions of the theology that emerges in Latin America, and undoubtedly in other parts of the world where similar situations are experienced.” (Gutiérrez, 2006, p. 18-19).

their prayers at the borders? Theology that deals with the reality of these people must first listen to what they have to say. The theologian cannot answer this question alone or isolated. Instead, they must listen to their cries and pay attention to what migrants have to say about how God has sustained them on their journey and continues to accompany them on a path that may not yet be complete.

### ***1.2 Underlying theological question***

In this article, we are concerned with the phenomenon of migration as a theological place in the strong sense of the term (Lussi, 2008; Lussi, 2015; Nobre, Da Conceição, 2021; Aquino Junior, 2019). We assume that God speaks through events, as we have noted, in all those actions and practices that pertain to people who migrate or relate to them. In this realm, there are many voices that must be heard and discerned. Not all are the words of God, but some are, and they must be listened to and obeyed as they deserve. These words carry the authority of a God who in the past accompanied His people through the desert, a God whom no temple has ever confined and who stands in defense of His people. The theology of the signs of the times, which has been so significant in the development of the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean, is even more accurate in its conclusions when it hears the cry of the poor and migrants, when it directly attends to the “agonizing effort”—as Pedro Trigo (2013) puts it—of struggling each day to move forward in life thanks to the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth.

The underlying theological issue is that, like migrants, human beings also migrate from a theological point of view. Theologically speaking, they, like Jesus, come from the Father and, like Jesus, return to the Father through the Spirit of the risen Jesus. The Son of God, we believe, became one of us through the same Spirit that enabled Him to discern His mission and fulfill it until the day He breathed His last. In doing so, He opened the way for us to follow Him as brothers and sisters, all children of Jesus’ Father.

Thus, migrants find in Christianity a Trinitarian key to navigate their paths, through the nights and across borders. It is as sons and

daughters of God that they journey toward the ultimate homeland. The migrant makes a home in any homeland. They recall the letter to the Ephesians: “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). Even now, they dwell in anticipation of the promised land. Meanwhile, Christ is for them “the way and the life.” Migrant Christians share on their journeys the bread that tastes like the bread of the heavenly banquet.

This constant movement—of going from here to there, of arriving and being deported, of being expelled from their countries and continuing through the world as expatriates, sometimes without paper or even nationality, can become a spiritual experience for migrants. When it does, it transforms into a testimony. They bear witness to Jesus Christ. Even to the Christian men and women who welcome them—many of whom do so generously—they have something new to announce from the Gospel itself. The evangelical witness of migrants in our time deserves the highest attention. They represent the crucified in history, and through their persons, their faces, and their words, Christ is made visible and speaks.

Jesus is the *Eikon* (Image) and *Logos* (Word) of God. The historicization of these biblical concepts compels us to carefully observe the phenomenon of migration and to learn from those who seemingly have nothing to teach. Encountering migrants helps them name their experiences and, in turn, evangelizes the “Samaritans.” Whoever welcomes a migrant because they see Jesus in them should never remain the same. The Gospel transforms both the evangelizer and the evangelized, as they alternately take on each other’s role.

## **2 Discernment criteria**

### ***2.1 Understanding revelation and tradition***

The Church teaches us that migration is one of the greatest signs of the times. For a long time, attention has been drawn to this phenomenon, and Christians are called to heed ecclesial authorities, who consistently emphasize the need to welcome migrants. The Church has discerned the events of our time and

based on its criteria, reached this conclusion. These criteria are rooted in what are commonly referred to as “proper theological places,” mentioned earlier. Among these, the following deserves consideration.

The Old Testament contains a wealth of experiences and commandments regarding how to treat foreigners. A fundamental commandment emerges from a foundational historical experience: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev 19:33-34). For this reason, foreigners must not be mistreated (Ex 22:21). God loves the foreigner (Deut 10:18-19). The foreigner must be treated equally: “For you and the foreigner residing among you, there will be the same law and the same ordinance. This will be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come; as you are, so the foreigner shall be before the Lord” (Num 15:15-16).

It is also important to consider the theological tradition that views Yahweh Himself as a migratory God:

Go and tell my servant David, this is what the Lord says: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’ (2Sam 7:5-7).

The New Testament continues this tradition. In the Final Judgment, Jesus teaches that the attitude toward the foreigner will be decisive: “I was a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35). Those who welcome the foreigner into their homes will enter the kingdom; those who do not will be condemned to hell. These words of Jesus should not be taken literally in every situation. Complex circumstances arise, and one cannot always open their home to anyone who knocks. However, Christ sets forth the fundamental criterion for discernment: hospitality toward those without a home

is a decisive marker. This verse from Matthew is not the only one that demands special care for the migrant, the marginalized, the sick, or the dying. The New Testament reveals that this is one of the most significant attitudes and actions prescribed by Jesus. Indeed, the other requirements in the parable of the Final Judgment emphasize the same principle. The Beatitudes, too, reflect this sensitivity. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), in which a foreigner shows compassion for an injured man on the road, is paradoxical. It clearly shows that the foreigner is a *subject* capable of evangelizing us.

In continuity with the Gospel revelation, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, the document addressing the Church in the modern world, states on this matter: "Efforts should be made to ensure that those who migrate in search of better living conditions are not deprived of their personal and family rights, and that they are not treated unjustly or with contempt" (GS 66). The Council, aware of the complexities of this phenomenon, emphasizes that "Human mobility, despite its inherent difficulties, contributes to the well-being of the human family and facilitates cultural exchange" (GS 66). Vatican II urges the overcoming and elimination of any form of discrimination in fundamental human rights, considering such discrimination contrary to God's design: "Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, must be eradicated as contrary to God's intent" (GS 69). This same paragraph recalls a fundamental principle of the Church's social teaching: "God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of all humanity, so that created goods should be distributed equitably among all, according to justice accompanied by charity" (GS 69).

In the post-conciliar magisterium, Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI have addressed migration in terms like those of Vatican II. Pope Francis has made this ecclesial concern one of the most significant priorities of his pontificate. In *Fratelli tutti*, he teaches "... in some destination countries, migration generates alarm and fear, often fostered and exploited for political purposes. This leads to the spread of a xenophobic mentality, closed and self-centered" (FT 39).

Migrants are not considered sufficiently worthy to participate in social life like everyone else, forgetting that they possess the same intrinsic dignity as any other person. Therefore, they must be “protagonists of their own rescue” (FT 39). While no one would openly claim they are not human, the decisions and ways they are treated effectively express that they are seen as less valuable, less important, less human. It is unacceptable for Christians to share this mentality and these attitudes, sometimes allowing certain political preferences to prevail over profound convictions of their own faith: the inalienable dignity of every human person regardless of origin, color, or religion, and the supreme law of fraternal love (FT 39).

Pope Francis highlights that the situation of migration becomes especially distressing when individuals fall victim to drug and arms cartels, or when they are exploited. Often, along their journeys, they endure “violence, human trafficking, psychological and physical abuse, and indescribable suffering” (FT 38). For Pope Francis, addressing migration is not only a matter of charity but also one of rights. He emphasizes the “right not to migrate”, meaning that people should have the ability to remain in their home countries and find there the conditions for a dignified life (FT 38). Until such conditions are possible, “we are called to respect the right of every human being to find a place where they can not only meet their basic needs and those of their family but also fully realize themselves as persons” (FT 129). Even those who migrate in search of a better future for their loved ones do so “with full rights” (FT 37).

Francis is not naïve. He recognizes that migration is a complex phenomenon. He understands that it may not be easy for nationals to accept foreigners, who may seem threatening in various ways. The Pope appeals to Christian charity and, particularly from Europeans, he expects fidelity to their cultural and religious tradition. He notes that they possess “the necessary tools to uphold the centrality of the human person and to find a just balance between the moral duty to protect the rights of their citizens on the one hand, and, on the other, to guarantee assistance and hospitality to migrants” (FT 40).

In any case, the stance of *Fratelli tutti* is prophetic. The Pope passionately defends migrants against attitudes and political regimes lacking compassion toward them:

Both populist political regimes and liberal economic approaches argue that the arrival of migrants must be avoided at all costs. At the same time, they suggest limiting aid to poor countries, forcing them to hit rock bottom so they are compelled to adopt austerity measures. What goes unnoticed is that behind these abstract and hard-to-defend claims lie countless lives being torn apart. Many are fleeing war, persecution, and natural disasters (FT 37).

Early in his pontificate, Pope Francis visited Lampedusa, the Italian island where African migrants often arrive after crossing the Mediterranean. His encounter with the migrants was a prophetic gesture without precedent. Years later, in *Fratelli tutti*, he issued a programmatic call: “Our response to the arrival of migrants can be summarized in four verbs: welcome, protect, promote, and integrate”(FT 129).

## **2.2 Guidelines**

The discernment criteria mentioned above—drawn from particularly significant sources—have guided pastoral ministries and foundations dedicated to migration in formulating their approaches. These orientations, tested in the field, in turn, inform the discernment of new practices.

Migration is a developing phenomenon, borrowing a term from journalism—that will likely increase in the coming years. Consequently, it will require continued learning from the solidarity extended to migrants. When history itself becomes a source of knowledge of God—a “proper theological place”—the appropriate response is to fulfill His will creatively. Every new achievement in fraternal praxis and every initiative proven to be effective becomes a guideline to follow.

What the “Samaritans” have done in recent decades to humanize migration—the lessons learned, the institutions created, the struggles at legislative and governmental levels, the shelters and transit accommodations, the consolation of so much suffering, and the nurturing of hope—must be continued.



### **2.2.1 Migrants are people**

Migrants are people (Red CLAMOR, 2017). This has been the conclusion both “Samaritans” and of other citizens who have ultimately embraced them. To say that they are people means three things.

Firstly, to affirm that someone is a person means recognizing a dignity that must be respected. Today, no one disputes—doing so would be pathological—that a migrant is a human being or has a “soul.” However, in current circumstances, ensuring dignified treatment can take time to materialize, such as when migrants arrive in a host country. Dignity today is tied to access to food, employment, housing, and healthcare conditions that enable a decent life. It often happens that in a country with migrants, nationals are considered “first-class” citizens, while newcomers are treated as “second-class.” Recognizing someone as a “person” requires treating them without discrimination or injustice and, fundamentally, as a citizen endowed with the rights that countries are capable of guaranteeing to their own citizens. “Samaritans” often act in favor of migrants, driven by spontaneous human compassion. This sentiment, attitude, and, in some cases, concrete action, is typically Christian. It reflects the act of “giving” and “self-giving,” whose ultimate expression is Christ throughout His life and on the cross.

Secondly, it is essential to adopt and be converted to a perspective that sees migrants as subjects capable of thinking and planning how to move forward in their lives and, therefore, as people who do not wish to be treated as mere objects of charity. Being a person implies recognizing that they, too, can be charitable, show solidarity, and act in these terms toward those who initially helped them. A person, *par excellence*, is a relational being, someone who exists thanks to others. In this sense, being a person means being recognized as someone who may have a different race, language, culture, or religion. What may initially seem threatening is ultimately a richness to be integrated.

The issue is not simple. Integrating strangers often poses a challenge and even a danger. Borders are closed because foreigners are seen as competitors for the benefits enjoyed by nationals. If this

were not the case, migration would not occur. Additionally, among migrants, criminals may arrive, bringing new methods of crime. Currently, organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean constitutes an international threat, taking root and establishing networks from within the region's prisons.

Thirdly, being a person entails the ability to relate spiritually to God, to others, and to creation in general. This relational dimension allows for reciprocal evangelizing exchanges between different peoples. The evangelizer—the “Samaritan” or host—who initially acts as a Christian should deepen their Christianity by allowing themselves to be “evangelized” by those they evangelize. Only then can we speak of a Christianity that rises to the level of the historical, philosophical, and religious insights of the 20th century. The Church has become increasingly aware of its colonizing role in the past. This role ideologically fostered a thirst for domination over those who, not being Christians, were viewed and treated as inferior. The Gospel mandate of Jesus to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel, especially after the alliance between Church and State in the 4th century, was fulfilled at tremendous human costs.

The decolonization of evangelization must be understood as a complex process, given that it is challenging to imagine dominated peoples who were converted to Christianity reversing poorly implemented inculturation. However, it is essential that moving forward, the Gospel be expressed in spiritual encounters under conditions of equality. It is inconceivable to imagine a Christianity faithful to today's Christian faith that does not represent a synthesis of cultures and religions, formed through the recognition of the equal dignity of all parties involved. The most successful experiences between migrants and nationals in this field should be considered prophetic. They represent an achievement that points the way forward.

### ***2.2.2 Migration as an “agonizing struggle”***

Forced migration demands that migrants draw on their greatest inner strengths—sometimes strengths they did not know they possessed. The migrant is a fighter and, in any case, must face their

situation with this mindset. They do not know what tomorrow will bring. Migrants must prepare to move forward on their own if they do not receive the necessary support to reach the “promised land.”

Migrants resemble, and can even surpass, many of the poor who live day to day. However, the often-monumental effort to reach their desired destination does not justify using any means to achieve it. Migrants must exercise discernment. It is assumed that they possess the same Spirit that guided the people of Israel through the desert and that enables the Church to expand throughout the world—precisely through migrants, not only through missionaries.

Migration is an “agonizing struggle”<sup>3</sup> in which the migrant discerns, among the possibilities available, those that are most humanizing—for themselves and for others. Migrants cannot exploit their condition as victims or exempt themselves from being fully human, even when their survival circumstances appear insurmountable.

The “Samaritans,” on the other hand, must not be naïve. Migration carries an extraordinary dehumanizing force. It often leads to human trafficking, degrading individuals to the point of confusion, leaving them uncertain whether they are innocent or guilty. This reality should prevent “Samaritans” from naively idolizing migrants or becoming disillusioned with them.

The Good Samaritan never knew whether the man he found on the road was guilty of anything, if he deserved his suffering, or if he was innocent. For Christians, people must be loved simply because they are creatures of a God who loves them freely.

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<sup>3</sup> “The agonizing struggle, understood as an obsession, strives for a dignified life because it sees itself as a creative response to the personalized gift of life. Thus, it is not experienced as a titanic and exasperated activism but paradoxically remains within the bounds of daily life. Its goal, a dignified life, is natural and intrinsic to it. The paradox of this obsession being realized in daily life lies in the fact that its realm is one of extreme necessity, not the secure and comfortable world of the city. Precisely, the strength of this obsession lies in crafting this daily life where there are no conditions to build or sustain it. Even where security is absent, the human quality of life already manifests in this daily life that must be rebuilt each day” (Cf. Trigo, 2013, p. 185).

### **2.2.3 Migration as an occasion for “Encounter” Between Persons**

Migration, as we see, is an occasion for an encounter between equally dignified people. No difference can annul this fundamental characteristic. On the contrary, this dignity of being people demands that both parties recognize each other as free beings and subjects of rights. *Reciprocity* is crucial (Lussi, 2021, p. 183). Denying migrants such dignity amounts to nullifying their personhood.

However, since migration is a phenomenon that unfolds over time and involves not only foreigners entering a new country, the encounter, when it occurs, requires a process of development. Especially between strangers, such an encounter often demands a basic openness, which can be difficult to achieve.

The “Samaritan,” of course, must relinquish any sense of moral superiority over their beneficiary. Moral superiority, in any case, is known only to God. Both guest and host, rather, must recognize themselves as innocent toward each other, for it is not a sin to migrate, nor is it a sin to welcome a migrant. This dynamic requires overcoming resistances (Wolff, 2021, p. 101).

For the host, however, practicing gratuitous charity can be more challenging, as they may culturally find themselves in a dominant position or perceive their culture as superior to that of their guest. Indeed, some nationalities are regarded as better or worse than others. In Latin America and the Caribbean, racism is widespread (Padilla, 2023, p. 58). In this context, it may be necessary to overcome such differences in the encounter. This overcoming can take time and may never fully happen, something that cannot be ruled out. Nonetheless, this does not negate the possibility of the encounter occurring, even if asymmetrical.

From an encounter, even if asymmetrical, both the “Samaritan” and the “foreigner” can be expected to emerge transformed—that is, for both to grow. For example, in a relationship between a Haitian and a Brazilian, the Brazilian may emerge more Haitian, and the Haitian more Brazilian. Before dialogue, they are distinct, but after it, to the extent of its depth, both parties may change; they may “convert” to one another. Moreover, this should be seen as an enrichment. Humanity grows and is perfected when the world’s

inhabitants share the Earth among themselves. Migration, when done well, is an achievement that deserves to be celebrated.

#### ***2.2.4 Integration and communion as the goal***

The above reflects a principle for the renewal of human societies and humanity. Never in history has there been a better opportunity to recognize ourselves as the work of a Creator who does not repeat Himself in His creatures.

Mixed couples should be seen as carrying the potential for a “plus” in humanity. Similarly, this potential should be explored in schools where children of different colors play together, imitate one another, learn from one another, and form relationships that will make them different from their parents. Perhaps they will not surpass their parents in certain respects, but they will at least embody the possibility of universal recognition and communion.

Social integration must be considered a goal. Closed migrant communities may have a provisional future, and this is understandable. However, migrants, along with nationals, should ultimately aim for full integration into the societies that receive them, doing so in a fraternal and creative manner.

The name of this goal could be “communion.” Coexistence, shared belonging, harmony, and co-responsibility—in short, the union of individuals in a collective social and cultural endeavor—presupposes and results from a fraternal communion among those who share the identity of being sons and daughters of God.

Thus, the communion achievable within a given country between those who arrive and those who receive them must be considered a “proper theological place” where the presence of God can be discerned and a shared future envisioned. Meanwhile, the Church itself must verify its role as a place of communion (Lussi, 2015, p. 225). In matters of migration, the Church must evangelize as a space of encounter among people who recognize themselves as sons and daughters of God, growing in fraternity.

## Conclusion

Migrations constitute an authentic “theological place,” more precisely a “proper theological place,” where the presence and will of God can be discerned. They are not merely a “from where” the Word of God is interpreted but a reality in which God Himself speaks, calling for the continuation of a specific humanizing praxis.

In this sense, to recognize God’s will in historical praxis, the Church relies on discernment criteria that are always historical. Judeo-Christian revelation is manifested historically and reaches its fullness in Jesus of Nazareth and His mission to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Church’s Tradition, which transmits the Gospel, is also historical, as it conveys to subsequent generations—always with necessary interpretation—what it has received from previous ones. This hermeneutical work, carried out in the context of migration, seeks to uncover what God is saying today. Moreover, the results of this discernment become criteria for guiding new praxis.

Therefore, by considering the experience of Christians committed to solidarity with migrants—those we have called “Samaritans”—theological conclusions have been drawn that provide guidelines for understanding the migratory phenomenon and regulating how migrants are welcomed. In this process, the dignity of the human person can be rediscovered. Conceived as a being in relation, this dignity allows migration to be seen as an encounter between “guests” and “hosts,” between foreigners and nationals, through which both parties can evangelize one another.

The ultimate fruit of this encounter should be an inclusive society where different people seek and find a communion that enriches and fosters the growth of all. This horizon, in Christological terms, can be called the Kingdom of God.

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# 2



## **BODIES, CONTEXTS AND HORIZONS** **Epistemological fundamentals for the** **Theology of Migration**

*Wellington Barros*

### **Introduction**

Theology is the science of excess for excellence. This is because its foundation or object can be related to everything we know and experience. There is nothing in the world that cannot be related to God through faith, which makes theology a science without limits in its perspectives or approaches. All sciences presuppose an epistemology, fundamentals and methods. Methods always derive from the object, which is why each science has its own methods in the variety of objects and in the epistemological fidelity that guarantees credibility. The reality of God and faith cannot be fully grasped by mere observation. The complexity of theology is due to the fact that it deals with something indecipherable and unattainable, which makes epistemological procedures even more demanding in relation to the object. Theology, like the other human sciences, is at the level of credibility and not of the demonstrability of the exact sciences. We know that there are ideological prejudices against that which is not exact and verifiable through the criteria of demonstrability. However, what is not exact is not less scientific, and theology claims for itself a body of systematic and scientific knowledge that we wish to present.



The epistemological inquiry into theology is a modern problem. This question was certainly present in earlier times. But it was in the Western modernity, because of the secular configuration of philosophy, science and society, that questions about the soundness of the fundamentals, the rigour of the procedures and the usefulness of the approaches of the theological discipline became legitimate. In this scenario, it was imperative for the theologian to seek to understand not only the objects of his discipline, but also to determine the specificity of theological knowledge itself. This field of reflection is precisely known as theological epistemology.

Questions about the scientific nature or methods of theology have been frequent in recent decades. Theology has sought to acquire greater clarity and coherence in its epistemic paths. Understood in this way, from the point of view of its realisation, theological epistemology is a task of the second order, since it presupposes the concrete realisation of theologising, first experiencing what it then seeks to understand. From the point of view of its impact, however, it is a question of the first order since it affects the perspective and the way in which the themes proper to the discipline should be approached. In this sense, epistemological consideration is of great importance in theology, because real progress in this field of knowledge presupposes a revision of methods rather than an expansion of the object.

Since theology is not independent of faith, its identity and practices depend on an understanding of revelation based on faith. The Christian revelation of God is fundamentally liberating, based on the tradition of the people of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth. This salvific-liberating dimension should impel theology to be critical and creative in the world in relation to God's plan for humanity, which takes up the causes of those who suffer most through concrete actions in the dynamic of the Kingdom of God. And here we find the bodies, contexts and horizons of people in situations of migration, who experience faith as this liberating dynamism always starting from and in favour of the victims present in today's world. The identity or epistemic dynamism of theology is in no way opposed to everything that happens on behalf of the victims of this world, as God revealed to the people of Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth.

## **1 The object and fundamentals of theology**

Theology arises from the experience of human faith in God who reveals himself. Epistemologically, it is a science of Revelation and faith. The way revelation is understood directly influences how theology is thought, lived and celebrated. For this reason, we affirm that Revelation is at the constitutive origin of theology: its source and foundation. The object of theology is God, who freely invites human beings into friendship. God communicates himself, and it is through faith that human beings respond to this invitation with a view to communion. God reveals himself to the whole human race; revelation is good news that is announced and made public, not a secret to be kept. Human beings are communicators of this revelation, that is, witnesses and not owners. Revelation is subject to the corporeality and historicity of human beings. In this sense, God's self-communication takes place through the world and human history.

God's self-communication is complete in its mystery, unlike human capacities. Faced with limitations, human beings come to know and experience divine life through images, symbols, parables, allegories, etc. Theology, the science of God, is a science based on Revelation. Theology communicates God as he is known to human beings and to the extent that God welcomes them into his profound mystery. The foundation of Theology is the Revelation of God who communicates himself. If other sciences are based on other data from experience, Theology is based on the Revelation of God and its acceptance by human faith.

Revelation unfolds in human history; it is a continuous existential and experiential phenomenon: God reveals himself and becomes revealed to the vital and historical experience of people who increasingly find new ways of interpreting and relating God to their contexts in different ways, even though there is something in Revelation that does not change or develop, namely, God as the unique subject. (Haight, 2004, 102-103). Through theology, many people seek a deeper understanding of the mysteries they have already accepted by faith. For some, these mysteries are understood above all through assent and trust, while others seek different forms of intelligibility.

Theological reflection is inherent to faith, and theology is accessible to all who strive to understand faith. Theology as a science is the deepening of theology of a more spontaneous nature and inherent to faith itself. However, this reflection must also be conscious of its principles, methods, statutes and conclusions, that is, it must seek to reflect faith methodically. Regardless of methodological coherence, theology adds nothing materially to faith; it merely develops its content. Therefore, theology is faith in a scientific state; it says nothing that is not faith, but it can say it in another way. Faith implies theology within itself, and theology explains the faith gathered within itself. In faith we find an implicit theology and in theology an explicit faith. Faith precedes theology; before intelligence we have memory, before reflection, proclamation.

To do theology is to see everything in the light of God; everything that relates to God can be theologised. If God is the main object of theology and if everything has some relation to God, there is nothing about which theology cannot be done. There is no science that has such a broad sphere of interest as theology.

Theology is subject to the inevitable tension between faith transmitted once and for all and the understanding and realisation of faith in the present, something that must be done again and again. Theology has no other task than to give account of the universal hope that came into the world with Jesus Christ. It is a ministry or service in the Church, whose goal is to translate the Revelation given once and for all into the present of every personal, social and ecclesial situation. It arises from faith and is referred back to faith. The development of the theological method cannot be based solely on the norms of other sciences but must first and foremost observe the knowledge of faith. It must meet the requirements of the sciences and the requirements of the knowledge of faith.

## **2 Starting point and theological methodology**

As already highlighted, the object or starting point of theology is God. In the dynamics of God's incarnation in humanity, God identifies with the most fragile. Therefore, it is not wrong to identify God with the poor and to develop a theology that begins with this

theological density of the poor or the victims of the world. Boff (2008, p. 706) highlights that

incarnation inaugurates another category, this one typically Christian: transparency. Through transparency, transcendence participates in immanence and vice versa. The result of this mutual presence is the transparency of God in the holy humanity of Jesus: 'whoever sees me sees the Father' (Jn 14:9).

In the case of theology, we have already seen that the object is the most peculiar thing one can think of: it is the mystery of God in himself and the relationship of everything that exists - and in particular of the human being - with him; a mystery revealed in history and, in a full and definitive way, in Christ. The peculiarity of the object - which is properly a personal Subject who reveals himself and communicates himself - determines the peculiarity of the method of theological science. But it is already clear that a fundamental characteristic of theological work must be an attitude of humility and openness of reason to what is greater than itself; an attitude of faith-filled listening to the Word in which the personal God reveals his own intimacy and reveals the ultimate truth about man and the world. To adopt a method that sought to express exhaustively the content of the Word of God in human concepts would mean reducing or distorting that content from the outset.

Theological methodology does not aim at the content of theology, but at its formal and structural aspect. In this way, it seeks to expose the foundations and presuppositions of theological knowledge. Theology is defined as critical, methodical and systematic reflection on the faith of the Church. The study of method aims to deepen the norms, criteria and articulations that the theologian must follow in order to carry out their theological activity correctly. Also with theology, the study or discourse on method reveals that it is necessary to reflect on what precedes knowledge, that is, what are the conditions for knowledge to be produced. Along with this movement of 'before,' there is the 'after,' that is, the verification of the methodological rigour that was used to produce a given piece of knowledge.

A science is characterised by its own object and by the method by which it advances towards a more complete and deeper knowledge of the object itself. In this sense, all science presupposes an epistemological form and foundation. Objects vary, and it is from them that a particular science derives its method, inherited from the conception of the object. There is a reciprocal relationship between object and method: undoubtedly, the method must be appropriate for the object (just as you need a good telescope if you want to observe planets or stars); but at the same time, the method used influences, if not precisely the object as such, at least the knowledge that is obtained about it. In particular, each method is based on certain assumptions or principles that determine both its cognitive potential and its limits.

The search for the method of a science (methodology) is motivated by the attempt to overcome the knowledge obtained by common sense. The credibility of a form of knowledge is therefore related to the method adopted to arrive at a demonstration. Demonstrability may be a criterion for scientific knowledge, but it cannot be the only one, since many sciences are based on something that is not merely demonstrable and subject to manipulation. There are ideological prejudices that, based on criteria of demonstrability, reject forms of knowledge obtained through the relationship with a 'non-objective' object, or one that is interpreted, narrated, or experienced.

## ***2.1 The structure of the theological method***

A formal reflection on the theological method only occurred recently, in the years prior to the Second Vatican Council, but the history of the Church shows that theologians have always made use of some particular method of investigation because theology was immediately conceived as a form, or rather the highest and most rigorous form, of the search for truth.

Despite the diversity of methods and models of theology and the historical evolution that can be found, it is possible to recognise a fundamental methodological principle that characterises theology in all ages. When we speak of theological method, we consider that theology is realised as an unfolding of the cognitive dimension of faith.

In this sense, its internal movement stands out, imposing itself by its own dynamism. And when it comes to the epistemological structure of theology, its two movements, the moment of listening, the *auditus fidei*, and the *intellectus fidei*, constitute theology. Thus, we understand theology as the intelligence of the object of faith. With the first, it comes to possess the contents of Revelation as they have been progressively made explicit in human history. With the second, theology seeks to respond to the specific needs of thought through speculative reflection. Thus, theology is organised as a science of faith in the light of a double methodological principle: the *auditus fidei* and the *intellectus fidei*.

Jon Sobrino (1989, p. 285-303) adds a third element to the structure of theological methods: the *intellectus amoris*. Sobrino and his theology highlight this dimension that we use here of the *intellectus amoris*, since his theology is, above all, *intellectus justitiae*. The *auditus fidei*, as an internal movement of theology, is realised from a specific locus, thus allowing us to recognise the poor and the unjust of this world as an authentic *locus theologicus*. Hence the relevance of affirming, from the point of view of a theology that understands itself as *intellectus amoris* and *intellectus justitiae*, that faith in the God who reveals himself in the flesh of history cannot be real on the margins of scandal and the suffering of the innocent, without the suspension of meaninglessness by an unsuspected meaning. The articulation between historical events of liberation and liberating events, founders of faith, weaves in both authors a theological epistemology whose axiological primacy belongs to the soteriological and ethical dimension of liberation. It takes both Christian revelation and faith and the historical situation seriously, so that both illuminate and enhance each other. Theology is based on the revelation of God and its tradition and interpretation in human projects, historically conditioned and even relative to the encounter with the presence of God. It is not arbitrary, but has as its definitive criterion the very experience of God (Haight, 2004, p. 105). We must also focus predominantly on the novelty or challenge that historical reality introduces into the theological task.

## ***2.2 Theology of bodies, contexts and horizons***

The mainstream Catholic theology from the beginning of the Modern Age until the advent of Vatican II (1962–1965) was characterised by its anti-modern and manualistic nature. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the medieval idea of a God-determined order was dismantled. The eruption of modernity brought mercantile capitalism and philosophical and artistic movements that favoured the supremacy of human reason and Renaissance humanism. These manifestations shook the pillars of Christianity through subjectivism and secularism. Catholic theology did not assimilate the Cartesian turn of reason or individualism and took a combative stance towards modernity. In the 18th and 19th centuries, even more critical revolutions took place: the French, bourgeois, industrial, urban, etc. In this context, theology reaffirmed its defensive stance and refused to be influenced by the philosophies of modernity, rejecting dialogue.

Nineteenth-century Catholic theology began to engage in dialogue with modernity. Some theological schools, such as those in Tübingen, Germany, and Rome, emerged as examples of renewal efforts seeking to encounter modern thought. The 20th century began with the awakening of theology through exegetical, patristic and historical studies (of religions, dogmas and the Church), and new relevant magazines and dictionaries appeared in France. The French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) was important in the debate surrounding the renewal of theology. He contributed to the constitution of the philosophy of immanence (apologetics of immanence) as a way of knowing God in the dynamics of actions. Blondel recognised in action an impulse of infinite transcendence and thus, in the dynamism of action, that is, in freedom, the possibility for the infinite, for God, is already inscribed. The relationship between immanence and transcendence was one of the themes he reflected on. In 1893, he published a work on action, which also represented a milestone in Catholic theology. He opposed the Cartesian cogito and placed knowledge in the primacy of action: 'If I act, therefore I'm. Thought and action are not opposed, for both proceed from the same source: life. Before being capable of thinking, human beings are animals in action. For

Blondel, human action has epistemological value, that is, it is a condition of the possibility of knowledge. Human action, which is expressed as will and freedom, already contains within itself this desire for transcendence and, therefore, what theologically will be called the desire for God. It appears in the philosophy of immanence in its ontological depth.

It was in the context of the ideas stimulated by Blondel that, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a movement of theological renewal emerged that was called *Nouvelle Théologie* (New Theology) and found its main centres of influence in France and Belgium. Influenced by Blondel, it sought to restore concrete human experience to theological reflection. And the New Theology represented an effort to overcome the model that had been adopted until then. One of its objectives was to respond to the demands of the modern soul. Its programme aimed at contact with concrete life. God should not be thought of as an object, and theology should respond to the experiences of the modern soul and be a concrete attitude towards existence. The interest of theology in the human sciences, especially anthropology, represents a real shift in contemporary theology in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st.

Contemporary theology has several characteristics and trends. Of particular note are approaches that seek dialogue with modernity. Modern human beings and their experiences are valued. This movement is causing profound transformations and shifts in theology. Murad and Libanio cite some of these: from transcendence to incarnation, from infinity to finitude, from the eternal life of God to God's action in history. Theology undergoes an incarnational, anthropological shift, without ceasing to speak of God, but always starting from humanity and its challenges, problems and hopes (Libanio, Murad, 2014, p.145). Thus, the historical, plural, hermeneutical, interdisciplinary, intercultural and holistic mentality of current theological practice stands out as its characteristic features. It is a theology that seeks to respond to contemporary historical, social, cultural and political demands.

Gibellini, in presenting the paths of current theology, reflects on the concept of correlation theology. He presents a typology



that is related to the concern for the identity and relevance of Christian discourse on the existential, anthropological, cultural and experiential reality of human beings. Theology is conceived as a correlation to be developed between two poles: that of Revelation and that of the existential. He adds that this way of doing theology has taken the name of anthropological turn in theology. Theology must dialogue and respond to anthropological demands. The advent of globalisation has led to shifts in the places where theology is elaborated and in the subjects who elaborate it. This gave rise to new theological movements: liberation theology in Latin America, inculturation in Africa, new theology of religions in Asia, and feminist theology in the international context of women's emancipation (Gibellini, 2005, p. 14-17). In another work dealing with women's theology, Gibellini brings up the concept of genitive theologies.

Feminist theology is not, strictly speaking, a 'theology of women.' In the post-war years, as a reaction to the abstractions of certain neo-scholastic theology and to address new emerging problems, the so-called 'genitive theologies' emerged (Gibellini, 2002, p. 417).

For Gibellini, genitive theologies express:

[...] the scope, the sector of reality, the object to which theological reflection applies. They are sectoral theologies and serve to give concreteness to theological discourse; they are, in a way, inevitable, but it is possible to abuse them, insofar as genitives can be uncritically multiplied and do not always delimit, from a methodological point of view, an adequate field of research and theological reflection (Gibellini, 2002, p. 417).

There was then a huge proliferation of genitive theologies, that is, of subjects. From the experience of one's own faith, its formulation focuses on theological practice. Women, black people, African Americans, indigenous people, migrants, etc. Uniting in a hermeneutical circle the experience of the past (biblical and theological) and the current experience.

The incarnational dynamic of the Christian faith is one of the factors that underlies not only the possibility but also the necessity of theology being contextual. God does not send his message from heaven, but makes himself present among humans as a human being. Through the human body of Jesus, we find God yesterday, today and always. In this sense, contextuality is imperative for theology (Bevans, 2004, p. 35-37). Contextuality means all dimensions of human experience, such as culture or politics, and thus offers an integrated understanding of all human experience (Bevans, 2004, p. 60).

Human experience is considered a theological place, and theology becomes more of a reflection on the ordinary life intoxicated by God and makes ordinary men and women the best people to do theology. Theological permanence is healthily relativised in relation to the conception of a reflection of faith in God's revelation based on situations or people that are absolutely legitimate in the dynamics of reflection on faith.

When context is taken seriously, theology is highly influenced by different theological places, giving rise to different forms of articulation and understanding of faith. Theology is no longer considered solely in the academic sense, nor is the theologian considered a scholar. The process of contextualisation demands that theological reflection be based on the subjects and their contexts and as an always unfinished process. If a person does not participate in a particular context, they can reflect theologically on it, but they will not have the depth to perceive reality as those who participate in it. However, even if in a limited way, people who do not fully share the experience of others can contribute to theology. When theology is made for and not from, it must have the humility to recognise its limitations and greater potential for distorting reality (Bevans, 2004, p. 44-50).

### ***2.3 Towards a Theology of Migration***

The method of the Theology of Migration emphasises the importance of integration into the concrete realities of migrants. This characteristic is not unique to this theology but is an imperative of various contemporary theologies. In the final decades of the 20th

century, some theologians showed greater interest in the theme of migration. The theology of migration has its origins in the 1970s and gained significant contributions at the beginning of the 21st century. However, it is still a recent reflection and is the result of a Catholic theological shift driven by *the Nouvelle Théologie*, which began to consider human experience in all theological reflection. This encouraged the emergence of theologies of subjects (black, indigenous, women, African Americans, migrants, etc.) from various perspectives that characterise today's society (religious pluralism, interculturality, globalisation, liberation, etc.).

Theological reflection on the phenomenon of migration has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, God is described as listening to the cries of those who suffer because they are slaves in a foreign land (Ex 2:23-25). And God chooses the most vulnerable, in particular the triad: orphans, widows and foreigners (Ps 146:9). God also reminds the people of Israel that they themselves were migrants and slaves in the land of Egypt (Ex 23:9). They must not oppress immigrants living in their land but learn to love them as themselves (Lev 19:33-34). A God who affirms that the earth is His and that humanity lives on it as strangers and pilgrims (Lev 25:23).

The theology of migration, as a discipline, is a perspective that has recently emerged on the theological scene, thanks above all to the attention of some theologians who strive to interpret this complex reality from the perspective of faith. The growing interest of Christian thought in theological reflection on this theme is also due to its relevance for the Church and humanity today. The most current theological methods, especially after Vatican II, are not only concerned with traditional sources such as Scripture and Tradition, but must also include contextualised human experience, making it a *locus theologicus*, which is as important as traditional places. Theology must truly seek to place itself at the service of the Kingdom of God. It must not only feed on Scripture and Tradition but must also critically confront the ambiguity and complexity of the reality in which human beings live. Migration is today more than an integral and important part of this reality, on which Christians are called to reflect from their own faith. There are also

countless pastoral leaders working in numerous pastoral structures that the Church places at the service of migrants who seek help and sustenance from theological reflection to shed light on the complexity, tensions, fears, joys and hopes that migration raises in civil society and in the Christian community.

In addition to one or two biblical authors, the Fathers of the Church also reflected, albeit not systematically, on the reality of migration. It was in the 1960s that the opportunity and need for a theology of migration emerged. In fact, the first real attempts to develop a theology of migration arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Europe and the United States. The interest, urgency and need for methodologies and an effort to systematise the theology of migration have very recently been raised at conferences bringing together migration scholars, pastoral workers and theologians. These conferences have provided important insights and guidelines for the future of the theology of migration, including those organised in Tijuana (Mexico) in 2002, Aachen (Germany) in 2003, Notre Dame (USA) in 2004, São Paulo (Brazil) in 2006 and Manila (Philippines) in 2006.

## ***2.4 Methodology of the Theology of Migration***

Campese applies the steps outlined by Ignacio Ellacuría (1930-1989) and Jon Sobrino (1938-) on the theological work of the poor as a methodology for migration theology. These two Jesuit theologians do not address migration theology through the method used; it is Campese who makes use of the method. He highlights Ellacuría for three reasons: he is the creator of the method, little known outside Latin America and Spain, and he is an example of an intellectual who gave his life for the Christian ideal of transforming society. This methodology is found in Ellacuría's writings and is widely known and explored by his colleague Sobrino. According to Ellacuría, the process occurs as follows:

- *Becoming by assuming reality*: it is not a matter of standing before ideas, things and their meanings, but of being real and active, and forming oneself with concrete reality; an incarnate and active presence.

- *Take on reality*: this is the ethical perspective of intelligence, that is, not shying away from real commitments; taking on things as they are and what they demand; intelligence is given to human beings so that they can take responsibility for the commitments and challenges that arise from reality.
- *Take charge of reality*: the practical character of intelligence, making things real; theological intelligence does not fulfil its task until it takes charge of transforming the reality in which it is embedded, incarnated.

To the three steps of Ellacuría's methodological procedure, Jon Sobrino adds a fourth: *Allow oneself to be taken over by reality*: It is not only a matter of accepting reality, but also of allowing oneself to be taken over by it. Reality is not only sin, but also the providential presence of God, which we must allow to take hold of us (Campese, 2008, p. 49).

## ***2.5 Migration as a theological place and sign of the times***

One of the most important achievements of current theological thinking is to give context the *status of locus theologicus* and Signs of the Times. Theological reflection on theological places represents a central movement in the historical and conceptual development of this discipline. This debate seeks to reveal the principles on which Christian thinkers can find arguments, criteria and evidence for their theological discourse. Behind this question are the 'authorities' that can support theological reflection. The Protestant theologian Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) was one of the first to reflect on theological places in 1521. However, the theologian who wrote the classic work on the subject was Melchior Cano (1509-1560), who in 1563 published a work called *De locis theologicis*.

Cano's last *locis* was human history, but in contemporary theology this was the place that received the most consideration. The effective inclusion of history and human experience as one of the most important sources or places of theology was one of the rich legacies of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) confirmed the official position

of the Church at that time on modernity as spiritual and human decadence. Thus, the legacy of Vatican II, which had been driven by theologians of the so-called New Theology with its anthropological turn, favoured the theological perspective that God is present in human history, which is conceived as the source of 'theological doing', which greatly influences the experience of faith and its search for understanding (theology). Based on this new conception of the *locus theologicus* as the source and social, political and ecclesial place of Theology, we can affirm that migrations are one of the most important *locus* of our time.

The distinction between source and *locus* should not be interpreted strictly. In the dynamics of Revelation, places can also be sources, as is the case with human experience: God reveals himself in contextualised human experience and the *locus* of human experience can be a source of God's presence.

The category Signs of the Times also contributes to the theology of migration. In short, this category is an expression with biblical, Christological, ecclesiological and eschatological references. The Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes* reflects on the need to discern the signs of the times in order to discover in them the presence of God and recognise their salvific significance in history. Such signs would constitute privileged places of God's presence. Already in its prologue, the constitution reveals its richness and affirms the Church's intimate relationship with humanity. Ecclesial activities must have as their goal the men and women of today's world. The Church must carry out the mission of Christ, who came to save and serve humanity and its history. To fulfil this mission, the Church must discern the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, since humanity is experiencing a moment of profound change. The fundamental option of the Church is to present the faith in harmony with modern culture, offering life and meaning to humanity. However, this should not be imposed in the face of new historical situations. It does not choose to live the faith as an escape from the world but opens the way to an optimistic conception of the world as a place of salvation. Christians must be present in society and assume their responsibility in public life. The Church is not an end in itself, but mediation and service to humanity. Thus,

faith impels us to commit ourselves to building a more just and fraternal society.

The concepts of *locus theologicus* and Signs of the Times have helped to go beyond a purely sociological or anthropological, economic or political understanding of migration. They have also helped to establish a theological conception of this phenomenon from which to interpret Christian tradition and seek theological knowledge. Migration manifests, albeit ambiguously, the presence of God on the path of humanity and the Church (Campese, 2008, p. 23).

The theology of migration has its roots in the incarnational logic of the Christian faith. The Christian faith is incarnate and invites us to understand and practise our faith in one of the signs of the times: migration. However, we must be careful, because our insistence on the contextuality of theology cannot eliminate its supposed universality. The universality of theology or its catholicity is fundamental. But it is not imposed 'from above,' but built 'from below.' In summary, we emphasise that the method of migration theology is, above all, inductive. The title of this presentation suggests that a theology of migration cannot be limited to the reality of migration, but must recognise how this phenomenon challenges us to rethink Catholic theology itself, that is, its main themes: God, Christology, Pneumatology, Spirituality, Ecclesiology, Anthropology, Pastoral Care, the Bible, etc.

## **Conclusion**

This brief essay aimed to summarise recent theological reflection on migration. This reflection arises from consideration of the subjects and their human experiences in the theology of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The theology of migration is gradually developing and gaining ground. More than that, in the face of so many migrants in today's world, it reveals a theological approach that involves migrants themselves, thus distancing itself from mere abstraction that can distance theology from concrete human life with its faces (subjects) and challenging contexts (horizons).

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# 3



## HEARTS ON THE RUN Challenges and struggles of queer immigrants in Latin America

*Hugo Córdoba Quero*

### Introduction

Talking about bodies does not necessarily imply addressing sexuality, but it is linked to the issue of gender. There is a recurrent tendency to define bodies in a rigid dichotomy of male-female, which reflects a social need to classify and pigeonhole. At the root of these situations, there is a tendency to believe that fitting properly into one of these two categories - male or female - ensures a place of recognition and privilege, conferring rights and guarantees that are apparently intrinsic and almost “genetically inherent” to perfectly categorized bodies in a given society.

In the strictest contexts, talk of gender is often reduced exclusively to female bodies. This has led to a biased view of migration, in which women are apparently incorporated into migration studies as if they have only recently “emerged” in history, without recognizing that they have always been an integral part of migration phenomena (Indra, 2004; Brutti, 2009). However, sexual orientation – although related to gender – introduces an additional and relevant nuance, as there are many more orientations than cis-heterosexual. This diversity challenges traditional notions of identity

and belonging, especially in contexts of migration, where these bodily and sexual differences are often intensified. When crossing borders, queer migrants confront stereotypes and prejudices that question both their gender and sexual orientation, which redefines, and often limits, their place in the host society (Luibhéid, 2002).

In the most alarming cases, those bodies that do not conform to this pre-established dichotomy are often “corrected,” frequently through surgical interventions as part of a marked “body fascism” (Córdova Quero, 2008). Intersex people understand the consequences of this imposition well, as they are often subjected to irreversible procedures to “normalize” their bodies from an early age. This generates deep psychological trauma and raises ethical dilemmas for the professionals involved (Sytsma, 2004). This has led some professionals to call for a moratorium on this type of “corrective surgery” (Kipnis and Diamond, 1998), in response to what many activists call “mutilation”, “torture” or “human rights abuse”, especially when performed on children without the consent of the person concerned (Crocetti et al., 2020).

Similarly, transgender people face pressures and expectations about how they should present their bodies and identity. This eagerness to define and “correct” bodies that do not conform to binary norms illustrates a deep societal resistance to bodily and gender diversity. The insistence on maintaining a rigid and exclusionary gender structure perpetuates the invisibilisation and - in many cases - the suffering of those who defy those boundaries. This is what Manuel Guzmán (1997) calls “sexile” - a forced exile due to persecution based on sexual orientation - when state power deploys violence in tandem with socio-cultural stereotypes in the country of destination (Galaz, 2022). This is most starkly observed at border crossings, where passports often do not match the gender expression of the persons. At best, this results in denial of entry to the destination country; at worst, in legal penalization. The latter, in collusion with what Eduardo Domenech (2020) calls “politics of hostility” or “[...] the criminalization and securitization of migration and borders” (p. 6).

However, it is necessary to recognize that migrants live their reality through their bodies and with their bodies they challenge

the social constructions that claim to be ordered, exposing some of their limitations. By assigning multiple adjectives to our bodies, we begin to question the existence of an exclusively male or female “reality”. These categories are, in reality, a social construction (Butler, 2007). We realize that genitalia, identity, external appearance and affective relationships are not strictly defined in binary gender terms. Instead, there is a universe of possibilities and nuances that escape conventional divisions. This range of potentialities challenges traditional and simplified notions of bodies, sexualities, gender and sexual orientations, broadening the understanding of human diversity and revealing a rich complexity beyond imposed categories.

For this reason, queer migrants - by their very presence and cultural background - challenge dominant social structures, while their sexual orientation and gender expression present new frontiers of challenges. Queer migrants - gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, intersex and cis-heterosexual migrants who do not conform to cis-heteropatriarchy - bring unique experiences that must be considered when analyzing their integration into the receiving society. This includes their diverse relational practices, such as monogamy, polygamy, polyamory or partner-swapping, which broaden the framework of inclusion in their host country. Indeed, the social networks that migrants need to survive in the new society foster cohesion through the intersection of culture, language, ethnicity and gender (Herskovitz, 1948). Culture travels with migrants, remaining in their identity and neither forgotten nor interchangeable (Tanner, 1997).

To understand the multiple realities faced by queer migrants, this chapter explores their experiences in Latin America from different perspectives. The first section examines how racial and bodily prejudice – along with the politics of biopolitical control - affect the lives of queer migrants, deepening their marginalization in contexts of migration. In the second section, I analyze the difficulties they face in their personal and labor relations, addressing exploitation and the risk of falling into trafficking networks, situations that perpetuate cycles of abuse and lack of protection. Finally, the third section offers a personal testimony about the

Honduran LGBTIQ+ Caravan in Tijuana in 2018, the “sexilio” and resilience in faith, as an event where the dynamics explored in this chapter are intertwined. In this way, the chapter seeks to offer a comprehensive and engaging analysis of the complex realities of queer migrants in the region.

## **1 Bodies in Transit: Biopolitics and Prejudice in Queer Migrant Experience**

In this section I seek to focus on the impact of the politics of control over bodies and identities on the lives of queer migrants, exploring how biopolitical power and racial and bodily prejudice profoundly condition their experiences. Through mechanisms of social control and regulation, institutions often reinforce the marginalization of queer migrants, whose gender identity and expression are often seen as a threat to dominant or national values. In addition, this section examines the role that sexual orientation plays in the exclusion of these bodies in contexts of migration, where systems of surveillance and exclusion can intensify for those who do not fit cis-heteronormative norms, thus restricting their ability to integrate and access fundamental rights. The section seeks to unpack how these dynamics contribute to precariousness and insecurity in their everyday lives.

### ***1.1 Biopolitics***

Michel Foucault (1990) argues that when “sexuality” became a concern of the state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it came to be seen as a zone of “danger”. In this sense, the regulation and control of sexual behavior became tools of state power, exercised over people whose identity or behavior was considered “deviant” from cis-heteronormativity. These individuals were subject to scrutiny, stigmatization and, often, punishment. Such dynamics have undoubtedly shaped the experiences of queer people both in their countries of origin and in their migration processes to other territories. It is therefore crucial to recognize how migration is intertwined with gender and sexuality, understanding the specific challenges faced by queer migrants in the context of international

mobility. Only in this way can we make visible and address the needs of those living at the intersection of these complex social and political dimensions.

Foucault (1990) argues that the regulation of sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries emerged not only as a response to the medicalization of dissent, but also as a social demand for the normalization of bodies and behavior. The control and supervision of sexual behavior was established as a means of reinforcing social order, so that those who deviated from cis-heteronormative norms were seen as a threat to the stability and reproduction of society. In this vein, Giorgio Agamben (1998) conceptualizes “biopolitics” as the “increasing involvement of man’s natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power” (p. 119), highlighting how biological life is instrumentalized by state power. The term ‘biopolitics’ was introduced by Rudolf Kjellén in 1920 - along with ‘geopolitics’ - both of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics of control in the modern state (Esposito, 2008).

By exerting control over sexuality, the state was able to monitor and manage the bodies of its citizens, shaping their experiences and behaviors to align with social norms. This surveillance also extended to the control of movement and migration, where those who deviated from cis-heteropatriarchal norms were often subject to increased scrutiny and suspicion when crossing international borders. This biopolitical framework is essential to understanding the unique challenges faced by queer people in the international migration context, where issues of gender and sexuality are intertwined and complex. By recognizing these intersections, migration policymakers can make informed decisions that adequately protect and address the specific rights and needs of queer migrants. This opens the door to an approach that is inclusive and mindful of the particularities of those who face these barriers in their migration experience.

As with sexuality, migration is a prominent area of biopolitical intervention, where the state exercises decisive control. Based on its “sovereign power” (Foucault, 2003), the state determines who and how many people can enter and transit its territory, establishing criteria that respond to its own interests. This encompasses specific educational, occupational, economic and legal requirements that

must be fulfilled to meet its standards. Moreover, the state decides not only when to deport or expel a migrant, but also where he or she can reside and how long he or she can stay in the territory.

The biopolitical mechanisms operating today have a long history of legal justification that has been naturalized in our societies. Biopolitics also had a significant impact on the lives of immigrants during the massive migratory movements of the 19th century. New research is making connections between these historical phenomena to better understand other eras and draw valuable lessons (Bastos, 2008). Through biopolitics, stigmatization is imposed on the shoulders of migrants, drastically limiting - if not completely eliminating - their opportunities to improve their living conditions. This situation has devastating consequences for queer people's daily lives, profoundly affecting their bodies, sexualities and interpersonal relationships. The pressure they face hampers their ability to live fully and authentically in an already complicated context.

The uniqueness of the relationship between queer people and international migration lies in the fact that this link becomes a point of confluence of discourses and practices that place them within the margins of state control, rendering them unable to escape categorization as "the undesirable Other(s)" (Peutz and De Genova, 2010). The stereotypes that regulate these perceptions emerge as a defensive mechanism of the state and its citizens against migrants, who are seen as Other(s) with the capacity to challenge monolithic identities based on gender, race or ethnicity, as well as nationalist narratives. The displacement of these people highlights the complex dynamics within the modern capitalist world (Wallerstein, 1976) that emerge in the relationship with Otherx(s), especially when they are negatively branded with labels such as "criminal", "terrorist", "illegal" or "inferior". This dehumanization, in turn, facilitates the legitimization of their exploitation (Mora and Montenegro Martínez, 2009). As Bob Sutcliffe (1998) analyses, migration dynamics are influenced by global economic and political factors, which highlight the structural inequalities affecting cis-heterosexual or queer migrants.

This analysis highlights how the processes of constituting strategies of control and power around the ‘problems’ of migration must necessarily interrelate with aspects of everyday life such as gender and sexuality. As Abdelmalek Sayad (1998) points out, “the real and proper problem in this field [immigration] should begin with the first problem, as a prior problem, the fact that it is an object that creates a problem” (p. 15). From this perspective, it is possible to establish a link between migration in general and queer migrants: the construction of people and communities that do not align with the fluctuations of the modern capitalist world-system is perceived as “a problem”.

This is the real “problem”. In other words, when migrants are dehumanized and become mere statistics or negative factors affecting the receiving society, a real dilemma is created, as their life experiences are rendered invisible. Therefore, it is essential to analyze their experiences from an approach that prioritizes both gender and sexuality, allowing for a fuller understanding of their realities and challenges, thus promoting a more inclusive and just discourse.

### ***1.2 Bodily and racial prejudice***

Some queer men are attracted to other men with certain phenotypes. Whenever an attraction to someone of a different race or ethnicity is experienced, it involves confronting and managing existing prejudices and preconceptions about that race or ethnicity. For example, within queer communities, the “myth” persists that Asian males have a smaller sex organ than the average of other races, leading to ridicule and even exoticization. Teenagers in schools, adult males in bars or queer people on online platforms frequently make jokes about this myth (Fung, 1996: 184; Cheng, 2011: 5). In addition, the ‘myth’ also claims that males of African descent have larger sex organs than the global male average (Poulson-Bryant, 2005; Vidal-Ortiz, 2022). As early as the 1950s, Frantz Fanon (1986) highlighted how African male bodies - and in particular their sexual organs - are fetishized and racially stereotyped in Western culture. These stereotypical beliefs not only perpetuate racial discrimination

(Husbands *et al.*, 2013; Calabrese *et al.*, 2018), but also influence the dynamics of attraction and interpersonal relationships within queer communities (Han, 2007).

Both “myths” - about Asian and African males - are incorrect. Penis size in males is not solely dependent on genetics, but also on physical build, as there is a “moderate” or “weak” correlation between a male’s height and the size of his sexual organ. This has been linked to elevated testosterone levels during puberty; however, once puberty is over, hormone levels no longer influence size (Juul *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, some studies suggest that - in addition to genetics - environmental factors such as social context, culture, diet, and exposure to pollutants or chemicals may influence their development (Sharpe, Skakkebaek, 2008). These findings dismantle racial stereotypes associated with penis size (Mondaini and Gontero, 2005). In short, humanity shows great variety in this regard, although deep-seated racial and social biases often impose harmful expectations that affect both cis-heterosexual and queer males (Grov *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, the perception of penis size as attractive is subjective and based on psychological rather than biological factors, which shifts the valuation of the male body to the subjectivity of potential partners (Mautz *et al.*, 2013).

Bodily prejudice is grounded in notions of race and ethnicity that mark and demarcate the bodies, sexualities and life chances of queer migrants, generating real and tangible consequences in their everyday experiences. Judith Butler (2002a) works on this in her discussion of power dynamics around three fundamental issues: racism, homophobia and misogyny, reflecting:

And while there are clear historical reasons to keep “race”, “sexuality” and sexual “difference” in separate analytical spheres, there are also pressing and significant historical reasons to ask how and where we should read, not only the convergence of such spheres, but the sites at which none of them can be constituted without the others. This is not the same as juxtaposing different spheres of power, subordination, personal action, historicity, or drawing up a list of attributes separated by those proverbial commas (gender, sexuality, race, class) that usually mean we have not



yet figured out how to conceive of the relations that seeks to mark (p. 242).

Therefore, notions of race and ethnicity cannot be separated from sexuality, gender or identity.

### **1.3 Sexual orientation**

Sexual orientation is a factor that has barred many queer migrants from the possibility of insertion into another society. Although legal policy changes have been undertaken, Eithne Luibhéid (2008) argues that the situation is still far from being resolved:

While most nation-states may no longer prohibit entry to LGBTQ migrants, their presence challenges and disrupts practices that remain normalized around racialized heterosexuality. National heteronormativity is thus a regime of power that all migrants must negotiate, making them vulnerable to exclusion at the border or deportation upon entry, while racializing, (re)gendering, (de)nationalizing and unequally positioning them in the symbolic economy, the public sphere and the labor market. These outcomes, in turn, are related to the ongoing reproduction of particular forms of nationhood and national citizenship, which have ramifications for local, regional, national, transnational and imperial power arrangements (p. 174).

We must also recognize that constructions of queer vary across different social and cultural contexts. However, North European and North American constructions of queer have become universalized and thus colonize local negotiations in different contexts around the world, for example, narratives of 'coming out'. The pressure on queer migrants to assume North European/North American cis-homonormativity in Western industrialized migrant-receiving countries still lingers on the horizon, and adds anguish to those migrants who cannot afford to realize a more visible queer life. Most of the time queer migrants feel disoriented and *homesick* in the host country and - in the most difficult cases - fall into depression or psychological problems arise.

Many queer migrants in their migration process move from a “developing” country to a “developed” country. It is logical to assume that the situation of queer migrants will change for the better. However, this is not always the case. Martin F. Manalansan IV (2003, p. 13) has pointed out that queer migrants do not always move from a situation of “repression” to one of “liberation”, but sometimes the opposite is true.

What is almost normative is that both migration studies and migration policymakers seem to assume that migrants are always not only male but also necessarily cis-heterosexual. This has dire consequences for queer migrants. We speak here of what we know as “compulsory heterosexuality” or “compulsive heterosexuality”, which understands the role that cis-heterosexuality has played in becoming a hegemonic ideology over time. Its power represents the basis of cis-heteronormativity, imposing its mandates and requirements for gender role expectations and the cis-heterosexual division of labor. This notion was proposed by Adrienne Rich (1980, p. 62-91) in her work “ Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence “.

In several countries with a long history of receiving migrants, there are “family reunification” programs aimed at allowing cis-heterosexual families to stay together. This presumes that marriage is inherently cis-heterosexual (Butler, 2002b), which is a recent Western construct (Nussbaum, 1997). However, this traditional model faces growing criticism (Honohan, 2009), especially when it is noted that many people are excluded from this possibility: cis-heterosexual asylum seekers, queer migrants - including gay couples, lesbians, transgender people - who experience sexillia and even polygamous families. These families or relationships are often forced to live apart due to visa restrictions. The situation has been exacerbated by the so-called “war on terror”, which has tightened border controls and reduced real migration options (Helbling and Meierrieks, 2020). In this context, queer migrants face a double burden, as in addition to dealing with general migration policy barriers, they face specific prejudices that further hinder their reunification and family stability.

### ***1.4 Exploitative dynamics and risks for queer migrants***

In this section I aim to examine the different discriminations faced by queer migrants in both their personal relationships and work environments, covering critical issues such as labor exploitation and the risk of falling into human trafficking and smuggling networks. Being in conditions of vulnerability, these migrants often face specific challenges arising from the lack of legal and social protection in destination countries, which limits their access to basic resources and aggravates their precarious situation. Based on an analysis of these conditions, the section seeks to show how these people are trapped in cycles of abuse and exploitation that not only affect their physical and emotional well-being, but also limit their possibilities for social and economic integration in an alien and often hostile context.

### ***1.5 Human trafficking and smuggling***

The increase in undocumented immigrants, which increases the risk of labor exploitation, exacerbated by an ideology that considers descendants of native peoples, Afro-descendants, and mestizos as subalterns and as “racially inferior” and, therefore, exploitable as the fruit of colonial leftovers that ignore Latin American racial and cultural hybridity (García Canclini, 1995). The same ideology reinforces the mechanisms of human smuggling and trafficking. The exploitation suffered by the victims of trafficking has serious historical antecedents in the Latin American societies where it occurs. As has been expressed in this paper, the conception of the Otrx/x as “inferior” or “negative” leads to the “invisibilization” of the abuse. This also implies a role of inertia of the society where the abuse takes place (Liguori, 2009, p. 19). Because racial ideology in Latin America has historically privileged people of European descent over those of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and mestizos, only in recent years has there been a growing awareness not only of the difference between the two terms, i.e. “trafficking” and “smuggling” of persons, but also of how both constitute human rights violations (CAREF, 2010, p. 18-19).

Poverty and economic inequality are key factors driving many people to seek opportunities abroad, making them more susceptible to trafficking. This can be seen in false job offer contracts as well as promises of residence through arranged marriages. These actions hide behind the objective of coercing people from their economic situation with unrealistic promises to be exploited upon arrival at their destination (Córdova Quero, Mor, 2024). On the other hand, violence and armed conflicts – which have historically affected some countries in the region – contribute to insecurity and forced displacement, creating conditions conducive to human trafficking. Many people have lost almost their entire family, which is a palpable reality in the lives of children who have been orphaned (Garay, 2003).

In this context, the reality of corruption and the fragility of government institutions complicates the effective implementation of laws against human trafficking and smuggling, creating an environment that favors impunity in all regions of the continent (Rivers-Moore, 2011; González Perett and Tuana Nägel, 2012). This issue highlights the imperative need to address not only the legal issues, but also the systemic challenges that perpetuate these human rights violations (Zuñiga Sigwas, 2023), especially in the particular issues of queer migrants.

### ***1.6 A personal testimony: Honduran LGBTIQ+ caravan, sexilio and faith***

In this section, I present a personal testimony about the Honduran LGBTIQ+ Caravan, sexilio and faith. From 16-19 November 2018, I was part of a delegation from the California Justice Commission of the Unitarian Universalist Church that travelled from San Diego, USA, to Tijuana, Mexico. I represented the Starr King faculty, where I am Associate Professor of Critical Theories and Queer Theologies. Of the ten of us in the entourage, four of us were ordained ministers. Although it was a pre-planned event, the arrival of the Central American migrant caravans in Tijuana had not been foreseen, which mobilized numerous volunteers to provide hospitality to the more than 9,000 people who arrived in the city. Our group immediately joined these solidarity efforts with

the migrants, including a caravan of 84 LGBTIQ+ people who were the first to arrive. Their experiences reflect the challenges and hopes common to many contemporary migrations of many queer migrants. For this reason, I focus specifically on the experience of the Honduran people who make up the majority of the LGBTIQ+ caravan in Tijuana.

### **1.7 The Honduran context**

Honduras is no exception to the situation of forced displacement of people and communities. Part of the so-called “northern triangle”, Honduras together with Guatemala and El Salvador form a region of economic exchange but also of shared violence. This is demonstrated by the rate of violent deaths in the region, which exceeds deaths in war zones in other parts of the world, according to United Nations (UN) reports (Prensa Libre, 2012).

The rise of drug trafficking, the presence of allies of Mexican cartels and the weakness of democratic institutions have led to a rarefied social climate leading to marked violence (Prado Pérez, 2018), which is augmented by the incipient presence of weapons and a virtually unemployed younger generation. The coup against President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 precipitated the conditions for the development of structural violence. The election of President Porfirio Lobo did not produce the expected results, as several countries in the region and Latin America did not recognize the electoral process.

Gradually, some countries changed their position, although not all members of the Organization of American States (OAS) recognize this today. One of the highlights of this situation was that former US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated in her book *Hard Choices* (2014) that her role was to organize - together with other authorities in the region - an electoral process that would prevent Zelaya's return to the presidency. Interestingly, it is the US that today is the country most opposed to forced migrants as a result of these political decisions. The rise of Juan Orlando Hernández to the presidency in 2014 did not change the political situation in Honduras.

Although the important Mayan culture flourished on its territory, Spanish colonization from the 16th century to the modern neo-colonial processes led to the structural impoverishment of Honduras. In its history, the country had another coup d'état in 1962, which plunged society into a military dictatorship that lasted until 1981. The country's nine million inhabitants today have suffered from other situations that have hardened their living conditions, such as incipient deforestation and the resulting climatic changes and water pollution caused by ruthless mining activity by transnational companies.

Honduran society has also suffered from the prevalence of the Roman Catholic Church with its corresponding conservative moral positions and the rule of right-wing parties. All this has produced a climate that is not very tolerant of racially diverse or generically dissident groups.

### ***1.8 The 2018 migrant caravan(s) and LGBTIQ+ people***

The Honduran caravan is not the only one that took place in Central America in October 2018. While it is true that the **first caravan** departed from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, on 13 October and was comprised of around a thousand people, others soon followed.

The **second caravan** left from Esquipulas, Guatemala, on 21 October. The **third caravan** left from San Salvador, El Salvador, on 29 October. The **fourth caravan** also left San Salvador on 31 October. Finally, the **fifth caravan** began its journey on 5 November, also from El Salvador. The LGBTIQ+ caravan that first arrived in Tijuana was comprised mostly of people from Honduras.

These caravans of people forced to leave their place of origin due to precarious living conditions and violence are not the only signs of the Central American exodus and their reasons are manifold. For decades, abandoned children have been making the exodus to other places, while women fleeing gender-based violence and human trafficking and smuggling have also begun the same journey. So far in 2018, 50,036 children - mainly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador – have been apprehended by US border guards (US Custom and Border Patrol, 2018).

Gender-diverse people are another visible group in this displacement that cannot be explained simply by the economic issue. There is a conjunction of factors that affect people in different ways and produce their migration. The structural causes are multiple and solutions to their situations cannot ignore this fact. In fact, a policy that simply looks at the economic issue is - from the outset - condemning people's future to failure because economic precariousness is not the only variable in this complex process. In the case of the LGBTIQ+ people in the Honduran caravan, this is more than evident. This is explained by Silvia Soriano Hernández and Víctor Hugo Gutiérrez Albertos (2016-2017):

Today's society suffers from great inequalities and it is a daily occurrence that these lead to discriminatory attitudes that manifest themselves in many ways, ranging from contempt and mockery to violent aggression that can lead to murder. We can begin by citing the economic discrepancies that translate into a few beneficiaries as opposed to a large group of people who are deprived of both work and basic necessities. We add the differences that appear depending on the color of one's skin or the sex one is born with, as well as the sexual preferences of each individual (p. 90).

From the beginning of the caravan that left Honduras, tensions arose between cis-heterosexual and LGBTIQ+ people. These frictions showed how - in the migration context - the same attitudes and stereotypes rooted in the society of origin were reproduced. This situation was particularly violent for transgender people, who faced exacerbated aggression and discrimination during their journey. In this sense, Soriano Hernández and Gutiérrez Albertos (2016-2017) highlight the disproportionate violence experienced by transgender people and analyze their strategies and mechanisms of resistance in the face of these adversities:

[...] because of their condition of being discriminated against, they opt for militancy in the struggle for their rights as a collective and the adversities they have to overcome, including death threats, beatings, insults and various disqualifications. The misunderstanding of their way of being

usually begins in the family nucleus and extends to all the places they go to, school, neighborhood, work, etc. What we can say is that, despite discrimination and repression, from violent to symbolic forms, people who opt for a break with the normativity of the sex-gender binarism must face many obstacles that can lead them to concealment; but not all of them decide for silence or invisibility and they are the ones who offer us a guideline for the recognition of rights that if they are not demanded, they are not granted (p. 91).

The testimonies of the 84 people in the Honduran LGBTIQ+ migrant caravan are graphic in describing their situations. For example, Lady Pérez - a 23-year-old Honduran transgender woman - stated in an interview for the BBC that it was the murder of her partner that motivated her to leave her country: "They killed him because he was with me, because of his sexual preference. It was one day when he accompanied me to take a taxi. Some guys came to the taxi rank and shot him. They also killed two people who were also there. I survived by a miracle" (Rojas, 2018).

Honduras has the highest rate of murders of transgender people in the region. This is not to say that others who joined the caravan from El Salvador or Guatemala have not experienced other forms of violence. Ana Gabriela Rojas (2018) recovers another story: Loli, a 26-year-old transgender woman from El Salvador, shows her wrist: she has a scar that a man gave her with a machete in a restaurant. On her leg she has another mark from an attack by a stranger perpetrated "simply because of homophobia".

Structural violence is the common denominator affecting LGBTIQ+ people within the migrant caravan, originating in a society where homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia persist. These forms of discrimination fuel hate crimes whose consequences are often irreversible, in many cases leading to death. This context forces LGBTIQ+ people to migrate in search of safety and dignity.

As I mentioned earlier, in the midst of the caravan to the US, LGBTIQ+ people were victims of multiple situations of violence. This is how Erick Alexander Durán Reyes, one of the members of the LGBTIQ+ caravan, describes it: "We were discriminated



against, even in the caravan. [...] People wouldn't let us get on the trucks, they forced us to be at the back of the line for the showers, they shouted ugly things at us" (Drury, 2018). Lady Pérez also describes this situation: "They denigrated us, you are supposed to be migrating from your country because of violence and discrimination, homophobia, and it turns out that in the caravan itself you encounter this violence" (Frontera.Info, 2018).

Finally, upon arrival in Tijuana, they were also attacked by some people after - with the help of lawyers - the group was able to rent a house to stay in. In the midst of a protest against the LGBTIQ+ caravan in which stones were thrown, Patricia Elena Juárez Hernández - a Tijuana resident - declared: "We are surprised, shocked, uncomfortable, because the authorities did not consider us. Here is a municipal president, a delegation that should have told us: neighbors, we ask for your support, your collaboration, these people are coming" (Martín-Fradejas, 2018). Within days, the caravan had to move to other locations and keep its location secret due to the fear that LGBTIQ+ people would be attacked again.

### ***1.9 LGBTIQ+ weddings***

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of handing out clothes, preparing food and heating tortillas, the ministers of the Unitarian Universalist Church delegation received a very special request: "They are talking about getting married and they ask that the ministers go to the third floor. The person who called us was from the Enclave Caracol center, an LGTBIQ+ organization located in the center of Tijuana. The center had set up its building as a shelter while the LGBTIQ+ caravan was being relocated elsewhere. As we went up to the third floor we met a group of different couples.

For those of us who were officiating at the ceremonies, it was essential to respect both the particular faith of each person getting married and the symbolic elements that each considered significant for the event to have a real impact on their lives. It was key to know, for example, that all the people identified themselves as evangelicals and not Roman Catholics. Accustomed in our churches to respecting diversity of beliefs, the ministers - Revd. Ranwa Hammady, Revd. Leslie Takahasi and Revd Mar Cardenas

Loutzenhiser - and the ministers - Revd. Rodney Lemery and myself - decided to write a ceremony that accurately reflected the couples' wishes.

The first questions we received were whether they could exchange rings, whether bridesmaids and groomsmen would be allowed, and finally, whether they could carry bouquets of flowers. For the people who got married, it was essential to have cultural symbols that would highlight the event as an authentic wedding and not simply an "act" of political declaration. Although legal or church weddings are not permitted for LGBTIQ+ people in their home countries, two key elements came together in Tijuana.

On the one hand, the fact that LGBTIQ+ weddings are recognized as legally valid in that city. This was something that the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Tijuana, Archbishop Rafael Romo, had already lamented and opposed in 2016 (La Jornada, 2016). However, if the ceremonies had taken place only 300 meters further away - on US soil - the religious weddings would even have been automatically legal. This is because in the US every minister has the legal authority to unite any couple in marriage, regardless of their religion.

On the other hand, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, many Christian churches - as well as many non-Christian religions such as Judaism or Buddhism - nowadays perform same-sex marriages (Córdova Quero, 2018). In this ceremony, the ministers present represented churches that do not discriminate in the sacrament of marriage on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or biological sex. This created an atmosphere of joy and hope for the couples celebrating their union. Pedro Nehemías Pastor de León - who married Erick Alexander Durán Reyes - expressed his excitement: "This is really a dream come true because you don't see it in our home countries. It is something we had always wanted to do and just today we had the opportunity to carry it out" (Infobae, 2018). For them, the ceremony represented the realization of a long-desired and finally achieved dream.

Thanks to the support of the Garymar Centre of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Tijuana and other generous donations, everything needed for the celebration was quickly organized.

Some people went shopping for rings, flowers and cakes, while others prepared an altar decorated with a large rainbow flag as a backdrop. We ministers began designing a marriage liturgy and making marriage certificates for the occasion. So on 17 November at 4 p.m., one gay couple, two lesbian couples, three transgender couples and one cis-straight couple walked - one by one - down the aisle to exchange their vows and rings. They also threw bouquets of flowers to the people present, who responded with showers of rice, streamers, *papel picado* and cheers of joy. All these cultural elements were a blessing that encouraged each couple to enthusiastically pronounce their “yes”.

Unfortunately, however, the media present failed to grasp the fundamental importance of this historic event. For the most part, they labelled the unions as “marriages” or “symbolic weddings” (Acevedo, 2018), which is absolutely incorrect. Placing the word “marriage” in inverted commas implies that gender-diverse people cannot truly be joined in marriage. In turn, referring to these ceremonies as “symbolic weddings” ignores the sacramentally valid character of these unions, legitimized, respected and recognized by the churches present, which even issued legally valid marriage certificates in the USA. It is evident that many media outlets still cling to the hegemonic idea that marriage is only valid between a cis-heterosexual man and a cis-heterosexual woman and only when performed by the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church. This approach ignores the diversity of positions in the Christian religion, where many churches no longer embody homophobia, lesbophobia or transphobia. At the same time, many news reports failed to recognize that there were five ministers ordained by their churches with a mandate to perform the marriages and refer to one of the ministers as “A woman who acted as a master of ceremonies” (Infobae, 2018), ignoring the female priesthood of these churches. In the end, the media coverage of this event once again placed LGBTIQ+ people on a second-class plane and questioned, once again, the legitimacy of same-sex unions.

As one of the ministers officiating the LGBTIQ+ marriage ceremonies, I closed the marriage ceremony with these words:

Today you have marked a historic milestone because we have done real weddings. Do not allow anyone to question the validity of your marriage or to tell you that these weddings are “fake”. We ministers here are authorized and empowered by our churches to marry any person who so desires and to make that marriage sacramentally valid. You have come a long way to come to this place, not only in your relationship as couples but also geographically. You have left loved ones and you have left your homeland to seek a better tomorrow. Let no one take away your dignity. Also today you have been prophetic in announcing to the world that in the midst of despair and the many things that await you in the future, only love will make you strong. That they have walked so many kilometers for so many days to tell the world that their love is true is already an act of hope, an act of resistance and a political act. In the Christian traditions, there are no churches or ministers who marry, but it is the people who join together who marry each other. We - ministers here - are here to witness, honor and respect your marriage. This is why we wish you happiness and God’s blessing today and always.

The LGBTIQ+ couples who married in this context reaffirmed and testified to the resilient power of love. In the midst of the many difficulties a queer migrant person faces in moving forward, affection and hope are strengthened. This was demonstrated by each couple who chose to unite their lives in marriage. The weddings of the LGBTIQ+ people in the Honduran caravan represent an act of justice, a light in the midst of the many injustices that migrants face. Despite this step forward, the road remains arduous, marked by restrictive policies and the geopolitics of modern migration processes. It is therefore essential that we continue to work for gender justice, so that queer migrants are not treated as second-class people, but with the respect and dignity they deserve.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented an analysis of the realities faced by queer migrants in Latin America, considering the intersectional complexities that cut across their lives. Through a

detailed review of the prejudices that affect these people and the ways in which the politics of control intensify their vulnerability, the chapter has uncovered the multiple mechanisms of exclusion that operate in their migration contexts. By integrating a gender and sexual orientation perspective with factors of race and biopolitics, the text illustrates how queer migrants are trapped in systems of oppression that limit their opportunities and put their well-being at risk. However, this analysis does not stop at denouncing these issues; it also includes a testimonial component that gives voice to those who face these situations, highlighting their strategies of resistance and resilience.

Ultimately, this chapter invites critical and empathetic reflection on the challenges of queer migrants in Latin America, emphasizing the need for greater protection and solidarity. The inclusion of experiences from the Honduran LGBTIQ+ Caravan highlights how community and faith can act as sources of strength in adverse contexts. This chapter therefore contributes to the visibility of their struggles and offers a committed perspective that seeks to push for changes in policies and practices that positively impact their lives.

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# 4



## A SHUNAMMITE WOMAN WHO HELPS A MIGRANT AND MAKES MIGRATION A *LOCUS THEOLOGICUS*

*Moisés Pérez Espino*

### Foreword

Migration is part of humanity's history. In recent times it has become a humanitarian crisis as destination countries, such as the United States and many others in Europe, have developed a series of legislation that make access for people in mobility<sup>1</sup> very difficult. In addition, climate change is contributing to migration and, as if that was not enough, organized crime is taking advantage of migrant's vulnerability and extorting money from them, taking what little they have.

Furthermore, the countries through which they pass demonstrate xenophobia and rejection, among many other reasons, due to the number of migrants crossing their territories. Migrating is not easy. Where is faith and spirituality in this situation? Is God present in migration? Can migration be a *Locus Theologicus*?

In this article, we will try to answer these questions through a biblical character, a woman who appears at the so-called

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<sup>1</sup>Examples of such laws or legislations are many. To review some examples, see: BBC News World, 2024 or Amnesty International, 2024.

“Deuteronomistic Historiography” in the second book of Kings 4:8-17, in the story corresponding to the prophet Elisha.

## **1 The woman who helps a migrant**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So, whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.” One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.” The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.<sup>2</sup>

## **2 Getting to know the biblical text**

In the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, we find several stories in which women are not named. This aspect is not strange in a culture, such as that of the people of Israel, when women had no power to act, that is, they could not make decisions regarding their lives or their possessions, or where everything was regulated by the closest male member of their family.

In the biblical excerpt above, the prophet Elisha calls a woman “Shunammite”, because she lived in Shunem. It is almost obvious

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<sup>2</sup> Kings 4:8-17 New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE). In the present article, all the text from the Bible will be cited from this version.

that this woman was not called by her name in the biblical narrative. In the whole context of the ancient Middle East, women were second-class human beings: they had value for the man who was next to them, who could be their father, their husband, or their son (García Bachman, 2006, p.17), a situation that caused that when they were widowed, they were left in total helplessness.

However, not all biblical accounts are of the same line and a clear example is found in a part of the Torah, where it is possible to see how legislation is made in favor of widows. In Exodus 22:22, where the laws of the Torah are exposed, for example, there is a concern and a ministry is created to care for widows and their children, who were fed and helped.

The Shunammite in the story, notices that a man of God often passes by Shunem, so she urges him to eat something to continue his path. The word that the version Dios Habla Hoy translated by “insistence” in verse 8, in Hebrew is **קִזְקִז** - khazak which means to strive and to be obstinate. In other words, the woman fought and insisted that Elisha accept something to eat (Strong, 2002, p. 140).

Since the prophet often passed through Shunem, the woman suggested to her husband that they make a small room with a bed, a table, and a candlestick, so that whenever the man of God came, he would stay there. An attitude that speaks very well of her, since she is sharing with a man she did not know, but whom she knew was a servant of God. This woman’s actions in favor of the prophet Elisha and his servant are relevant.

They reflect her way of thinking about the “other,” which includes those who are hungry and need rest. Regardless of whether he is a man of God, in this case, a prophet, he was a human being with basic needs, like all human beings. The woman is aware of this, in addition to the fact that Elisha did not go alone.

One of the laws of the Ancient Middle East is that of hospitality, from which the Hebrew people are not exempt. There are several examples of the implementation of this law in the biblical accounts, such as Abraham’s welcoming of visitors in Genesis 18, or Job’s welcoming of his friends, beginning in chapter 4 of the book.

The phrase used in Hebrew to designate hospitality is **הַכְנָסַת אֹרְחִים** , haknasat orjim, whose meaning has the idea of

reception of travelers, was put into practice with migrants and especially with the poor and needy (de Voux, 1976, p. 34). This practice was not limited however, to what was said before, since the reception of travelers was also practiced among the nomadic tribes of the Ancient Middle East, which allowed them to rest and take some food, and then continue on their way. There is a saying among the Bedouins that “the Bedouin Arabs, like Abraham, will sit at the entrance of their tent to be in expectation of foreign guests”, recalling the episode of Genesis 18 (Wigth, 1981, p. 15).

The woman, who the prophet calls Shunammite, assumes this law, codes, and customs and puts them into practice with Elisha. It is striking that the woman’s husband appears incidentally and that he does not take center stage. She alone pleads with the prophet to eat and, although she informs her husband of the construction of a room for the prophet, the idea is hers and she receives no response from her husband.

Although the narratives are literary constructs that serve a specific purpose and respond to their own context, it is worth noting that, in a male-led world, this woman has the capacity of acting, decision-making, and determination.

Even though the story does not remember her name, the Shunammite is a woman who thinks of others and their dignity and reaches out, no matter who they are, to help and give them the basic needs for the prophet to remain a dignified human being: food and rest.

In the passage, Elisha asks his servant Gehazi what good they are to do for this woman, to show her the blessing of their God. Since she was childless and her husband was already old, the prophet tells her that she will have a son. Now, it is not that God will bless because someone does good. The passage implies that the action of a woman, whose name is not remembered, makes the servant of God notice her and then he wonders what he can do for her since she has treated him so well. It is not a matter of a reward or payment, but of showing gratitude for what this woman has done.

### 3 The context of sSecond kings chapter 4

The books of Kings, together with those of Samuel, Joshua, and Judges, form the so-called Deuteronomistic Historiography (Römer, 2008, p. 234). It is a narrative ensemble constructed upon the return from exile in Babylon of the people of Israel, composed of all the stories that had been passed down from generation to generation, stories of important men for the people of Israel, leaders, kings, and prophets.

There are many women who lead stories in this section, some with names and others anonymous, but all of them amid a patriarchal world, that uses their stories, remembers them, and writes them, spinning them as one more part of a larger fabric. Guevara Llaguno says thus:

About twenty-six women have a prominent role in the story, but the range of characters extends to recognize more than forty in total who come in and out of the story and leave their mark. Among all these women, some stand out because they are key protagonists in the story and their profiles have been delineated with great attention: women, concubines, queens, prophetesses, prostitutes, etc. (Guevara, 2009, p.114).

The Shunammite is a wife, who appears in the saga of Elisha, the prophet who is blessed and benefited by her. This woman plays a very small part in a larger section that, for the history of Judaism and Christianity, goes unnoticed. The important thing is Elisha: he performs miracles and the woman sustains him. The main character is the prophet, and the woman only appears to benefit him. Is this the only reason for being of her character, or does she have something else to say and teach?

### 4 A Shunammite woman who helps a migrant and transforms migration into a *Locus Theologicus*

A woman with decision-making capacity and economic resources decides that a human being, who constantly passes

through her territory, must eat and rest every time he arrives. She is thinking of the other, of his welfare. She sees him as a human being, just like her, and does not exclude him, but includes him.

Feeling that we are more than others leads us to exclude others and, on the contrary, to know that we are in equal circumstances leads us to include. Helping others comes from identifying them in their humanity (Volf, 2022, p. 31). The Shunammite did not feel more than the prophet, she did not share leftovers but treated him as an equal, knowing that two of the basic needs of all human beings, such as eating and resting, are lacking to Elisha. That is why she offers him food and rest. By treating the other as an equal, the Shunammite, loves her neighbor, as herself, in equal circumstances, as equal human beings with needs to be met.

In the narration of the Creation of the human being, in Genesis 1:27, we read: When God created man, he created him in his own image; male and female he created them. In Hebrew, the word translated as “image” gives the idea of creating human beings in the image of God, of the same essence, in equal circumstances, without superiority of one over the other (Strong, 2002, p. 110). The creation in the image of God of human beings, who need situations and essential requirements to live with dignity, offers them dignity. Loving one’s neighbor as oneself reminds us that all human beings are equal since we were created from the same essence and require primordial elements to survive.

The word used to refer to the created human being is אָדָם , Adam, which comes from אֲדָמָה , adamah, earth. Both male and female are equal, there is no superiority, no inferiority, God made them and gave them equal dignity. In Genesis 5,2, it is written that God called them both adam, emphasizing the creation of the human being in the image of God and the equality between human beings (Croatto, 1997, p. 90).

When Jesus speaks of “loving one’s neighbor as oneself” in the Gospel of Matthew, he emphasizes that we should love each other as human beings, as equals, without supremacy or hierarchy. Soren Kierkegaard says it in this way:



It is the Christian love which discovers and knows that the neighbor exists, and, what amounts to the same thing, that everyone is a neighbor. If it were not a duty to love, then the concept of neighbor would not exist; but only when one loves one's neighbor, only then is the selfish partiality eradicated, and the equality of the eternal preserved (Kierkegaard, 1949, p. 37).

If we are created in the image and likeness of God and equal to all other human beings, why should we treat some people differently? The answer to this question has to do with love for us and our neighbor. If we attack a human being, we are going against God, because human beings are the image of God. In today's language, to violate human rights is to go directly against God (De León, 2024, p. 34). The Shunammite woman saw Elisha as an equal, with the need for rest and food, so she fed him and built a room for him when he passed through Shunem.

In a traditional reading of the passage, what has caught the attention is the miracle that the prophet performs on behalf of the Shunammite woman, but, if read from the woman's actions, we can notice that she offered Elisha a great blessing and that God made himself present through food and a room for him to rest.

The Shunammite woman thought of the other as equal to her, she did not consider herself more because she had money; she shared what she had with a human being in need and, through these gifts, she made up for the deficiencies that another human being, equal to her, had. Her actions made God present, and the food and rest allowed a difficult path to be transformed into a place where God and His blessing are present.

In the New Testament, Jesus asks us to love our neighbor and to help him. Matthew 25:40 reads the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

As a sign of gratitude, the prophet wants to give her something that she needs. She had no children, so she is promised one, and in time she becomes a mother. It is not about doing good to receive a reward, it is about loving our neighbor because it has been understood that he is equal to us and has the same needs to survive.

It is not that if we do good, we attract good and if we do evil, we will obtain evil; it is, once again, about fulfilling what God asks of us so that He can continue to give us His blessing, knowing that we will share it with those who are in need.

Jesus in the New Testament summarizes the whole law in two commandments love God and your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:36-40), love them as people who have the same needs to survive as you have. The divine act, human love, fulfilling the first commandment is to bring God closer by bringing His love to our neighbor, to eradicate selfishness, supremacy, and superiority, and to see in the other the image of God (Kierkegaard, 2006, p. 82). Supporting migrants brings them rest and calm and Jesus happens in them, because He becomes one with the helpless, and transforms the moment and the situation into a place where God happens.

## **5 Contextualizing**

The human mobility crisis that is being experienced worldwide due to war, climate change and violence is forcing more than 300 million people around the world, particularly in the region of Central America and Mexico, to migrate to travel to the so-called Global North (United Nations, International Migration). This crisis, which is also called “migratory”, has mixed flows some people migrate trying to change their residence due to lack of food or security, while others seek refuge because their lives are in danger in their countries of origin and others are deported from the countries of destination (Portal de datos sobre migración, 2022).

## **6 The Context of Migration in the Central American Region and Mexico**

There are more than 114 million refugees and displaced people worldwide (Grandi, 2023). In the Americas, for example, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 7.7 million have left Venezuela in the last six years (UNHCR, 2024). Similarly, Cuba is another example of how people from the region are seeking refuge in Mexico or the United

States: in the past 2023, according to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, COMAR, 12,777 Cubans have sought refuge in the country (COMAR, 2024).

These data speak of a humanitarian crisis due to human mobility. The causes are diverse, but the main ones include violence, crime, lack of living conditions, and as if that were not enough, the consequences of climate change.

Mexico, as the closest neighbor of the country of destination for many of the people who are in mobility, has been overwhelmed in its capacity to respond and care for migrants, since in the country, only in 2022, 2.4 million people were counted in this condition (Ruiz Soto, 2022). This number may sound like just a figure, but it is important to think that it is made up of people who need food, who need to clean themselves, who get sick, and who need and spend money. All these actions listed above are a challenge for the Mexican government and all its civil society organizations.

In addition to this challenge, following the creation of CBP One, a digital mechanism to apply for asylum in the United States from another country, it is possible, and necessary, for migrants to wait for their asylum appointments<sup>3</sup> in Mexican border cities (CNN, 2023).

If, as usually happens, applicants fail, they take the decision to stay in Mexico. That is why, in many of the country's cities, it is increasingly common to see people in human mobility who, when they do not obtain the possibility of crossing to the United States, decide to stay.

## **7 Purpose of the Global Migration**

In 2018, most member countries<sup>4</sup> of the United Nations (UN) signed the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM, 2028). This pact ensures that people in migration have

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<sup>3</sup> Possible, however, in only eight U.S. border cities. In Texas they are Brownsville, Eagle Pass, Hidalgo, Laredo and El Paso; in Arizona Nogales; and in California Calexico West and San Ysidro.

<sup>4</sup> Only the United States did not sign it. *Vd.* 164 countries -without the US- sign the first global migration pact. Forbes Mexico, 10/12/2018.

the right to migrate and that they are always guaranteed that all universal rights are fulfilled.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, the crisis of human mobility has grown and the agreements made by transit and destination countries have often failed to fulfill this compact, causing not only human rights to be violated, but the approach to migration to change: from being a humanitarian crisis, it is now seen as a security crisis, so the governments involved decide to protect their territories and send the military, national guards and police to confront the “invaders”, detain, expel and violate them.

The change of narrative from a humanitarian crisis to a security crisis has brought serious violations of the Human Rights of people in mobility. Although the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration sought the fulfillment of the integrity of human beings in mobility, ensuring all their rights, as well as free and regular transit, so far it has not been fulfilled but, unfortunately, the opposite has happened. This change of narrative, as said, has not only brought violations to the human rights of people in mobility but also has criminalized them and treated them as lawbreakers. As an example, we have the number of detentions, deportations, and “voluntary returns” that the government itself reports every year (Government of Mexico, 2023).

The Compact is a good intention, but the governments of the region, following interests far removed from ensuring that the Human Rights of people in mobility are a reality, have set it aside and it has become just another document to be filed away and, in its place, criminalization, detentions, and deportations of migrants have been installed.

Today’s migration crisis has gone beyond the actions of the region’s governments and, to overcome the crisis, the involvement of all organized sectors of a country, including civil society, is needed.

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<sup>5</sup> This is developed in the Fourth Principle of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. For further reading, see General Assembly Resolution 72/195 “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.” A/73/L.66 (Dec. 19, 2018).

## **8 Turning migration into an opportunity to encounter God**

If human mobility has become a crisis and governments have been overwhelmed, who has answered with support? Fortunately, many NGOs, Churches, and Civil Society, those who think of migrants as human beings just like themselves with minimal subsistence needs, have answered with much-needed support.

One of the great challenges faced by migrants is to be able to feed themselves every day since they do not know if they will be able to reach their destination and since they encounter insecurity on the roads, personal safety rather than food becomes the priority. Likewise, sometimes they have money and can buy, but also, at times there are not even stores on the roads, and on occasions, they simply do not have money.

The weight variations to which they subject their bodies are evident. People who come on foot, for example, from Colombia and enter Mexico, are people with thin and malnourished bodies, who have not been fed and nourished for months. Mexican government studies reveal that more than 10 percent of the migrant population suffers from gastrointestinal diseases during their passage through Mexico; it should be clarified that these are figures of people who are treated, which means that this number could grow if those who do not go to a medical appointment, but who obviously get sick, are counted in (Medina Mora, 2024).

People in migration eat poorly most of the time due to the sparsely populated roads they choose to pass unnoticed, where food is not available. In this difficult context, the shelters and Christian Ministries that offer food are an oasis amid the complicated journey through Mexico, whose long and wide territory has been formed, in addition to the, agencies and institutions that support people who cross it with food. And, fortunately, these are not only ecclesiastical efforts, but also families and civilian efforts, which offer too one meal a day for the people who walk through their territories.

In addition to crossing the country on foot, there is another method that many of the migrants, in their quest to reach the northern border, decide to use: the train they call the Beast, a name

given to it because of the number of injured and dead migrants who have had accidents on the train. An example of the support last mentioned is “las Patronas”. According to the story, as the Beast passed through Amatlán de los Reyes, in the state of Veracruz, a migrant shouted to some women who happened to be shopping that he was hungry. The women, who later became known as “Patronas”, gave him bread. After this event, while talking about this situation at home, they decided to make small bags of food and drinks to throw at the migrants hiding every day on the train. What began as a family effort is now a shelter and a space where food is offered daily to the migrants on the train (Diario de Colima, 2023).

The people who work there, mostly women, are volunteers and are organized in such a way that every day there is enough food, which they put in plastic bags, to throw into the hands of the migrants who hold onto the train with one arm and with the other take the food that unknown women throw to them. Each month they receive donations from many organizations that support their efforts.

“Las Patronas” have been the subject of news reports in national and international media, praising their noble work and asking for help to continue making food to feed the hundreds of migrants traveling on the train.

Any civil or religious organization that can offer people in mobility clean and healthy food, as they are malnourished, or hungry, and able to endure long periods without food, will be of great support to the thousands of migrants crossing through our country.

As women and men believers in Jesus, we can make small efforts to offer food to the hundreds of thousands of migrants crossing our lands. And, in doing so, we imitate the example of the Shunammite woman towards the prophet Elisha, who shared food and rest with him whenever he needed it.

## **9 Migration as *Locus Theologicus***

Thinking of people in migration as human beings in need, considering ourselves as human beings too, will make us remember

their basic needs and the love of neighbor will move us to help so that, when they pass close to us, they can have the basic needs to subsist.

The story of the Shunammite woman is very similar, among others, to the people who, for example, help the migrant population that crosses Mexico City. Amidst them, three strong women oversee an equal number of shelters, who offer their work in favor of the hundreds of foreigners who ask for a place to sleep during the days they are doing their paperwork, to be able to continue to the border with the United States.

First, Gaby, who oversees one of the men-only shelters, has to be forceful to have her voice respected, because, as in the past, women are not taken into account: many men do not pay attention to them. Secondly, Bety, in charge of a shelter for women and children, that, to help migrants, demands that the authorities do their job to better serve those in need. And thirdly, Mother Antonia, who runs a shelter for families and hosts almost 500 migrants, seeks support to feed so many people every day.

The work of these three shelters, providing food and rest for migrants, is effective because these women are there; one is a social worker, the other a sociologist and the last is a Catholic nun; their leadership contributes to the good work offered to migrants; none of them is expecting a reward, or that they will do very well, even their salary does not always reach them. What encourages them to continue is to share a little food and rest with those in need.

The support of people in need, such as those who are migrating, allows resting and feeding, thus supplying basic needs for the subsistence of every human being. Those who dedicate themselves to this regardless of rewards think of others as human beings, and see them in equal circumstances, without superiority. If we act from Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are contributing to God's presence, to God's grace, transforming a difficult situation into a Locus Theologicus, that is, a place where God happens, where he makes himself present.

The nameless woman in this story is a human being who assumes herself to be in the image of God and reaches out to another migrant human needing rest and food. Defying the customs

of her time and even going against the established, this woman teaches us a great lesson.

The biblical text does not speak of her again, but her story leaves us a great example, since, with her actions, she turns a vulnerable situation such as migration into a space where God is present.

All human beings are created in the image of God. So, like the Shunammite, we can make it possible for God to be present with the thousands of people who are being mobilized today in search of a better place to live.

Even though the crisis of human mobility is very big, if there are people willing to support and think of others as equals, it is possible to transform the realities of some. Like the story of this woman whose name we do not know, because of the story called Shunammite, who helped the prophet because she saw his needs, which were the basic requirements of a human being to survive.

Given the inhospitable reality we are experiencing with so many crises, those of us who have assumed that there are no supremacies, but humans in need, must be alert to be able to offer our help to those who pass by us; we are not going to solve the problems of the whole world, but we can supply the basic needs of human beings in need. Let us share one of the many blessings that God gives us.

Let us make God and his goodness manifest through our actions, understanding ourselves as human beings, equal to those who are in need. God happens when we put into practice loving our neighbor as ourselves, transforming an inhospitable place and situation into a *Locus Theologicus*, a place where God is present, helping supply the basic needs that all human beings require to live.

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# 5



## AGAR From migrant to refugee

*Marilú Rojas Salazar*

### **1 Hagar, egyptian migrant and nomad in the desert: The Flight**

This story took place thousands of years ago, during the IIIrd Dynasty of Ur and the XIIIth Egyptian Dynasty. It comes to us through two sources: the Yahwist, Gen 16, written in the 10th century, and the Elohist, Gen 21, from the 8th century. According to Gen. 16: 1-6 Hagar is a servant of Egyptian or Afro-descendant origin in the service of Sarah and Abraham:

Sarayahu Abram's wife bore him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave girl, whose name was Hagar, and Sarayahu said to Abram, "See, the LORD has made me barren. I pray you, go to my handmaid. Perhaps I may have children by her. So Abram listened to the voice of Sarayah. And it came to pass at the end of ten years, when Abram had dwelt in Canaan, that Abram's wife Sarayahu took Hagar the Egyptian, her handmaid, and gave her to Abram her husband to wife. So he came to Hagar, and she conceived. But when she became pregnant, she looked down upon her mistress with contempt. And Sarayahu said to Abram, "My grievance

is upon you. I have put my handmaid in your womb, but when she is with child, she looks at me with contempt. The LORD judge between the two of us. Abram said to Zerah, "There is your handmaid in your hand. Do with her as you think best. Saray gave in to mistreatment, and she fled from his presence. The Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness – the spring on the road to the South - and said, "Hagar, O slave of Sarayah, where have you come from and where are you going?" She answered, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarayah. Return to your mistress," said the Angel of the LORD, "and submit to her. And the Angel of the LORD said to him, "I will so multiply your descendants that they shall not be numbered for multitude. And the Angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you have conceived, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Ishmael, for the LORD has heard your affliction (Gen 16:1-11).

Hagar's situation is one of vulnerability, as is the situation of many migrant women who flee because of the violence against them. Hagar is violated by Abram and Saray, as she is treated as a sexual object and as a 'womb for rent' by both of them. Hagar is characterized as an independent character and at times as Gail Labovitz states, Hagar is a protagonist in her own right within the story, she rebels and flees into the desert where she encounters divine emissaries (Labovitz, 2021). Wandering in the desert, pregnant, and rebelling against systems of oppression she places herself in a nomadic situation with all the dangers that this implies. Fleeing mistreatment seems to be the only way out for women, they represent 48% of international migrants worldwide and more and more women migrate alone, even as heads of households. Increasing numbers of women migrating independently is often referred to as "the feminization of migration". While many migrate to take advantage of new opportunities or to reunite with family, others leave to escape violence. Discrimination and violence on the basis of gender, gender identity, poverty and sexual orientation are among the factors driving migration of women and LGBTI people in Central America and the Caribbean (UN Migration. IOM Regional Office for North, Central America and the Caribbean, 2024).

A person's sex, gender identity and sexual orientation mark each stage of the migration experience. Gender affects the reasons for migration, expectations, relationships and power dynamics associated with being a man, woman, boy or girl, and if one identifies (or is perceived) as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, transvestite or intersex (LGBTTTI) person, it can significantly affect all aspects of this process, which can become doubly violent for this population. The risk of being a victim of trafficking, being sexually violated at least three times during transit in Mexican territory, being placed as a sex slave or simply being disappeared are the realities experienced by most migrant women.

Who is Hagar? She is an Egyptian woman given to Sarah as a gift according to rabbinic midrash, but it must be understood that the rabbis read the story through their own patriarchal lens of their own social and legal institutions such as marriage, marital property and slave-holding. The apocryphal Genesis mentions that the name Hagar by sound could mean 'reward or wages', reinforcing the idea that Hagar was a gift from Pharaoh to Sarah. There is a whole discussion around Hagar as an ordinary slave given by Pharaoh to Sarah, right up to the discussion of Hagar as Pharaoh's daughter and a princess (Lavobitz, 2021, p. 171). What interests us here is to recover the person of Hagar as a violated woman who becomes a migrant, and from being a migrant she becomes a refugee in a second expulsion, and her body and situation become the *locus theologicus* of God's revelation.

In the story of Hagar, she prefers to face the dangers of the desert and to be one more nomad among the many groups that are considered patriarchs, since to remain with Saray and Abram is already to be dead in life. We wonder to what extent Saray's mistreatment and the abuses of Abraham himself led Hagar to take the decision to become a refugee in the desert? No doubt Hagar as a good Egyptian knew the escape routes and the way of life of the Bedouin women of the desert as well as their hospitality, so she decided to flee to the desert as a safer place than Saray and Abraham's own home and place.

The text mentions that the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the desert - the spring on the road to Sur (Gen.

16,7-8) and said: “Hagar, handmaid of Saray, where have you come from and where are you going?” She answered: “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Saray”. The text leaves us in no doubt, Hagar is the recipient of an epiphany of God in the midst of crisis, violence, flight-migrant as a theological place (theological locus) where El Roi “the God who sees me” promises Hagar: “I will so multiply your offspring, that by their great multitude they shall not be numbered.” And the Angel of the LORD said to her, “Behold, you have conceived and will bear a son, and you shall call his name Ishmael, for the LORD has heard your affliction” (Gen. 16:10-11). The migrant body of the woman becomes the space of revelation-announcement, and from now on God will be the God of Hagar, who wants to place her as the recipient of his blessing (Gen. 16,6). It is the first act of God’s annunciation to a woman (Pikaza, 2013, p. 48), a woman seeking refuge and fleeing violence.

Hagar’s cry has been heard and God makes a covenant with a vulnerable migrant woman of African descent. Hagar goes from being a migrant to a refugee. The concept of migrant refers to any person who moves away from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across an international border, either temporarily or permanently, and for various reasons. Whereas, a refugee is someone who has had to flee their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there. So from that moment on, Hagar is a refugee because her life and the life of the child she is carrying in her womb is at risk. The risks to her safety and her life were so great that she felt she had no choice but to leave and seek safety beyond Saray’s reach. However, it must be recognized that a refugee has rights, and Hagar has rights, not only as the mother of Abram’s firstborn, but also as his concubine, for there is a whole exegetical discussion about Hagar’s status. Some claim that she was the daughter of Pharaoh of Egypt given to Saray, according to the midrash of Genesis Rabbah studied by Gail Labovitz, she mentions that according to anonymous commentaries Hagar is given to Abraham as a wife (this is the word used in Gen.16:3) (Lavobitz, 2021, p. 173). Whether this is Hagar’s status or not, the important thing is that she has rights, and God recognizes them by making her responsible– according to Pikaza - for a:

matrilineal descent of a set of tribes, for the sons of Ishmael will indeed be called and be called Sons of Hagar (rather than Abraham), so that she is thus the creator of the lineage of Ishmael (God hears!) and the founder of the sanctuary of Beer-lajai-roi, the well of him who sees me (of the living one who sees me). She has seen God and heard him, and thus appears as the initiator of a true (though not Israelite) cult and the mother of a people who worship the universal God at the Well of vision (Pikaza, 2013, p. 48).

We must not forget the place and the situation in which Hagar finds herself: she is in the desert and fleeing from violence, in an extreme situation like that of many women who are migrating in the spaces of our countries. It is in this situation that Hagar is looked at by God and she looks at him. The metaphor is beautiful: God looks into the eyes of Hagar, and Hagar looks into the eyes of God. Are we capable of looking at our migrant sisters with the same eyes? Under the gaze of Saraye, Hagar and her son become a constant threat to their inheritance, their property and the promise of offspring. Under God's gaze, a promise, a blessing and a matrilineal lineage opens up, which will no longer be a patriarchy, for from now on the offspring will be called the Hagarites or the sons of Hagar.

## **2 Refugee in the desert: Hagar is driven out to die.**

Hagar suffers a second expulsion, this time by Abraham, and for fear that she and her son will also become the heirs

The next day, Abraham rose early in the morning, took a loaf of bread and a leather water bowl, and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder. Then he handed the boy over to her and sent her away. Hagar departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the bowl ran out, she put the boy under a bush and went to sit by herself within arrow-shot distance, [a] for she thought, "I do not want to see the boy die." As soon as she sat down, she began to weep inconsolably. When God heard the boy sobbing, the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Arise and take him by the hand, and I will make of him a great nation." At



that moment, God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water. God accompanied the boy and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became a bowman; he lived in the wilderness of Paran and his mother married him to an Egyptian (Gen. 21:14-21). (New International Version Bible)

Hagar is an expelled woman who must fend for herself, and now with a child to care for in the middle of the desert, water and bread run out along with strength and faith in the God who promised her his blessing. Hagar, like many abandoned, humiliated and expelled women travel the migrant routes without the strength to take care of their children, as is the case of Isabel:

Isabel is a young Venezuelan mother who left her country five years ago and arrived in Peru, where she lived for most of that time and where she gave birth to her one-year-old son. In search of improving her economic condition, she moved again, this time to Colombia, from where she decided to make her way to the US.

"I had to go backpacking in Colombia to be able to get transport to the beginning of the Darien jungle," she told **VOA**. It took Isabel and her young son 10 days to cross the dangerous journey to Panama. However, she said their passage through Mexico was the "most difficult" of the journey.

The 20-year-old woman said she was intercepted by the Mexican authorities on five occasions, one of which she and her son were reportedly imprisoned for seven days. Afterwards, she decided to cross irregularly into the US.

Once in El Paso, Texas, Isabel turned herself into border authorities and was released with a notice to report to agents in Chicago, where she hopes to move once she has the resources. "I'm waiting to collect the money... here where I'm sitting I just have the ticket but I don't have enough to eat... so I have to choose," she said. Meanwhile, Isabel and her son sleep on a pavement in the city. "The bad thing is that when you know you are on the street, sometimes you feel trapped because you don't have anything to feed him. Everything you go through is too difficult. Isabel said that when her son grows up, she will show him the photos and videos she has taken of the journey that brought them to

the US. "I brought him here because I want him to surpass me, to be someone else... I dreamed of him, someone big, I dreamed of him playing on a baseball field... to be someone who represents everything I was" (Vargas, 2023).

Hagar's God continues to keep his promise on the edges of the desert, on the edges and borders of women who are pushed to the extreme of survival. The biblical text tells us that God heard the cry of the child and opened her eyes and saw a well with water, and gave the boy a drink. Elizabeth like Hagar keeps faith and hope in a better world for her children.

The desert of Beer-sheba was the place of refuge for Hagar and her son Ishmael. How could such an inhospitable place be a place of refuge? How could a woman and a child survive so many dangers in the desert? This could not have been possible without the support of the Bedouins in the desert. There is a whole theory around the text that it was the women at the well who probably helped Hagar, recognizing that Hagar and her son were driven out to meet their death, yet Hagar's God again manifests and reaffirms the promise of his blessing. The geographical and spiritual wilderness in Hagar's life is the place of the revelation of the God who sees her to keep his covenant to the end. It is the second time that Hagar is in the desert as the only place of refuge and subversion against a 'Patriarchal Family' system that oppresses and expels her from its bosom.

The desert between the border of Mexico (Sonora) and the United States can be a hostile place for anyone, as in the case of the Mexican desert that the migration route involves, a person with health problems should not attempt the crossing, since one has to walk about 100 miles - 160 kilometers - to cross the desert and must carry food and water for seven to 10 days. Most deaths in the desert occur because migrants stay behind when fleeing Border Patrol, but mostly because they injure or blister their feet and are left to fend for themselves by coyotes. Many migrants will face dangers ranging from high temperatures to animals such as pumas - in mountainous areas - scorpions or poisonous snakes and spiders. Wolves, foxes, boas, rattlesnakes and snakes are just some of the animals found in the Sonoran desert, which migrants call a huge killing machine.

Many migrants lose their lives in the desert, but others, like Agar and Ismael, manage to survive, driven by their faith and hope for a better life like the one Isabel dreams of. Hagar and Ishmael were helped by the women at the wells and the hospitality of the desert dwellers.

### **3 Refugee for women**

According to some authors, it was the women of the desert wells who sheltered Hagar in her exile imposed by the violence she suffered at the hands of Abraham and Sarah. The Bedouins were, and still are, desert dwellers, nomadic tribes that roamed different regions of Asia and Africa. They were mostly engaged in trade, such as the exchange of goods. They travelled in caravans of camels, and from time to time they stopped at the oases to camp for the night, or to take shelter from the inclemency of the weather, especially the nomadic or Bedouin women went to the water sources to wash themselves, clean the children and provide themselves with water to cook food and fill their pitchers for the provision of water on the road, so it cannot be doubted that it was the Bedouin or nomadic women of the desert who took pity on the situation of Hagar and her son. The text of Gen. 21:21 concludes by saying that Hagar and Ishmael lived in the desert of Paran and she married him to an Egyptian. Interestingly, there is no male protagonist in the text in this marriage. Hagar is therefore a single mother, and it is she who takes responsibility for her son in the desert, raising him, educating him, feeding him and finding him a companion of the same descent: an Egyptian. Hagar performs the functions of a leader of her own house and lineage. Hagar maintains the covenant or alliance with her origins and a covenant is established with another woman to continue the offspring through Ishmael. The blessing is extended in the wilderness through God's covenants and promises to the women.

The well is also a strong symbol of refuge: "the place of women", "the source of life", "the place of rest", wells were places of great importance in this region, where water meant nothing less than life itself. Wells were also often associated with God's blessing. Abraham himself had gone through considerable trouble because of the wells during his time in Canaan (Gen 21:25).

Be'er ( בְּאֵר ), 'well, pit'. This name has roots in Ugaritic, Akkadic, Arabic, Phoenician, Aramaic and Ethiopic. The word occurs 37 times in the Old Testament. Be'er means a "well" that may contain water (the term itself does not indicate the presence of water). This means that it can also be a pit or a place corpses. The word refers to the 'well' itself, whether natural or dug. The mouth of the well could be narrow enough to be covered with a rock that a single strong man would be able to remove (Gen. 29:2,10). In the desert lands of the ancient Middle East wells were important places of refreshment for travelers who quenched their thirst there. The same concept is used in Prov. 5:15 to describe the role of the wife for her faithful husband (Biblicom.org, 2024) . Hence also the association with the women's space later as a place of purification or a meeting place. The life-sustaining water well and the women whose womb is a life-sustaining water well took on a very strong meaning, which they retain to this day. The body of the refugee women takes on this meaning again.

#### **4 Refuge in divinity**

The Roi shelters Hagar by promising her as Abraham did to keep a covenant with her and to make of her a great people and nation. Now God is the God of Hagar. What is the God of Hagar like? To begin with, we must not forget that in the beginning of biblical Israel there were some indigenous Canaanite groups, basically marginal shepherds who were supporters of the Goddess (God/God/Goddess) with images and sacred places that inhabited the land of Palestine and in the areas surrounding the desert there was a belief in the warrior God, without image or sex, more characteristic of nomadic groups. The fusion of these two currents gave rise to the later Jewish monotheism, according to X. Pikaza. The figure of the Goddess was not of foreign origin, nor alien to the Jewish world that inhabited Palestine, but was opposed to the group of Yahweh alone (Pikaza X., 2013, p. 20). Hagar takes refuge in the divinity that inhabits the desert. A refuge implies shelter, care, protection from dangers and risks, it also implies complicity, and it seems that these characteristics are more typical of the cult of the Goddess that appears very frequently in the sapiential writings

and reflects the personal and family religiosity of the desert clans and the inhabitants of Palestine. When the bible speaks of refuge, it refers to a place of safety. Knowing the divinity as her refuge allowed Hagar to regain confidence in herself and in her life project with greater freedom, as well as the ability to raise her child alone and to become the mother of a people.

Hagar could no longer fear the people who threatened her life, well-being and freedom. God/Goddess revealed Himself to Hagar as a personal divinity who walked with her in the wilderness and became the guarantor of her life and existence, as well as that of her son Ishmael. Hagar is protected by the loving care of divinity, while Cain would bear the stamp of opprobrium. We can ask women like Hagar and her son who cross the frontiers, who is their refuge, where do they find a place of safety? And they will undoubtedly affirm that they trust in God alone and that he will be the one who protects them, cares for them and brings them to the end of their destiny safe and sound.

Hagar, you gave birth far from your homeland.  
and the Angel of the Lord came out to meet you in the desert.  
Holy is his name!  
El-Roi-God (Gen 16:13),  
sees those who see him: migrant women in every generation,  
to whom His loving and warm gaze reaches,  
according to His promises (Gen 16:19).  
Because of you Agar, we understand:  
only at night can we count our stars.  
(Yolanda Chávez, Migrant)

## **5 Hagar and refugee women today**

According to UNHCR, some 43.4 million of the 117.3 million people who have been forced to leave their homes are refugees. Overall, female migration is growing faster than male migration. In addition, more and more women are travelling alone, rather than following family members or partners (UNHCR, 2024). This official data in the 2023 annual report may give us some insight into women seeking refuge for themselves.

Hagar represents all those women seeking refuge in the midst of deserts and borders, fleeing violence, poverty, death threats, corrupt political and governmental systems, narco-governments or threats of human trafficking. The bodies of refugee women exposed to multiple forms of danger and violence join Hagar's corporeality to expose injustice and cry out for a safe place. The bodies of refugee women are now the theological site of the revelation of God/Goddess as the only safe haven for their lives and unmask the systems that produce the death of those who have no refuge; and in the same way they challenge us to be a space of refuge for those who cry out to us from this situation of pain (Piedade, 2021) .

In the words of Vilma Piedade, we can affirm that it is pain that links the story of Hagar with the stories of refugee and migrant women in our countries, those who cross borders, expose their lives, bodies and sexualities in search of a safe haven, and who often become bodies that do not matter, disposable bodies or bodies in pain, because as Piedade mentions: "there is no minor or major pain. Pain is not measured. It belongs to the one who feels it. There is pain. Pain hurts, full stop" (Piedade, 2021, p. 18-19.) Painfulness is a place of enunciation and belonging of the tight bodies of the women of the amefricanity who seek refuge, and a place of dignified survival.

The bodies of the dark-skinned women are the most exposed in the migratory transits, they are the bodies that do not matter, the unsweepable ones (Buttler, 2020, p. 53-54), the bodies in-worlds. Hagar's body, like that of many women on this continent, is associated with the poverty, pain and tearfulness of those who continue to hope for a dignified refuge, capable of recognizing them as persons with full rights.

Many refugee and migrant women are associated with cleaning or domestic work, just as many colonialist and racist biased readings have made the figure of Hagar 'a slave' or a woman in Sara's 'service'. For the colonial racism that still runs through us has placed cleanliness with privilege, and "as long as cleanliness is privileged, exclusive to privileged women, we will have to face this postmodern and colonized challenge" (Piedade, 2021, p. 56).

Hagar and the refugee women are also twinned in the struggle to raise their children in the midst of adverse cultures, to build new cultures and peoples, they become ancestors of many other generations who build cross-cultural and epistemic bridges, or what I would call as nomadic processes of migratory critical thinking to engender 'other' ways of being human.

## Conclusion

The bodies of migrant women as a *locus theologicus* represented in the historical memory of Agar now constitute the symbol of incarnation and the manifestation of the nomadic God who continues to walk among us on the routes that cross the deserts, mapping out exits and refuges that give life.

Thousands of women walking trace routes of hope and subversive resurrection to recreate paths of justice and equity, thus creating fissures in the neocolonial capitalist market system. The cries of women constitute the new clamor that will not cease to be heard from generation to generation.

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# 6



## THE OPPRESSIVE FACE OF THE O-3 VISA FOR BLACK IMMIGRANT WOMEN A Theological Critique inspired by Ruth 2

*Nathália Montezuma*

### Introduction

This text arises from the need, as a documented Black immigrant in the United States on an O-3 visa, to give visibility to my experience. Being an immigrant with a visa also means being treated as an unwanted, marginalized, and oppressed body, as foreigners, regardless of their immigration status, are often seen as threats to national identity. In this way, US immigration policies seek to control my existence, causing wounds, exclusion, and fear, but also awakening resistance within me.

Recognizing my migratory reality as a theological space allows me to question the restrictions placed on O-3 visa holders through the lens of faith. These restrictions prevent me from working and reinforce a cycle of dependence and lack of immigrant autonomy. By reinterpreting the events of Ruth's life in chapter 2, viewed through Black/African and feminist hermeneutics, I can highlight the connection between a Black immigrant and work eligibility.

The author Mena-López emphasizes that Black/African and feminist hermeneutics "is not only about finding the presence of Black people in the Bible but primarily about reinterpreting biblical

texts from the perspective of this chosen social subject” (1995, p. 21). It is essential to explain that, for this article, Ruth is seen as a black immigrant. The opportunity to work gave Ruth deep meanings, connected to ancestral memory, the presence of the goddess Maat, and sisterly strength, adding valuable insights to the understanding of work for Black women.

Work plays “a central role in understanding the human being as a social being” (Fernandes et al., 2023, p. 99),<sup>1</sup> shaping our sense of self and how we find meaning in it. By marking Black women like me with the label “you’re not allowed to work”, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) denies today’s “Ruths”<sup>2</sup>—Black immigrant women—the chance to experience a meaningful and positive relationship with work here in the land of “Amerikkana”.<sup>3</sup>

A thoughtful theological reflection identifies and calls out the issues faced by documented immigrants who lack work authorization. Preventing an immigrant from working, especially when they are a Black, poor woman, is a form of triple violence. Theologically, we need to provide answers to this challenge, creating new meanings that work toward the liberation of these individuals.

To provide answers and inspire new questions and perspectives, I turn to the book of Ruth as a theological lens for reflecting on migration. In this article, I focus on chapter 2, which tells the story of God revealing himself through Ruth, an immigrant who finds protection in a law granting her the right to work. Ruth’s story offers profound insight into migration as a sacred space where the migrant experience is closely connected to action, love, and divine justice for the most vulnerable.

As the author of this reflection, I do not intend to romanticize the relationship of Black women with work, nor the journey of

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<sup>1</sup> Intentionally, in the quoted sentence and other quotes, I replace the word “man” with “human being” to avoid the idea that the term “man”, the male sex, refers to humanity in general.

<sup>2</sup> For this investigation, no official data was found indicating the social markers of O-3 visa holders.

<sup>3</sup> *Amerikkka* term coined by activist Assata Shakur to refer to the United States, father of the Ku Klux Klan.

the character Ruth herself. The history of work for Black women since the transatlantic slave trade has been marked by oppressive relationships. Western logic reduces work to a mere means of survival—a constant sacrifice and a space of precarity, often linked more to feelings of pain and exhaustion than to experiences of fulfillment and dignity.

It is no coincidence that, etymologically, the word “work” comes from the Latin *tripalium*. *Tripalium* was an instrument made of three crossed stakes, initially used in agriculture but later turned into a torture device in Ancient Rome, reinforcing the association of work with pain and dehumanization.

However, work also serves as a space where Black women, like Ruth, “built a social, historical, cultural, and above all, resistant relationship” (Xavier, Fontoura, 2013, p. 425), creating a vital legacy that sustains our strength, agency, and autonomy as social beings, regardless of the territory we find ourselves in.

## **1 O-3 Visa: A Migratory Injustice**

The O-3 visa is for spouses and children under 21 of O-1 or O-2 visa holders. The O-1 and O-2 visas are work visas for highly skilled individuals with extraordinary abilities in arts, education, science, and related areas, allowing them to reside temporarily in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Unlike other dependent visas, the O-3 visa does not grant the holder the right to work legally, making the immigrant economically dependent on the O-1 visa holder, creating spiritual, social, and economic hardship.

Additionally, O-3 visa holders cannot obtain a Social Security Number (SSN) to open a bank account or receive scholarships if they choose to study. If an O-3 visa holder decides to work, they may face deportation consequently, while the O-1 visa holder is responsible for being the only provider for the family.

The oppressive side of the O-3 visa, especially for Black immigrant women, is evident in how it forces them into financial

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<sup>4</sup> More information about O-3 visa: <<https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/o-1-visa-individuals-with-extraordinary-ability-or-achievement>>.

dependence on their spouses, preventing Black immigrants with this status from fully experiencing the meaningful aspects of work that Ruth found as an immigrant. This situation limits the potential of Black immigrant women and reduces their opportunities to contribute meaningfully to American society, highlighting the insensitivity of U.S. immigration laws in addressing discriminatory systems, as they fail to apply an intersectional analysis when granting the visa.

Through the popular prophetic voice of a Black immigrant woman, it is now time to reveal the meanings that the character Ruth assigns to work.

## **2 The significance of ancestral memory**

Ruth, like me, voluntarily migrated to another country, desiring to be close to her family. Adapting to a new culture is a complex process, with several layers of transformation that profoundly affect our subjectivity. It is a continuous effort to remember who we are, our past, and who we want to be. As a Black immigrant, Rute faced triple layers of discrimination—gender, race/ethnicity, and class that limited her job opportunities. However, for Rute, the work was a way to integrate into the new country and improve her and Naomi's living conditions. One of his first initiatives as an immigrant was to ask for permission to work (Ruth 2:2).

According to Stanton,

It was evident that Ruth believed in the dignity of labor and of self-support. She thought, no doubt, that everyone with a sound mind in a sound body and two hands should earn her livelihood. She threw her whole soul into her work and proved a blessing to her mother (2001, p. 22).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to critically reflect on Stanton's statement. While emphasizing Ruth's appreciation for work, Stanton also presented an ableist perspective by implying that individuals without "sound" minds and bodies, as defined by societal standards of the time, would not have the opportunity to experience the dignity and self-sufficiency that work provides. Today, with a more inclusive understanding and a commitment to combating prejudice, we recognize that work is not inherently restrictive for people with disabilities. Instead, society must ensure equitable opportunities and accessibility for all individuals to participate in meaningful work.

It is crucial to remember that the Bible has its roots in the African and Asian worlds, regions that are linguistically and culturally interconnected (Nash, 2002). This Afro-Asian heritage gave Ruth a profound sense of ancestral memory in her work, fostering her economic autonomy and reclaiming her African identity and subjectivity.

I am not suggesting that Ruth decided to work just because she was an immigrant in poverty, although that is a relevant factor. However, as the article proposes, Ruth's decision to work was influenced by her ancestral connection to work, which transcends the mere need for survival. As Stanton told us, she believed in the dignity of work and self-sustenance.

Ruth found something familiar at work. Despite living in a patriarchal, ultra-nationalist, and androcentric society, her inner values were matriarchal, deeply connecting her to her historical roots. In the context of matriarchal societies, uninfluenced by the European worldview, Black women continue to play a central role in sustaining the "African economy", standing out as key figures in improving rural living conditions, ensuring access to land and markets, and combating gender inequalities (Té, 2022, p. 9).

Black women have always worked to take care of themselves and their communities, whether in matriarchal or patriarchal contexts. There is a difference between work being ontological, seen as something intrinsic to our essence, a gift and divine responsibility, and work has become a source of oppression and exploitation that overwhelms black women. However, even within this patriarchal context,

Work emerges as a culturally significant aspect. [...] Black women culturally identify themselves as providers who must care for others. When they find themselves unable to work, whether due to physical incapacity, temporary or otherwise, or exclusion from the labor market, it disrupts their mental representation of themselves. This, in turn, affects their well-being (Xavier, Fontoura, 2013, p. 427).

If Ruth had arrived in Bethlehem as an immigrant without the right to work, it would have hindered the nourishment of her African values and her well-being. For Ruth, work symbolized autonomy,

essence, mental health, divine blessing, and preserving her ancestry. It challenged the imperial project of Ezra and Nehemiah, who saw foreign women as destabilizing threats to the idea of a holy nation (Mena-López, 1995). Ruth transformed work into a form of resistance, reorganizing herself and taking on the role of gleaner to maintain her power as a Black woman in a foreign land. This effort mirrors the resilience of Black women during and after the period of enslavement, who, “by becoming laundresses or street vendors, realized they could pursue various other professions, even under precarious conditions of subsistence and knowledge. [...] They strengthened themselves and found identity in the unknown, using it to sustain life for themselves and others” (Xavier, Fontoura, 2013, p. 426-427).

Many people may interpret Ruth’s role as a gleaner as a proactive choice to ensure her and her mother-in-law’s survival. However, I see it as more than a choice—it represents an imposition by the prevailing system, which relegated this type of work to immigrants. Like enslaved African women, Ruth was fully aware of her skills and knowledge to perform higher-level professions. Yet, the racist and patriarchal reality restricted Black women’s access to more significant and respected roles.

Even while performing this profession, Ruth reclaimed her ancestral memory and the conviction that work is a fundamental part of her identity (Xavier, Fontoura, 2013). This allowed her to feel empowered to reinvent herself, valuing work as an essential principle. This gave her independence and autonomy in her new social environment. According to Xavier and Fontoura, for Black women, work is “more than a means of gaining independence; it can transform them into protagonists” (2013, p. 428).

It is no coincidence that Ruth takes on a leading role throughout the narrative. In Chapter 2, the Moabite woman takes the initiative to go out and work, acting independently in an unfamiliar environment. She manages to provide for herself and her mother-in-law throughout the harvest season. During this time, Ruth sought to leave a legacy in the history of Israel by ensuring her family’s sustainability—much like Black women have done throughout their history, creating lasting impact through resilience and care.

For us, Black women, making work a connection to ancestral memory is an ontological matter deeply rooted in our history. We possess the ability to transform oppression into strength. Work is a fundamental element that creates our legacy on this earth and fosters individual and collective growth as we strive for a different social reality for ourselves and our descendants.

The O-3 visa, for Black immigrant women, prevents us from leaving a legacy, claiming leadership, finding freedom, and passing down our ancestry through work in the history of this Amerikkkannation. This oppressive U.S. immigration practice seeks to suppress the empowerment of Black women in this territory, denying the recognition and value of our full potential.

By denying us the right to work, they also deny us the opportunity to be a blessing to our families, just as Ruth was a blessing to her mother-in-law, Naomi. However, even without work authorization, we search for any opening to move forward and invoke our ancestral past.

### **3 Meaning of the manifestation of the goddess Maat**

According to Tolfo and Piccinini, “work can be associated with meanings of torture and suffering [...], but it also generates meanings such as justice, the possibility of security and autonomy, self-development, fulfilling relationships, among many others” (2007, p. 45). Building on their reflection, we can see that, in Ruth’s life, work embodies the justice of the goddess Maat for immigrants, serving as the means through which she integrated into society and pursued her emancipation. When Maat is present, all other positive meanings of work manifest, creating a just environment for genuine inclusion.

In Egyptian mythology, Maat is the goddess who embodies justice, truth, and balance, tirelessly safeguarding cosmic and social order. Her influence shapes social interactions, preventing power imbalances and ensuring the rights of the vulnerable, thereby avoiding injustices, exploitation, and abuse. Maat weighs the hearts of the dead with her ostrich feather, judging their actions as

citizens. Pharaonic law was based on Maat, who also symbolized a feminine philosophical principle. In this way, kings sought to govern with justice and equity, ensuring that communal life was fair and characterized by harmony, order, and stability.

According to researchers, the Egyptian goddess Maat was known to the Israelites during the post-exilic period due to the cultural influence of Ancient Egypt. Mena-López and Montezuma note that:

In Proverbs, Hochmah (wisdom) is essential for knowing what is just, speaking with justice, and living righteously (Pr. 1:2; 8:1-12). According to Deuteronomy 4:5, the wisdom and intelligence of a people are reflected in their laws (Jer. 8:8-9). Hochmah, personified as a woman embodying patience and justice, appears in post-exilic texts. The relationship in the history of religions between wisdom and justice, generally symbolized by the personification of Hochmah, originates in representations from ancient Egypt, centered on the Egyptian goddess Maat. In this sense, it can be said that the legacy of Maat in Israelite wisdom is evident in the practice of justice as a social ethical principle (2024, p. 32-33).

In addition to Mena-López and Montezuma, we must consider the contribution of Malunga Karenga, who reveals that socio-protective measures for the vulnerable in the Judeo-Christian tradition are Kemetic values.

It is Kemet, ancient Egypt, which gave humankind the concepts of humans as the image of God and human dignity which is derived from it, resurrection and judgment after death, preference and care for the poor and vulnerable, care and responsibility toward the environment, the moral essentiality of service, and building for eternity so that we may live for eternity (2010, p. 196).

The book of Ruth is her story a theologically feminine narrative—in which Ruth, alongside her mother-in-law, evokes Maat by claiming her Kemetic rights as a widow and immigrant. Ruth's relationship with work carries a Maatic sense of justice, revealing



the divine intention to allow immigrants to work without relying on practices that further increase their vulnerability in foreign lands, ensuring them the means for self-sufficiency.

Any immigration restriction preventing Ruth from seeking work would bring chaos and suffering, both social and cosmic, as it would constitute violence against her identity as a Black woman and her ancestral past. Maat, as both a goddess and a feminine philosophical principle, is manifested in Ruth's relationship with work, as evidenced by the following points:

- **Identity:**Ruth recognizes work as a fundamental marker of her African identity (v. 2).
- **Feminine intuition:**Ruth trusts her feminine intuition to seemingly choose, by chance, the field where she will work (v. 3).
- **Permission to glean:**The foreman grants her permission to glean in the field (v. 4-5).<sup>6</sup>
- **Recognition:**Ruth is widely acknowledged for her dedication to work and boldness (v. 6-7).
- **Protection and Generosity:** Boaz, the field owner, represents pharaonic law, acting generously by allowing Ruth to glean freely and protecting her from sexual harassment in the workplace. He ensures that workers respect her and that she stays close to the female servants under his care (v. 8-16).<sup>7</sup>
- **Family sustenance:** Ruth subverts the system by turning work into a means of survival, becoming her family's primary source of income (v. 17-19).

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<sup>6</sup> Ruth did not need to ask for permission, as it was her right. This situation highlights that the landowners were not fully adhering to Yahweh's law, often denying the right to glean.

<sup>7</sup> There are, however, suspicions that Boaz acted generously toward Ruth primarily because of her connection to Naomi, as these socio-protective measures did not appear to extend to all immigrants seeking work in his field (Ferreira, 2013). Moreover, as a wealthy relative of Naomi, he could have acted more benevolently to prevent her and Ruth from living in vulnerable conditions. Nonetheless, we recognize that Maat was present in the weighing of Boaz's heart, assessing whether his actions were truly just and generous, regardless of social status or personal connections.

- **Balance:** Ruth and Naomi converse after working, exploring ways to remain safe and secure within the system (v. 20-21).

The author Líndez states that “all of this goes far beyond what Ruth could have imagined when she left home in search of a field to glean. She sees with her own eyes that Boaz’s request to the Lord was fulfilled” (1998, p. 101).<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of Egyptian mythology and Maat, this account affirms that this “dynamic force” (Mena-López, 2011, p. 40) was manifesting to protect Ruth and foster opportunities and new relationships within this new culture.

In this sense, work is an activity that allows immigrants to “develop lasting bonds of affection, helping them escape loneliness [...] enabling them to meet people with whom interactions can be open, honest, and enjoyable, even in challenging projects” (Morin, 2001, p. 17).

Unsurprisingly, chapter 2 marks the beginning of a deep bond between Ruth and Boaz, developed in the workplace and through a friendly relationship cultivated by both. This bond culminates in chapter 3, where Ruth, acting ethically, proposes a marriage of interest, skillfully invoking the laws of levirate marriage and redemption to ensure social interaction and protection for herself and Naomi (Fischer, 2004). This occurs within a complex social context for immigrant women, highlighting Ruth’s agency and strategic navigation of her circumstances.

While the O-3 visa prevents its holders from working, it perpetuates disorder and injustice, pushing Maat’s presence away from the heart of society. Furthermore, this Egyptian goddess cannot manifest in a work environment that imposes vulnerabilities. Maat symbolizes the ideal that Ruth and other Black immigrants holding O-3 visas strive for: that work be recognized as a right for all documented immigrants in the United States. They seek a space where they are respected and valued as human beings, acknowledged for their contributions, and free to exercise their autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup> “Todo esto es mucho más de lo que Rut se podía imaginar cuando salió de su casa en busca de un campo donde pode esigar. Está viendo con sus propios ojos como se cumple la petición de Boaz al Señor”.

## 4 The Meaning of Sisterly Strength

In Ruth 2,22-23, I might suggest that the work described in these verses evokes a deep sense of brotherly strength. Fischer notes, “it is evident in 2,23 that Ruth spends the entire harvest season in a female environment: working alongside the day laborers and spending the nights with Naomi” (2004, p. 277-278). For Ruth, work as a sisterly strength represents a way to seek freedom and justice alongside other women. For Lagarde y de los Ríos,

Sisterhood implies, on a social and collective level, a connection with each woman’s hidden, inner part, affirming her own desires and agency. Thus, sisterhood reveals its strengths both in overcoming the historical alienation that divides “me” from “the others” and in the essential construction of “us”. [...] Today, women need sisterhood to build the link between our transformation into social subjects and our transformation into protagonists of our own lives (2012, p. 489).

This feminine environment at work, where Ruth and the other women empower and recognize each other as individuals, creates space for new connections and the sharing of knowledge to transform structures. This process fosters mutual collaboration, enabling one woman to contribute to the life of another, offering a powerful response to patriarchy, which often expects women to view one another as competitors or adversaries. Although they are recognized as Boaz’s workers, they are bound together in solidarity, resisting the patriarchal power of religion and society.

Sisterhood in the workplace is an essential tool where women learn to care for and support one another in a highly competitive environment. Ruth was likely welcomed by Boaz’s female servants, who may have recognized that the foreigner could not only enrich their work environment with her culture but also strengthen them all in the fight for gender equality and rights.

For feminisms, it is essential that women become aware of the patriarchal politics that use them to perpetuate various forms of oppression. This awareness operates on both

individual and collective levels. In this context, it is necessary to eliminate forms of violence among women, such as delegitimization, distrust, discredit, disempowerment, and the various forms of discrimination (sexual, generational, ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, economic, intellectual, ideological, religious, political, and more). These patriarchal obstacles hinder women from coming closer to one another (Becker, Barbosa, 2016, p. 247).

I imagine Ruth and her fellow workers, whose identities are rendered invisible by the absence of their names, were aware of the patriarchal politics surrounding them. In this context, they likely engaged in conversations and encouraged one another to go after their goals and resist gender-based violence. Within this work environment, Ruth deeply nurtured herself through the strength of these women, which empowered her to secure a peaceful future for her next generation and, by extension, for her mother-in-law, Naomi. When women unite in sisterhood, they create a space of empowerment that transforms their individual lives and leaves a lasting impact on their communities.

## **Conclusion**

While writing this article, I found myself in deep anger, as I felt violated and deprived of experiencing the meanings Ruth, as an immigrant, attributed to work. It is a brutality when the immigration system legally removes the right to work. Every living being has this right because work is an essential part of the human condition, especially for Black women, as evidenced throughout this piece. The O-3 visa deeply wounds our ontology and our well-being in every dimension, as it effectively eradicates the subjectivity of Black immigrant women.

The condition of ineligibility at work reveals a lack of welcome and reflects the disregard for our unequal treatment, particularly when compared to citizens of this country and holders of other visas that allow dependents to work. As a Black immigrant, Ruth had the right to work and, through this experience, found a powerful connection to her ancestral memory, a manifestation of the goddess Maat, and an expression of sisterly strength.

At its core, this article is a form of protest and a call for theologies to address the bodies and needs of immigrants living legally in other countries. I acknowledge that our struggles differ from those faced by our undocumented siblings, but they are struggles, nonetheless. There is a theology to be developed from this perspective, as a migrating body, regardless of its status, is a body that experiences violence.

I hope this text has revealed how chapter 2 of Ruth, when read through a contemporary lens, offers a powerful theological critique of U.S. immigration policies. In a way, the book of Ruth proclaims: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself...” (Leviticus 19:33-34).

I conclude this article with the hope that other bodies like mine will not have to endure the oppressive face of the O-3 visa. I believe that Maat and Yahweh, who blessed Ruth, continue to work tirelessly to ensure that justice and balance prevail among us.

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# 7



## **MIGRATION AND IDENTITY OF WOMEN ARRIVING IN THE UNITED STATES**

### **An approach from the womanist theology of Isasi-Díaz and the border theory of Gloria Anzaldúa**

*Yenny Delgado*

### **Introduction**

The migration of women from Abya Yala<sup>1</sup> is a complex phenomenon that shows multiple facets of identity and oppression. Women who decide to migrate not only face the violence and difficulties inherent in migration, especially when it is forced, but they also deal with additional layers of discrimination, supremacies and the imposition of identities by the Anglo and Hispanic colonial structures in force in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Abya Yala comes from the Guna language and means 'land in full maturity and land of vital blood'. In the 1970s, indigenous activists, farmers, historians, politicians and theologians adopted the term Abya Yala as a unifying name instead of using North America (mainly English-speaking) and Latin America (mainly Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking), which perpetuate Eurocentrism and the colonial past that continues to refer to our mother earth as a territory in permanent colonisation.

Migrant women's situation has been a theological concern that hasn't been ignored. Women have taken on the role of border crossers as a space for reflecting on their own condition as women and on the diverse ethnic identities that are still alive in people who migrate to the United States. Women are often forced to cross borders, making it a permanent task to understand, reflect on and consider this latent reality that many women on the continent experience.

In the following pages, I will reflect from a critical decolonial and womanist theology on the dynamics of migratory situations and their approach from the proposals of the womanist theology of Isasi-Díaz and the border theory of Gloria Anzaldúa. I will develop how these initial perspectives make visible the vulnerability, oppression and risks faced by women from Abya Yala when they arrive and live in the United States and how a decolonial approach can also show the identities of women who are called Latina or Hispanic without the opportunity to make visible their ethnic and ancestral identities as part of the diverse native peoples of Abya Yala.

## **1 Historical perspectives**

The colonization of Abya Yala brought with it the construction of borders extended along the length of the continent and left no land undivided. The borders separated communities and families and generated conflicts of belonging, ancestry and identity for the native peoples.

Understanding that borders are colonial constructs, the legacy of a territorial division for the sake of power, control and supremacy of the Europeans over the original population of Abya Yala, we understand that these divisions and the creation of the countries we now know have served to privatize land, creating laws and walls that perpetuate the oppression of peoples. Native women know the significance of these divisions from first-hand experience.

Women from Abya Yala who migrate to the United States face a multifaceted identity process. Initially, they identify with their villages of origin, carrying with them a rich cultural and spiritual heritage. However, once they arrive in the United States,



they are quickly categorized as *Latinos* or *Hispanics*, labels that seek to homogenize diverse identities into a single group with a colonial identity, without considering self-identification, ancestral memories, among other important characteristics and owned wisdom by women whose first language is one of the native languages. This categorization not only erases their native roots but also perpetuates a colonial narrative that prioritizes the Mestizo and Spanish identity created by the European colonizers, such as the caste system, and devalues the descendants of the original peoples as mere foreigners in their own lands, an ideology perpetuated by the supremacist racial system invented and disseminated during colonial oppression.

In this historical context and from a decolonial perspective, it is crucial to deconstruct these borders of oppression on migrant women from a reflection in the United States to reveal and value native identities. This implies recognizing Abya Yala as a cross-border territory, a cultural and spiritual continuity that transcends the divisions imposed by colonization.

From my own experience as a descendant of the original population, a woman, a migrant and a decolonial theologian in the United States, this essay seeks to make visible the situation of the women of Abya Yala living in the United States.

## **2 Mujerista, a word that comes from “woman”**

In the 70s, Alice Walker proposed and used the term womanist to make feminism more inclusive, explaining that womanism derives from the word ‘woman’. In the historical sense of the term, *mujerista* comes from the experience of Afro-descendant women who were enslaved during the colonial period and went from childhood to adulthood at an early age, assuming domestic responsibilities and arduous work in the fields without considering that many were still children (Harty, 2022, p. 20). Women were seen as instruments for procreation, to look after the home and as sexual objects. Women’s bodies were privatized by white men, whether they were bosses, landowners or lords who considered them property, and who could have access to the women they ‘owned’. Smith writes:

Although Native men and women were both subject to a regime of sexualized terror and sexual violence, it did not affect them in the same way... When a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and as a Native. The colonial situation of race and gender oppression cannot be separated (Smith, 2015, p. 8).

In the same way, the experiential about the women of Abya Yala who suffered when they were captured from their communities and taken to the cities to be part of the servitude, the women became slaves in their own land, during the Spanish colonization they were mainly imprisoned as labor for servitude. Thus, Candela writes about the women in the invasion of Paraguay:

Here I come across a Portuguese man who calls himself Fulano Farina from San Vicente, a town in Portugal...he takes people from the stands [...] I take them to San Vicente and sell them to other Portuguese people a city in Portugal... he picks people up from the stands [...] I take them to São Vicente and sell them to other Portuguese people, and they pay me.

[...] ten years before the King's officers for slaves ran up to 30 [...] came after another Portuguese man called Diego Dias and said that the governor gave him permission to sell many of the Corocotoques Indians and other nations in the town [...] he took them to San Vicente like the unions that on the way were going to be sold by the slaves of the sale [...] Another 3 or 4 Christians come to find out who was responsible for this and they took them away, each one with their half-dozen (Candela, 2014).

This oppressive situation meant that women had no autonomy over where they lived, over their own bodies, their ancestral practices and knowledge were limited because they were seen as 'Indians, pagans'. As Sofía Chipana, an Aymara theologian, says: "Borders not only divide territories, but also bodies and knowledge" (Chipana, 2016, p. 73).

Control over women was exercised in many ways, always under the supervision and domination of men, and of white women who remained silent in the face of mistreatment of native women,

rape and abuse, while also benefiting from their services inside and outside the home, the raising of their children, etc. Thus, the societies that emerged during the colonial period and later republics created laws that protected the abuses and oppression, since they undoubtedly benefited economically from them. As Segato says: "The body of women has been one of the most disputed territories in colonization, and its liberation is essential for any process of real decolonization" (Segato, 2016, p. 23).

The similarities between the experiences of Afro-descendant women and native women are indisputable. Both groups were brought to Abya Yala as trade, and both were confined to service and forced servitude. They could be bought and sold, and were subject to sexual abuse, physical violence and other atrocities. In a state of continuous displacement, women become migratory objects, stripped of their agency and their rights. Thus, we can say that the colonizers imposed symbolic borders on women's bodies, transforming them into territories to be conquered, invaded, penetrated, exploited and controlled. In this sense, Segato writes: "The body of women is a disputed territory in which the tensions of power and domination are manifested" (Segato, 2003, p. 22).

From this historical context we can see that what we now call migration, moving from one territorial space to another, crossing borders, has a much greater historical significance. The women of Abya Yala, now considered migrants, are often forced to leave their lands due to violence, both structural and family-related, famine, crime, among other challenging situations they seek to escape. Whether alone or with their children, they walk hundreds of kilometers, exposing themselves to multiple dangers on this journey to reach the United States.

That is why reflecting on and interweaving historical events past and present is key to seeing how we can attend to the women of Abya Yala on this other side of the border who measure economies, opportunities and salvation. Therefore, studying the migratory process of women to the United States is necessary from a critical and decolonial perspective. To be able to tell our own story and build our own possibilities. "The women of Abya Yala are empowered by an ancestral history and memory that allows them

to be a symbol of resistance made invisible by a “monolithic and universal history” alien to native peoples, to ancestry and to the collective memory of resistance” (Delgado, 2022).

### **3 Womanist theology against colonization and patriarchy**

In the narrative goal of society and Judeo-Christian theological belief, man is at the center of power, society, culture and religious practices. Legislative bodies composed mainly of men legislate on the morality of the social framework. Women are left out of the decision-making process.

Women theologians, especially Afro-descendant women in the United States at the end of the 1970s, understood the conditions of women to visualize and have their voice. Afro-descendant theologians highlighted how the texts were predominantly written by male theologians and did not consider the perspectives, experiences and points of view of women. Womanism created a methodological approach to theology that focuses on women’s experience and everyday life. It mainly advocates for a place in the dialogue for women’s studies and women’s perspectives in theological spaces, as well as in the field of ethical theology, which is committed to understanding and regulating the patriarchal norms that have governed relationships in the church, society and the home for a very long time.

Las mujeristas have advocated for the right to the freedom to do theological and social work from different disciplines and use intersectional work, a contribution from Kimberly Crenshaw who, since 1989, has been working on the concept of intersectionality as the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and the related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. The last decades have been momentous as women began to expose the triple dynamic of ethnicity, gender and economic oppression. Based on this analysis, a better understanding of the women of Abya Yala can show a broader approach to how to do womanist theology and re-imagine other forms in the women’s movement. Thanks to women who have gone through all the complex situations of being

a woman in a patriarchal and colonial society, we can see another way of being in the women's movement.

Throughout the generations, women have built resilience and resistance, but they have also faced a constant struggle against racism and sexism in their new contexts. The daily life of migrant women, often facing precarious working conditions, discrimination and violence, but finding ways to resist and survive by maintaining manifestations of divine power and commitment to their identities in an oppressive context.

Womanist theology, from a broad perspective and from the intersection of reflections, offers a critical tool for the women of Abya Yala to expose the 'monolithic and universal history' alien to the native peoples, to the ancestry and to the memory that is still shared among the communities. For this reason, I would like to make an intersectional and decolonial reflection on the theological work of Isasi-Díaz and from the cross-border reflection of Gloria Anzaldúa.

#### **4 From Isasi Díaz's Teología mujerista (Womanist Theology)**

In the 1990s, the theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz translated and reflected on the word *mujerista* and saw that sense of struggle in migrant women. In her words she writes about how her work on *mujerista* theology came about: "Yes, we are women, and those of us who make a preferential option for women are *mujeristas*. I am greatly indebted to the work of the black *mujeristas* who have preceded us in this struggle to name ourselves. Their use of the term "*mujerista*" has influenced me enormously" (Isasi-Díaz, 1989).

The *mujerista* theology that Isasi Díaz writes and adapts is based on the organized and committed work of the theologians of afro-descendant origin with whom Isasi Díaz has experience of dialogue. Her grassroots work with Spanish-speaking migrant women in the United States. She realizes that an approach is needed to women who have gone through a difficult migration process and who arrive in social structures of violence and abuse. The women move from one side of the border to the other, bringing their traditions, language and practices with them. *Mujerista* reflection

is based on women's everyday experiences. Isasi-Díaz argues that the daily experiences of struggle, resistance and faith are crucial to understanding God and justice. "Mujerista theology is based on the daily lives of *Latina* women, who find God in the midst of their daily struggles and joys" (Isasi-Díaz, 1996, p. 69).

Womanist theology recognizes the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism and xenophobia. Isasi-Díaz insists that theology must address these oppressions in an integrated way and seeks to read them in the reality of women in Spanish-speaking communities. For her, community is central; theology must foster solidarity and mutual support. Isasi-Díaz argues that traditional theology has served as an instrument of oppression, reinforcing patriarchal and colonial structures that devalue the experiences and spiritualities of women. "Justice for migrant *Latina* women implies a radical transformation of the economic structures that perpetuate their exploitation and marginalization" (Isasi-Díaz, 1996, p. 145).

## **5 Women from the perspective of Teo political action**

Womanist theology is not only a theoretical reflection but also translates into practical and political actions. Through community organization and education, womanist theology promotes the empowerment of migrant women, helping them to develop skills and access resources. "The resistance of *Latina* women is not only an act of survival, but also a theological act of affirming their humanity and dignity in the face of oppressive structures" (Isasi-Díaz, 1996, p. 104).

Womanist theology aligns itself with the social demands of women, as expressed by Afro-descendant women who are beginning to expose social and justice inequalities in the country, thus promoting the defense of the human rights of migrant women and advocating for legal and political reforms that protect migrants from exploitation and violence. Recognizing the transnational nature of migration, womanist theology encourages solidarity between women in different countries, creating networks of support and resistance.

It is recognized that the church, instead of being monolithic, should be a diverse space that can support women and be supported by them. The experience of spirituality and faith are key to facing these migratory processes. "For Latin American women, faith is not an escape from reality, but a source of strength and hope that allows them to face and resist oppression" (Isasi-Díaz, 1996, p.126). From a womanist perspective, it is emphasized how womanist spirituality is a source of hope and strength. Religious and spiritual practices offer a refuge and a community for migrant women, helping them to face adversity and to seek justice that recognizes and values the work of migrant women and advocates for policies that protect their rights.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz's *mujerista* theology offers a framework, an invitation to understand and address the experiences of migrant women from Abya Yala. Through its emphasis on lived experience, intersectionality, community and justice, *mujerista* theology not only challenges structures of oppression, but also offers paths of resistance and hope.

Until the moment when Isasi-Díaz did her theological work and contributed to the reflection with a critical view of liberation, I did not consider decolonial theology as a tool for the approaches that we have to live with today, and it was assumed that the issues of social class and sex were the limitations for living in justice, without counting and making visible the cruel consequences of the colonial process experienced within the communities, especially those that came from the original populations and the identities of native women. In this way, in recent years, thanks to the continuous efforts of feminist and womanist theologians who contribute a decolonial work, we can show how decoloniality enriches the theological feeling-thinking of migrant women from Abya Yala, with identity and sacred ancestral memories. Before her physical departure, Isasi-Díaz left us these words as a task to continue deepening and from which I have personally taken as a womanist theologian. She wrote, "For womanist theology to remain relevant, it must continue to evolve and broaden its inclusion of the diverse experiences of all Latina women" (Isasi-Díaz, 1996, p. 179). I consider these words as a call to continue deepening and contributing from a decolonial

womanist theology that also allows us to call the women of Abya Yala from their ethnic identities as a right to self-identification with their native peoples and the experiences we bring from our ancestors to face a society in motion.

In this context, womanist theological reflection intersects with the sociological work of Gloria Anzaldúa, which allows us to address the multiple identities that we carry with us when crossing the border into the United States.

## **6 Borderlands from Gloria Anzaldúa**

Gloria Anzaldúa explores the complexities of border identities in her seminal work *'Borderlands/La Frontera'*, introducing the concept of *mestizaje* not only as a racial mixture, but as a metaphor for the complexity of border identities. From her experience on the margins, Anzaldúa describes how native and migrant women negotiate multiple identities imposed by colonial systems. This approach reveals how being *'Latina'*, *'Hispanic'* or *'Anglo'* can homogenize and hide her indigenous roots.

Anzaldúa writes: "A *mestiza* is the product of the transfer of cultural and spiritual values from one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, speaking a patois and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of *mestizaje*: which community does the black mother's daughter listen to?" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 100). This extract highlights the tension inherent in border identities, rooted in colonial history where women were forced to abandon their ancestral languages for Spanish, or for English, which continue to perpetuate the language of the colonizer as civilizing. The geographical borders between Mexico and the United States are also cultural, linguistic and identity borders. Anzaldúa describes the migrant woman as *'doubly displaced'*, navigating multiple cultures and intersectional systems of oppression (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 90).

The *'new mestiza'*, according to Anzaldúa, emerges from the constant negotiation between Mexican and North American influences, the indigenous and the European, the feminine and the masculine. This identity is not static, but fluid and conscious of the contradictions of living on the borders. "The new *mestiza* confronts



contradictions by developing a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from the Anglo point of view. She learns to manage cultures" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101).

Migrant women, particularly those fleeing violence and persecution, face racist and patriarchal stereotypes both in the United States and within their own communities. This is also emphasized by Isasi-Díaz, who shows the double marginalization suffered by women and highlights the importance of challenging the colonial labels that are still used today without questioning the colonial components that simply label women as 'Latina' or 'Hispanic' to women, without giving them the opportunity to recover or name themselves from native and ancestral identities, as these would be a form and act of resistance to the colonial legacy to which we are still subject.

From a decolonial perspective, it is crucial to question the imposed narratives that perpetuate the homogenization and suppression of diverse ethnic identities. Anzaldúa and other decolonial theologians such as Isasi-Díaz opened the way for this critical reflection, challenging colonial structures and offering new ways of thinking about and experiencing identities in the 'borderlands'.

This decolonial theological approach invites us to reinterpret borders not as restrictive limits, but as spaces of convergence and resistance, where native women can reclaim their identities, spiritualities and cultures in a holistic and authentic way. It is an invitation to continue exploring and deepening, responding to the contemporary needs of migrant women in the United States with empathy and transformative action.

This review attempts to capture the richness and depth of Anzaldúa's reflections and those of other decolonial thinkers, offering a more focused and cohesive academic perspective on the complexities of border identities and the feminist and decolonial resistances that emerge from them, such as the flexibility of their personalities. For they must be experts in changing modes of behavior and language to adapt to changing cultural contexts (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 42).

Theological dialogues and reflections on decolonial identities began decades ago, as evidenced by the theological works of Isasi-Díaz and Anzaldúa. Although the United States has changed since the 80s and 90s, the reflections of these authors leave us with tasks to be reflected upon and explored in greater depth. These should not be limitations or cause for fear but rather allow us to continue to critically delve deeper from a decolonial perspective. This enables us to address the current needs of migrant women in the United States in an informed and empowered way.

## **7 On the strength of the conclusion**

To assume that borders are not limiting spaces but confluent ones that allow us to think about ourselves from the perspectives of resistance, identities and faith, where we can reinterpret the border from a decolonial womanist theological perspective. A space where native women can reclaim their identities and spiritualities, their languages, their culture, their music, showing that every day is lived to the full by resisting both colonial oppression and homogenizing narratives.

From a critical decolonial perspective, both Spanish and Anglo-American colonial structures have functioned as mechanisms of oppression for native women. These structures have perpetuated narratives that benefit the oppressors and supremacist ideologies, keeping native women at an economic, social, political and rights disadvantage. However, the reflection of a decolonial theology challenges the imposed monolithic narratives to make visible the diversity that exists from the forcibly immigrant communities. The narratives of 'conquest, independence and republics' about the women of Abya Yala must be questioned.

The *mujerista* theology of Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of border identities offer powerful frameworks for understanding and addressing the experiences of Spanish-speaking migrant women. Identifying these migratory experiences enriches explorations of how migrant women navigate the complex intersections of sex, gender, economics and spiritual practices. These perspectives not only challenge structures of oppression

but also offer paths of resistance and hope. In a world marked by migration, narratives centered on male and white power do not contemplate the history of women, especially those who identify as part of the original populations of Abya Yala. The contributions of Isasi-Díaz and Anzaldúa remain vital tools for the liberation and justice of migrant women.

It has been women who have taken an active role from the beginning and have worked to make visible how colonial structures have exacerbated the oppression of women inside and outside communities throughout Abya Yala. The imposition of a colonial patriarchy has reinforced the hierarchies that marginalize indigenous women and their descendants, as well as Afro-descendant women, and this has encouraged the invented borders to continue to be not only the object of study, but also of resistance.

In this decolonial framework, we women challenge the existing paradigms of borders at both a historical and a theological level. Through our theological work, we women have exposed the inconsistencies between social and ecclesiastical teachings on the roles of women and the realities we must live with, in a society that continues to experience the onslaught of existing colonial borders. Through women's and feminist approaches, women theologians are challenging current oppressive systems and advocating for equity and justice not only in political but also in religious spheres.

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## **FEMINIST THEOLOGY AT THE BORDER**

### **Migration, Vulnerability, and Hope**

*Yolanda Chavez*

#### **Introduction**

Discussing migration is not easy. We are talking about human beings moving across the planet, motivated by various circumstances. Sometimes, against their will, they must leave the land where they were born. The issue can be approached from different perspectives: economic, climatic, social, cultural, political, legal, psychological, historical, geographical, demographic, among others.

However, when we talk about migration from a theological perspective, the issue becomes even more complicated, because it places us face to face with human beings, faces of people loved by God, crossing borders in bodies that, because they are migrant bodies in very difficult circumstances, are vulnerable bodies. From this perspective, this essay explores the intersection between the theology of incarnation and the experiences of migration, approached from a community and pastoral perspective.

Drawing on my experience as a community companion in church communities in Southern California, I propose to understand

how the incarnation of Jesus Christ also embodies the physical and spiritual journey of migrants. I focus on the acute vulnerability that falls on the bodies of women, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQTTIQ+ community, whose stories often remain invisible even within the Church.

Migration thus becomes a *locus theologicus*, a sacred space where the struggles, longings, and resistance of these bodies reveal profound dimensions of God's presence and action. Seen through an inclusive theological lens, this human phenomenon invites us to recognize migration as an expression of the human condition and an opportunity for solidarity and social transformation.

When the issue of migration is examined closely by the vulnerability of these bodies and from a border with its own complexities, such as Southern California, the issue takes on an incisive and painful character. This determines the way in which the issue is discussed, because the gaze becomes sharper, penetrating the crust of the word 'migrants' and discovering that beneath that crust there are living and throbbing wounds. Finally, this essay proposes to consider the ethical and pastoral implications of the theology of incarnation in accompanying and supporting migrants and invites faith communities to actively engage in promoting migration justice and compassionate welcome.

## **1 Migration Realities: Challenges**

The U.S.-Mexico border is a critical point in global migration (*Migration Policy Institute*, 2023), with thousands undertaking the journey each year in search of safety and better opportunities. However, these migrants face tremendous dangers, ranging from extreme climate conditions to violence at the hands of traffickers and the hostility of restrictive immigration policies. The desert climate can be deadly, and human traffickers frequently exploit and abuse migrants. Additionally, policies such as physical border walls and family separations create an environment of fear and distrust.

Beyond these physical obstacles, migrants also confront an "ideological wall"—a construct that originated during the Trump

era,<sup>1</sup> which continues not only to exist but to intensify, characterized by a resurgence of ideological fundamentalism and white supremacy. This ideological wall manifests in policies and rhetoric that dehumanize migrants, fuel fear and hostility toward them, and justify restrictive and punitive measures. This environment has been exacerbated by political narratives that criminalize migration and foster racial and ethnic discrimination, creating invisible but powerful barriers that hinder integration and access to basic rights.

The influence of ideological fundamentalism and white supremacy on immigration policy extends beyond government actions, deeply permeating societal and communal attitudes. This has fostered an environment of systemic violence and discrimination against migrants, where hate speech and exclusion fuel xenophobia. As a result, migrants not only struggle during their transit but also face alienation and hostility in the very places where they seek refuge and opportunity.

This “ideological wall” presents a profound and compounding challenge: migrants must not only overcome the tangible physical barriers of the border but also the entrenched cultural and social barriers that threaten their dignity and strip them of their humanity in their new environments. Women, members of the LGBTTTIQ+ community, and individuals with disabilities are disproportionately affected by this intersection of discrimination, experiencing multiple layers of marginalization and heightened vulnerability.

Addressing these challenges demands the active deconstruction of exclusionary ideologies and the introduction of a theological perspective that embraces radical inclusion—one that directly challenges patriarchal and heteronormative narratives that have historically silenced and excluded countless individuals. A renewed theological framework is urgently needed, one that does not remain in abstract theorization but instead deeply engages with the tangible realities of dignity and justice for the most vulnerable members of migrant communities. Such a theology must be incarnational—

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1 Nativism and White Nationalism: According to the Daedalus article published by MIT Press on January 4, 2021, the Trump era meant a shift in racial politics, moving from supposedly “colorblind” racism to a resurgence of white nationalism. This resurgence seeks to dismantle the rights won by racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants, and refugees. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1162/daed\\_a\\_01852](https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01852).

capable of touching and transforming the wounded flesh of those who have been marginalized. It must also cultivate a collective consciousness rooted in respect and recognition of identities that traditional theological frameworks have betrayed, ignored, or suppressed. As Ada María Isasi-Díaz profoundly stated, “Theology is not just an academic discourse, but a lived practice that emerges from concrete experiences of marginalization and hope” (Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church, p. 10).

## **2 Intersections between identities and contemporary migration**

To grasp the complexity of the experiences of LGBTTTIQ+ migrants, we turn to the poetry of Gloria Anzaldúa. In her poem *To Live in the Borderlands*, she explores the internal and external struggles of living between cultures, facing discrimination, and finding identity amid these tensions: “When you live in the borderlands, people pass through you, the wind steals your voice. You are a donkey, an ox, a scapegoat, a precursor of a new race, half and half — both woman and man, or neither — a new gender”.<sup>2</sup>

The symbolism of the border in Anzaldúa’s work profoundly encapsulates the experiences of contemporary migrants who, in hostile and exclusionary environments, struggle to preserve their identity. The border thus becomes a space of resistance and affirmation of diversity, where dominant power structures are contested, and the resilience of those who inhabit it is revealed. This symbolism—both in its tangible physical dimension and its deep internal resonance—reflects the relentless effort of migrants to affirm their existence and survive within systems of exclusion and oppression.

For LGBTTTIQ+ individuals, this struggle is even more arduous: in asserting their identity within deeply intolerant societies, they are not only persecuted and forced to migrate but also face heightened violence during transit, where, in addition to rejection for their identity, they encounter escalated hostility simply for being migrants.

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<sup>2</sup> “To Live in the Borderlands”. Available at: <<https://www.best-poems.net/gloria-e-anzald-a/to-live-in-the-borderlands.html>>.



In the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), LGBTTTIQ+ individuals endure alarming levels of violence, which their governments fail to adequately address. Reports document abuse at the hands of family members, gangs, and state authorities. For instance, in Honduras, gangs attack LGBTTTIQ+ individuals with complete impunity, while in Guatemala and El Salvador, law enforcement agencies are often complicit in these abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

In Mexico, LGBTTTIQ+ migrants continue to face grave violations of their rights. They are frequently extorted, mistreated, and discriminated against by immigration agents and police. Additionally, within shelters and detention centers, they often lack essential support and encounter significant obstacles in accessing critical medical services, especially those with chronic conditions. During their journey north, LGBTTTIQ+ migrants are constantly exposed to sexual violence, with many falling victims to human trafficking networks. Discrimination persists even within detention centers and shelters, where they may be harassed, sexually assaulted, placed in isolation, or subjected to “institutional murder,” as in the case of Roxana Hernández, a transgender woman who died in U.S. immigration custody after crossing Mexico with a refugee caravan in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of specific protective policies exacerbates these risks, rendering their migration experience even more perilous and traumatic. Upon arrival in their destination countries, they continue to face systemic barriers, including discrimination in accessing healthcare, housing, and employment, all of which severely hinder their chances for integration and well-being. In places like the United States, anti-LGBTTTIQ+ rhetoric and discriminatory policies in some states foster a hostile and exclusionary environment, undermining the safety of migrants seeking asylum and protection (Medina, Lindsay, 2023).

The intersectionality of these experiences underscores the urgent need not only for profound theological reflection but also

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<sup>3</sup> For the activists of the organizations that accompanied the migrant caravan in 2018 throughout the journey, the death of Roxana Hernández was an “institutional murder.” Information available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-44311381>>.

for targeted pastoral responses that both comprehend and address the specific needs of LGBTTTIQ+ migrants. Theologians such as Marcella Althaus-Reid have asserted that theology must fully engage with sexual and gender experiences in both its analysis and praxis, integrating a perspective that acknowledges and affirms the diversity of human identities (Indecent Theology, 2000). There is an urgent need to develop and advocate for inclusive pastoral care within parish contexts, rooted in a deep understanding of the lived realities of LGBTTTIQ+ individuals. Additionally, faith communities must actively champion policies that safeguard their rights and resist the dehumanization they endure.

### **3 Women migrants**

Currently, women constitute 50% of the global migrant population and face distinct and heightened risks that render them extremely vulnerable. Among the most severe challenges they encounter are sexual violence and exploitation, deeply rooted in power structures and gender dynamics pervasive in nearly all societies. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that 60% of migrant women experience some form of violence during their journey, a distressing statistic that underscores the urgent need to address this humanitarian crisis

Sexual violence is not the only danger these women face. A conversation with a volunteer catechist confirms this:

On the journey, you experience many things, many situations, mostly dangers that one lives through. The one I remember most is when they left me and three other people stranded for five or six hours in a mountainous area... it was one of the scariest things for my life... Women face many risks on the road, the main one being rape. Many times, coyotes demand more money from one's family just because we are women. Thank God I am alive because many of us do not survive and make it here (Interview with a young Salvadoran woman, February 17, 2022).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Full interview with Stefany Tovar, available at: <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A03AmCe8S7U&ab\\_channel=TraslashuellasdeSoph%C3%ADa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A03AmCe8S7U&ab_channel=TraslashuellasdeSoph%C3%ADa)>.

Many of those who do reach their destination have already been subjected to human trafficking, where they are exploited for labor or coerced into prostitution. The absence of effective protection measures and the lack of support networks leave them exceptionally vulnerable to these abuses. Moreover, fear of deportation or retaliation often discourages them from reporting these crimes, perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence and exploitation.

Beyond the immediate threats to their safety, migrant women also face systemic barriers that hinder their ability to secure employment and access basic services, further exacerbating their precarious situation. Gender discrimination in the labor market relegates them to informal, low-wage jobs that provide no labor protection or social security. Additionally, restricted access to healthcare, education, and adequate housing increases their vulnerability, exposing them to serious health risks and hindering their integration into host communities.

These structural inequalities not only severely limit migrant women's opportunities for personal and professional growth, but also negatively impact their families and broader communities, reinforcing cycles of poverty and marginalization.

## **4 People with Disabilities**

Migrants with disabilities face unique and profound challenges that demand targeted attention and strategic responses. Migration, already an arduous journey, becomes exponentially more difficult due to the additional barriers these individuals encounter. Among the most pressing obstacles are the lack of accessibility along migration routes and the inadequate infrastructure in detention centers, which often lack ramps, accessible restrooms, and essential resources for people with physical disabilities. This absence of accessibility not only restricts their mobility but also endangers their health and safety.

The situation is further exacerbated by insufficient and inadequate medical services. People with disabilities often require continuous and specialized medical care, which is scarce or entirely unavailable at many transit and destination points. The

lack of essential medications, medical equipment, and trained personnel can lead to a significant decline in their health. This issue is particularly critical in detention centers, where living conditions are often precarious, and medical attention is severely lacking. Additionally, many migrants suffer life-altering accidents during their journey, resulting in permanent disabilities, adding yet another layer of vulnerability and marginalization (UNHCR, 2019).

Nancy L. Eiesland, in her seminal work *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (1994), challenges traditional misrepresentations and idealized notions of physical perfection within theological discourse. Eiesland states: "The image of the risen Christ with his scars represents a 'disabled God', subverting standards of perfection and emphasizing that vulnerability and disability are essential parts of the human experience."

Through this perspective, Eiesland reimagines divinity through the lived experience of disability. Writing from her own experience with a congenital disability, she invites us to see vulnerability and disability not as deficiencies but as lenses through which we can perceive a deeper vision of justice and liberation (1994, p. 94).

Eiesland's concept of the *Disabled God* challenges conventional theological paradigms, redefining perfection not as the absence of disability but as the capacity for resilience, endurance, and flourishing in the face of adversity. She suggests that the experience of disability offers a profound theological insight into justice and liberation, urging faith communities to embrace and celebrate bodily diversity while actively working toward inclusion, accessibility, and equity for all individuals, regardless of physical ability.

To effectively address these challenges, it is imperative to adopt an inclusive, human rights-based approach that ensures the full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of migrant life. This requires the implementation of "people first" policies<sup>5</sup> aimed at ensuring accessibility along the entire migratory route, as well as strengthening medical and support services in detention and reception centers.

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<sup>5</sup> People First: People with disabilities are people first, and they should not be defined solely by their disability. This approach promotes a comprehensive and respectful vision of the person, recognizing their talents, potentialities and dignity.

## **5 Incarnation: A Theological Perspective**

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is a cornerstone of Christian theology. This mystery, in which God assumes human nature, sharing in our experiences and condition, is not merely a historical event but a continuing reality with profound theological implications. As Daniel G. Groody emphasizes, “the Incarnation calls us to recognize the dignity of every person, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, seeing them as the image of Christ” (Groody, 2022, p. 213-215). This divine act is an ongoing invitation to recognize God’s presence in every human being. The Incarnation teaches us that God is not a distant or indifferent entity but one who is deeply engaged in human existence, intimately sharing in both our joys and sufferings.

Jesus and his family were forced to flee as refugees when they escaped to Egypt to evade Herod’s persecution (Matthew 2:13-15). This event underscores that, from infancy, Jesus experienced displacement and vulnerability. In this sense, every migrant embodies the experience of Christ. The narrative of Jesus’ exile in Egypt directly resonates with the contemporary struggles of millions of migrants seeking refuge and a better future far from their homelands.

Within the context of the Southern California border, the Incarnation acquires an even deeper significance. Migrants, as they journey through treacherous terrain and uncertain futures, embark on both a physical and spiritual pilgrimage—an embodiment of displacement, vulnerability, and resilience. This journey reflects the Incarnation and the Eucharist, revealing Christ dwelling among us, sharing in our hardships and aspirations. Thus, each migrant, in their pilgrimage, mirrors the experience of Christ, who was himself a migrant and a refugee.

## **6 The Incarnation as a model of inclusion**

The theology of the Incarnation calls us to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of every migrant, seeing in them the living presence of Christ. This recognition is rooted in the belief that God became flesh, and in doing so, not only identified with humanity

but also fully embraced the condition of the most vulnerable and marginalized. This divine act serves as an invitation to Christians to perceive Christ in the faces of migrants, especially those who experience compounded discrimination due to their identity as LGBTTTIQ+ individuals, women, or people with disabilities.

In *A Theology of Migration: The Bodies of Refugees and the Body of Christ*, Daniel G. Groody argues that migrants embody Christ's journey—both physically and spiritually. He reflects on how migration can be understood through a Eucharistic lens, in which migrants and refugees mirror the body of Christ—not only in suffering but also in their hope for redemption and justice. The experience of migration itself becomes an incarnational reality, as Christ too suffered rejection, displacement, and marginalization. This perspective challenges us to recognize in every migrant the embodiment of the suffering and risen Christ (Groody, 2022).

The Incarnation compels us to dismantle structures of exclusion and build bridges of solidarity, affirming the intrinsic worth and dignity of every person. This theological understanding necessitates a proactive and committed response from the Christian community, one that actively promotes justice, inclusion, and compassion in its approach to migration. By seeing Christ reflected in every migrant, we are called to respond with love, advocacy, and concrete actions that foster a more just and compassionate society

## **7 A promising proposition for the future**

The theology of the Incarnation, as experienced in the reality of migration, calls us to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of every migrant, seeing in them the living presence of Christ. This theological perspective is essential for developing a theology of inclusion and justice, one that actively advocates for the full and equitable participation of migrants in both community and religious life. By recognizing Christ in migrants, we are compelled to respond to their needs with compassion and justice, fostering policies and practices that embody this commitment. A theology of inclusion not only affirms the divine presence in every individual but also demands an active and engaged response to the injustices

migrants face, promoting systemic and structural transformation within our societies.

To achieve genuine and effective inclusion, it is essential to promote policies and practices that guarantee the equitable participation of migrants. This necessitates the implementation of laws that safeguard their human and social rights, as well as the development of programs that facilitate their cultural and economic integration. Faith communities play a pivotal role in this process, not only by providing spiritual and material support but also by advocating for legislative changes that uplift and protect migrants. Inclusion should not be perceived merely as a moral aspiration, but rather as a theological imperative, one that embodies and reflects God's unconditional love for all humanity.

## **8 Creating Communities of Spiritual Sisterhood and Inclusion**

In our pastoral mission,<sup>6</sup> we are developing communities of spiritual sisterhood and inclusion, designed to support migrant women, LGBTTTIQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. These safe and welcoming spaces enable participants to find mutual support, share their experiences, and cultivate their spirituality. The significance of these spaces lies in their capacity to foster solidarity, empathy, and collaboration. A study conducted by Georgetown University (2019) found that community support groups play a crucial role in the emotional and spiritual well-being of migrants, providing them with a vital sense of belonging and community, essential for their adaptation and resilience.

From a theological perspective, communities rooted in spiritual sisterhood and inclusion embody the Christian call to solidarity and accompaniment of the most vulnerable. Liberation theology, with its emphasis on the preferential option for the poor and marginalized, is incarnated in these initiatives, which seek to dignify and uplift migrants of all identities and abilities. In this sense, communities of spiritual sisterhood and inclusion do not merely provide immediate emotional and spiritual relief—they also

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<sup>6</sup> Ministerio de Espiritualidad Femenina. Available at: <<https://www.hsrcenter.com/>>.

serve as a living testament to Christ's compassion and justice. These communities become true centers of resistance and hope, where members empower one another to overcome challenges and build dignified and meaningful lives, aligned with Gospel principles and Catholic social teaching.

The establishment of spiritual sisterhood communities not only benefits migrant women but also strengthens the social fabric of host communities. By fostering solidarity and empathy, these communities help dismantle barriers of discrimination and exclusion, promoting harmonious and respectful coexistence. Furthermore, these spaces of sisterhood are envisioned as platforms for advocacy and community mobilization, actively defending migrants' rights and dignity.

Developing participatory methodologies of spiritual accompaniment, which actively engage migrants in the design and implementation of pastoral programs, is crucial to ensuring that their voices, needs, and perspectives remain central to the accompaniment process. This participatory approach enables migrants to be not only recipients of support but also active agents in creating solutions and strategies that address their lived realities and challenges. Spiritual accompaniment must be understood as a dynamic and relational process, where migrants and their companions mutually enrich one another in their spiritual and human journeys.

Participatory methodologies not only amplify the voices of migrants but also empower them to exercise autonomy and agency. By exploring migration as a "theological locus" from the perspectives of Intersectional Liberation Theology and the Feminist Theology of Migration, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ naturally emerges as the embodiment of the physical and spiritual journey of migrants, particularly those who belong to marginalized and underrepresented groups.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ not only reveals God's profound love for humanity but also sets forth a model for our response to the contemporary realities of migration. It calls us to see every migrant as a reflection of Christ, compelling us to respond with love, justice, and concrete action. By recognizing the divine



presence in the marginalized and excluded, we affirm the intrinsic dignity and worth of every human being, fostering a more just and compassionate society. This call to justice and dignity must be translated into tangible and effective actions, transforming our communities and social structures into true spaces of welcome, solidarity, and inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

The reason this work began by touching the most sensitive fibers of human experience rather than relying solely on statistics and numbers is because it is essential to remember that every migrant carries within them a story of sacrifice, hope, and resilience—a story that reflects the unceasing pursuit of a life lived with dignity. However, what distinguishes migrants from others is not merely their movement across borders, but rather the unique adversities they endure due to their immigration status: family separation, legal uncertainty, systemic discrimination, and extreme vulnerability—challenges that are even more acute for women, LGBTTTIQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. These often-invisible realities, particularly to those who have never experienced migration firsthand, demand a response grounded in compassion and solidarity, one that recognizes in each migrant the living presence of Christ. Extending our arms, hands, and hearts to migrants is not merely an act of charity; it is a profound affirmation of our commitment to justice and inclusion.

To act with compassion and justice, to envision a more just and humane society, is to recognize in every migrant the incarnate, suffering, and resurrected Christ. This call to justice and love is not an abstract ideal but a tangible reality, embodied in the lives, actions, and voices of young leaders like my immigrant friend and a prominent leader in LGBTTTIQ+ ministry, who shared the following testimony in one of our conversations:

I decided to do something within the Church after I spoke openly about my sexual identity, and I was dehumanized, thrown away, excluded from almost all social and religious spaces... then, between tears and anger, I asked God: ‘Why

did you do this to me?’ and he answered: ‘Because I love you’(Interview conducted in Encino, California, in March 2024, with Yunuen Trujillo, a 35-year-old Mexican who immigrated to the United States at age 16).<sup>7</sup>

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# 9



## RETURN MIGRATION IN HONDURAS Territory and bodies in dispute

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### Introduction

Migrations as a theological place brings us to several theoretical, methodological and also practical-operational challenges. Within this framework, it is necessary to reflect on territory as an analytical and epistemic category, i.e. not only as a physical place or space but also as a place where different social dynamics and power relations are produced, and also as an axis for producing knowledge about migration and all the processes it entails. Territory is, above all, a place of meaning, in which the experiences of those who have returned to their countries of origin are configured. In this sense, we reiterate the idea that territory is more than a geographical space, a category that allows us to analyze the migrant body as a space of knowledge, resistance, spirituality and transformation. Likewise, the epistemology of migrant bodies as a theological place, leads us to consider them as body-territories, which become dispossessed territories and refers us to an ultimate idea: that of non-territory.

It should also be noted that the category of territory imposes on us a series of reflections in the light of biblical references to it, as well as an understanding of human mobility within the complex framework of contemporary migrations.

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on and from the category of territory and, based on this, on the bodies of Honduran migrants on their journeys to and from the United States. It is an approach to migration from the incarnated experience of “returned” migrants, in which spirituality plays a very important role.

## **1 Conceptual foundations of territory**

### ***1.1 Territory as a “theological place”***

The important thing is to establish guidelines for the theological place on the basis of concrete biblical references, which in this work we consider as methodological guidelines for understanding migration in any religious sphere.

The theological *place* refers to the biblical questions of space, territory, memory, dwelling place; however, this place does not suddenly find the world, nor a specific border, as they are historical and cultural constructions of those who at some point migrated, but are still on foot, walking day by day. They moved their bodies-territories from one place to another.

Several texts from the New Testament (NT) and even from the Old Testament (OT) could serve to guide the Pastoral Care of Migrants in its various activities, both from a pedagogical point of view and from a spiritual, pastoral and theological perspective (Gonçalves, 2023, p. 4).

In the biblical testimonies, migration is a human affair linked to God because they move, they move, as Augé (1998, p. 19) stated for the gods in Africa, who go from one place to another, with their ceremonies and their rites, but also with their individuals, just like humans, they move; they move; they carry out the diaspora<sup>1</sup>. It is

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<sup>1</sup> I use diaspora only for Jewish populations, not for the migration and plunder of the African population in the consolidation of capitalism.

not a question of making theoretical accounts of the territory, but of initiating a prospective vision of the territory in favor of migrations on the basis of a theological mission.

Despite the fact that migration has always been a human condition, the borders of nations become the indestructible walls increasingly visible in the speeches of politicians by making it a synonym for votes instead of giving way to humanity always on the move.

### ***1.2 Territory and theology***

The promise to Abraham of a land and a numerous people, and his departure; the narrative of the Exodus, together with the wilderness wanderings; the so-called Last Judgement, in Matthew chapter 25; but also the parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke chapter 10; or even the First Letter of Peter, written “to those who live scattered as strangers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1Pr 1,1) - form some exemplary cases in the sense of giving biblical support to socio-pastoral action in the field of human mobility (Goncalves, 2023, p. 14).

In migration, the nation becomes not only the place to pass through, it becomes an obstacle that must always and at all times be overcome, the barrier to be broken by faith, by religious belief.

### ***1.3 Territory, nation and ethnicity***

Territory can be read in many ways. Anthony Smith recovers it from its national placement. We are interested in revisiting the concept of territory from the religious rather than the political and academic, although we do not deny its articulation. For Anthony Smith, the nation “is a predominantly spatial or territorial conception, according to which nations must possess compact and well-defined territories. People and territory must, as it were, belong to each other, in a similar way” (Smith, 1997, p. 8). At the same time, the nation demands rights and obligations on the part of its members. Thus, the definition of nation proposed by Smith

includes several elements: a gentility, a historical territory, collective myths, mass culture, and duties and rights. Thus, his definition is as follows: the nation is “a human group designated by a gentility and sharing a historical territory, historical memories and collective myths, a public mass culture, a unified economy, and legal and equal rights and duties for all its members” (Smith, 1997, p. 13). Territorial boundaries began with kingdoms and fiefdoms. They became official with nations. Life travelling through territory has always been there, as has belief in a God. Belief crosses borders, superficial and concrete, like walls, even those of lamentations. Ethnicities, groups, whatever they are called, are diluted by faith. Territory is always a moving vehicle, as the incarnated experiences of migrants show.

For Smith, ethnicity has elements like those of the nation, but there are others that make it totally different. Thus, the main characteristics of ethnicity are it possesses a gentile, a myth of common origin, shared historical memories, one or several elements of collective culture of a differentiating character; it is also considered an association with a specific practice and possesses a sense of solidarity towards significant sectors of the population. With these elements, the author defines ethnicity as a “collectivity that emphasizes the role of myths, lineage, historical memories, and is known by one or more differentiating cultural features such as religion, customs, language or institutions” (Smith, 1997, p. 18). Thus, ethnicity has its foundations in lines of cultural affinity embodied in myths, memories, symbols and characteristic values preserved by a cultural unit of population. From the above it can be deduced, then, that for ethnicity, territory is not a fundamental element for its survival, which is why the author speaks of ethnicities as deterritorialized, as Gilberto Giménez (2001) also argues. The United States is a nation imprinted with many historical memories of all these people who were not born there, but who live and make territory there. They go with their customs, beliefs, they carry the memories of their longed-for families, they open the “American dream” as if it were “paradise”, because they are constructed and re-signified there. Ethnicity leaves aside the superficial border of the territory and moves, be it their lives, as is currently the case in Haiti and Honduras, the forced returns, the deportations of migrants,

far from stopping them, increase their mobility. As will be seen, they move with their prayers, their petitions to God, but all with the theological idea, whether it is understood or ignored, that the divine figure impels movement.

Nations could be formed from ethnic groups; there are two types of processes that would make this possible. The first are lateral ethnic communities, which are linked to the aristocracy; the second are vertical ethnic communities, which are eminently popular and belonged to urban confederations, embedded in sects and diasporas, which may have had a rural character. On the other hand, for Gilberto Giménez (2001) there are two types on which the nation can be conceptualized: the civic-territorial and the ethnic-genealogical. Contemporary migrations challenge these theoretical notions of the nation.

Nation and ethnicity, as understood by Smith, share the same cultural content, have a denomination of origin, myths of origin, common history, adopted or own language. In this case, it is Honduras. The same language, fragmented families, cultural festivals, escaping the violence of certain groups, striving for greater well-being. This unites them, and their faith is unshakeable, despite all that they experience in their journeys of mobility. However, what makes a nation different is that it is a collectivity identified with a territory, in which there is a fusion between culture and territory in a symbolic-expressive appropriation of the space.<sup>2</sup> However, the author points out that the symbolic-expressive appropriation of the nation should not be confused with the state territory, which is governed by a legal framework.

The basic difference between the ethnic group and the nation is the meaning they give to territory, as both contain the symbolic trait of territory. While for the nation the territory is identification and full appropriation, for the ethnic group the territory is more an element of claim, dispute, nostalgia and remembrance.

Anthony Smith and Gilberto Giménez practically coincide in their conceptualization of ethnicity and nation, and the influence

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<sup>2</sup> “[...] a nation could not maintain its cultural *ethos* and even its identity as an imagined community without reference to a territory that serves as a place of anchorage, a space of inscription and symbolic reference” (Giménez, 2001, p. 51).



of the former on the latter is even very noticeable. In such a way that the emphasis given by the authors discussed lies in the distinction between ethnicity as less territorialized (Smith, 1997) or deterritorialized (Giménez, 2001), in which one does not emphasize the element of territory as a distinctive feature, and in the other it is presented as an object of claim, dispute and nostalgia. As for the nation, it is basically the same meaning considered from an anthropological approach that emphasizes the symbolic aspect of the territory, but in which Smith also visualizes rights and duties on the part of the inhabitants who occupy that territory. Migrants are bearers of these rights and duties, but they are sometimes annulled, rendered invisible in this sense, as Smith explains.

For Miguel Bartolomé (1997), ethnicity as a concept has already surpassed its equivalence with the concept of race, both in the academic and political spheres of global society. This is because ethnicity has been charged with ideology, separating itself from the exclusively academic and establishing itself in historical and political conjunctures.

#### ***1.4 Territory as a marker of identity and memory***

Territory is an identity marker, it is the place of origin, of distinction, even alluding to Augé's formulation of the person as the center of otherness that is distinguished from the traveler in the metro, my personal geography marks the spatial and territorial distinction.

Augé refers us to non-place, as that merely geographical pattern of individuation that distances others, everything that is not in your person, such as the dwelling, the place of physical residence; however, of a multiple inhabiting of your person. Territory is dwelling and memory, as Rossana Cassigoli says.

Rossana Cassigoli's book (2010) takes us into a position that, far from the localism of Mexican and Latin American ethnographies of the last century, proposes an epistemology of places of origin, which is linked to the epistemology of migrant bodies. Of a universal residence belonging to the human condition: its dwelling place (whatever it may be). In migratory processes, the dwelling, the place of origin, is accompanied by memory: a remembering

made praxis and at the same time poetic, of an enunciation arising from the political catastrophe, from exile, from current migration, from those who have been banished from their place of origin.

Human habitation is so every day that we forget its interpretative and reflexive capacity. The praxis that Cassigoli proposes for this dwelling is the dwelling; it is a journey to the origin that anthropology is so interested in. The praxis on the dwelling suggested by the author places it in a central axis that crosses human everyday life, a space full of symbolism and interpretative capacity. This event makes it possible to establish a common thread for bands of hunter-gatherers or for gregarious beings in large cities. This enunciation on the dwelling place entails a political stance that underlies the author's work, those humans who for various reasons are forced to leave their place of origin; exiles (from any time and place, Spaniards, Jews or Chileans after the 1973 coup, Haitians, Hondurans, Mexicans) yearn for a dwelling place, they recall a dwelling place. In order to analyze the dwelling, he considers the origin, the maternal womb, the house, the home, the dwelling, the domicile, the street, the village, the territory, all concepts endowed with strong cultural symbolisms that can be glimpsed in Cassigoli's proposal. As well as being a theoretical proposal, these are also outlined as a methodology for the anthropological interpretation of space, or rather, a poetics of human habitation, which is intertwined with migration as a theological place and the epistemology of migrant bodies.

Cassigoli considers memory as an "active feeling", a creative reverie; it is a poetic rebellion of individuals through what he calls the "poetics of human inhabitation"; people are reclaimed through language and its evocations of past history, accompanied in this sense by what De Certeau calls the historiography of everyday life (2010, p. 30).

Memory is transformed into praxis. Cassigoli moves away from the Marxist formula and contemplates it from an anthropological viewpoint by endowing it with meaning (not consciousness) but as a significant act, "a signifying action that symbolizes the source of the creative process" (2010, p. 23). The action is endowed with a powerful element that strips it of all banality, the ethics

recovered from Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. The subject becomes a prolocutor of his or her culture; therefore, it becomes a phenomenology of the imagination, as social subjects create and recreate in their memory their past, the place where they come from. Cassigoli leads this series of arguments to a fascination with focusing on the origin, the abode that is sometimes plundered and leads to the loss of this primordial place; the path to its recovery is the memory of the narrators, of those who recount the past, this historiography of everyday life, historiography of culture.

There are several meanings at play in memory. Memory embodies the individual, gives him or her form, places him or her in a political position and condition: *who I am*, this one interprets infinitely. There is no opposition between lived history and narrated history, and this is what this paper tries to recover through a Scalabrinian approach, by uniting memory and testimony in these interviews with migrant returnees to Honduras. What is relevant is the completeness that identifies the agent of history; memory is metonymic, it says the part for the erased whole. However, memory is also the forgetting of the everyday, that which only through narration, when we remember our past life, is made visible.

In the current context, individual, family, community, ethnicity, population and nationality are at the conceptual crossroads due to the incessant migration in Latin America, and even more so if the theological place, including the so-called Protestant beliefs, is placed as the point of departure or reception of current migration in Mexico and Latin America. The territory as a theological place interpellates these migrants, and they interpellate this place. The body of the migrant is also a sacred territory, carrying memory, wounds and hope from the spirituality of the journey.

## **2 The migrant body as a body-territory: another conceptual referent**

After the brief overview of the explanatory category of territory, this work takes up the idea of the body as territory, as a tool that allows us to realize that the body is not only physical, but also a political, cultural and deeply spiritual territory. In other words, the

body is a material and symbolic unit. This notion thus starts from considering the body as a territory in which the being is incarnated (Chapela, 2010).

Likewise, the concept of “body-territory” refers us “to a dynamic intersection and feedback between bodies and spaces” (Cavalcanti de Alcântara, 2023, p. 3).

This concept allows us to speak of the inscription on bodies, since they are territories, as a process that refers to:

to the marks, to the traces, that occur in the body and subjectivity of human beings and in their material and symbolic spaces as a product of direct or indirect human actions where these actions are practices in the world that reflect the action of power on individuals and social groups (Chapela, 2010, p. 101).

The concept of the body as territory has been worked on from different perspectives and studies such as feminist, decolonial, anthropological and also by those who address the phenomenon of migration. In this sense, we can mention Rita Segato (2013) with *La escritura en el cuerpo de las mujeres asesinadas en Ciudad Juárez*. Territory, sovereignty and crimes of the second state”; in her work she argues that women’s bodies are the first territory of dispute within patriarchy and how the inscription of power over bodies and the processes of territorial violence is reflected in people’s own bodies. Also Lorena Cabnal, who is a Mayan community feminist from Guatemala, proposes “my body is my first territory of defense; in this observation we can see clearly how patriarchal logics have been expressed and how they have crossed us and how today, for us, the forms of colonization come together and create agreements, pacts and patriarchal mandates” (Cabnal, 2023). Another in the line we are mentioning is Nicholas de Genova who puts forward the idea of the border spectacle, that there are not “illegal” immigrants but “illegalized” migrants, accompanied by deportability, which is “the possibility of being forcibly displaced from the space of the state” (De Genova, 2018, p. 30). In this portability, the migrant body is a territory of control, exclusion and also resistance.

### 3 Methodology

Qualitative research was followed, because this type of research allows “unpacking how people construct the world around them, what they do or what happens to them in terms that are meaningful and offer a rich understanding” (Flick, 2015, p. 10). The data collection technique was the semi-structured interview, based on an interview script consisting of four dimensions. The first dimension was the *socio-economic* dimension, which consisted of 17 questions to characterize the interviewees, from full name, age, sex, place of birth, occupation of the mother and father, marital status, whether they have children, among others.

The second dimension was the *journey trajectory*, with eight questions, to inquire precisely about the journey, the people accompanying the migrant and the number of times he/she tried to migrate. The third dimension was *religion/spirituality*, also comprising eight questions, on the type of religion and the meaning of God in their life and in the journey(s) undertaken by the migrant. Finally, the dimension of the *returnee's trajectory*, with ten questions, emphasizing how the process of return to their country of origin, Honduras, emotions and vision of the future was, if it existed. It should be noted that we had closed questions, although most of them were open questions, so that the migrant could share as many of his or her experiences and experiences in this condition of being a returnee as possible.

The sampling was convenience sampling, as it was a type of non-probability sampling in which participants were selected because they are easily accessible under given conditions (Flick, 2015). They are not chosen randomly or representatively, but based on accessibility, availability or interest for the researcher. In this case, the condition consisted of being a returnee, which means having been deported from various places of detention in the United States to Ramón Villeda Morales International Airport in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

All the interviews were conducted by Rosiane Melo, a Scalabrinian missionary, who was on mission at the Centre for Attention to the Returned Migrant (CAMR), located in San Pedro Sula. Informed consent was obtained from all of them and the

objective of the interview was explained. A total of nine interviews were conducted, but for the purposes of this study, only four of them were taken up. They were conducted during the months of March and April 2024, recorded with the missionary’s mobile phone. They were transcribed in Word, respecting in full what the migrants said about their experiences of return. The following table provides a basic profile of the four migrants interviewed, which is used in this paper.

**Table 1:** Basic profile of migrant returnees interviewed.

| N | Person interviewed | Sex | Age | Schooling                 | Religion               | Profession or trade | Living children |
|---|--------------------|-----|-----|---------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Cesia              | M   | 28  | Technician                | Christian              | Nurse               | Two             |
| 2 | July               | H   | --- |                           | -----                  | -----               | --              |
| 3 | Carlos             | H   | 42  | Incomplete primary school | International Bautista | Peasant             | Three           |
| 4 | Elibert            | H   | 57  | Incomplete primary school | Catholic               | Peasant             | Three           |

Own elaboration, 2025.

### 4 Results

Based on the interviews conducted, we have categorized them as follows.

#### CATEGORY 1. From bodies-territories to bodies-non-territories: dispossession

However, the concept of the body as territory and the traces inscribed by force, imposed by the power of various degrees of authorities (from a sheriff to a judge, all located in the United States) marked the bodies of the migrants who are the protagonists of this paper.

Cesia told us:

We were painting a gas station, that’s what my husband does in San Diego, painting gas stations. And unfortunately we ran into someone racist, a sheriff. And he just saw us, just

because of our physique and everything, and he dismissed that we were immigrants and asked us for our papers. And well, we didn't have American papers, we were immigrants. So he intimidated us and took our passports and took us to jail. We were in jail for two days, two nights, with no right to a phone call, no right to a lawyer, no right to anything. When we were about to complete 48 hours, he handed us over to Migration. Then Migration arrived, processed us and everything. They released my husband, but not me and my brother-in-law. They took us to a centre where we stayed for two months, without being able to see the light of day, without knowing if it was night, if it was day, without knowing what time it was (Interview with Cesia, April 2024).

In the voice of Cesia, who lived in the United States for four years. Her words reveal how her physical body was used as a motive to exert the excessive power of a local power figure. Annulling her dignity, and the years she had lived, without the right to reply.

According to the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, to dispossess is "to deprive someone of what they enjoy and have, to deprive them of it with violence". Cesia was beginning a process of dispossession of her body, of her humanity.

Cesia's example reminds us of the experience of Jesus of Nazareth himself, when he was taken by force to begin his "dispossession". But without succeeding, because his body-territory belonged to another plane, the most sacred one.

*Julio*, also Honduran, unlike Cesia, who emigrated like many people "in search of a better future" because he had lost his job as a result of the pandemic, did so because of the way his mother treated him. He left as a child, when he was 12 years old. He was returned, although in his own words, he says, he was

deported because I didn't have my visa. [...] I was angry, without money. [...] I was on the street, so I didn't get serious, but I also didn't like it when I was working. I didn't like it all the time when I had to move out of a house. Because there were no longer three of us, there were six of us now. And we were all together, living together (Interview with Julio Abril, from 2024).

It is true that Julio's account does not emphasize the treatment by Migration, but rather the marks left on him by the treatment of his mother, who was the person in power. "Because the way she treated me was very hard, it was very complicated, I mean, she knows how she treated me". His story of returning to his country was about forgiving his mother and seeing his siblings, whom he had left behind when he was a child; this prevented him from realizing that because he was on the streets, "singing", he was simply returned to his country of origin, Honduras (Interview with Julio, April 2024).

Carlos begins by saying: "sowing grain", to refer to his trade. He has tried to emigrate three times. The first time was when he was 17 years old, seeking "always to have a better life, economic resources. [...] I entered the United States and Immigration caught me and then they deported me to Honduras in 2016" (Interview with Carlos, April 2024). "The second time I made it to the Mexican border, they caught me in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, and they deported me back to Honduras. Well, the other time was in 2019, when I met with the accident" (Interview with Carlos, April 2024).

In this case, for Carlos, the mark on his body as a territory was even more dramatically imprinted. On the way back, he suffered an accident, which caused paralysis of the lower part of his body, leaving him paraplegic for the rest of his life. "You suffer a lot on the road, you suffer fatigue, sleeplessness, thirst, hunger, illness, because many times you have things along the way" (Interview with Carlos, April 2024). This journey of pain, suffering, inexorably reminds us of the way to the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, and this way also has a new meaning and forms part of the five steps of the Pedagogy of the practice of Jesus, proposed by Fr. Alfredo J. Goncalves in *"Evangelho" da Pastoral dos Migrantes*. Recalling the passage of the disciples of Emmaus, he tells us

For it is on this journey that both disciples meet on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Fear, failure, disillusionment, deception and frustration are their companions. They have just witnessed a tragedy and escape becomes necessary: Jesus of Nazareth was condemned and executed on the wood of the cross, the death reserved for the worst evildoers.



It was considered the most ignominious execution in the Roman Empire. If that happened to the Master, what might not happen to his disciples? It is not difficult to imagine the pain and the tone of the conversation among them. They remain crestfallen, perplexed, impotent (Goncalves, 2024).<sup>3</sup>

Carlos tells something else.

At the time of my return, I was not feeling very well, because I had recently had surgery and I was in a period of recovery, because when I travelled to the United States I weighed about 72 kilos and when I returned to Honduras I only weighed 36 kilos, which meant that I had lost a lot, I had no strength in me, I was so weak, until that moment my emotions were not so good, but I always had that faith, that confidence, that conviction, that certainty that God was going to lift me up (Interview with Carlos, April 2024).

*Eliberto*, who also emigrated because of economic problems to support his family, lived in the United States for four years and two months, working in the construction sector. “The first thing you need to emigrate is a decision, it was a very difficult decision, to leave your family behind, the children were small and the baby girl was not yet born, if it wasn’t for the economic issue I wouldn’t have left” (Interview with Eliberto, April 2024).

Referring to the journey, he said:

On the route there are good people, but on the train it is a difficult journey [...] There are people who throw food for the migrants, I saw accidents and how many people die on the way, where I also had an accident, when getting on the train, you have to tie yourself down, on that occasion I didn’t do it and in a turn the train made, I fell into a field where there were no houses and at night. In the morning a man arrived who was on his horse going to collect firewood. The man asked me where I was from and I told him that I was from Honduras, to which the man very kindly told me that he had good references from the people there and offered

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<sup>3</sup> Translation from the original in Portuguese by Rosiane Aparecida de Melo.

me his help. The man told me that he had a humble house with his wife, and it was there that I was able to communicate with my sister and tell her what had happened. The man helped me for six days until I recovered and then I returned to Honduras; my sister sent money to the man to help with expenses (Interview with Eliberto, April 2024).

In his own voice, Eliberto tells us how that road, that journey is difficult and how it undoubtedly leaves its traces, its marks on the bodies of migrants, full of fears and dreams, in the hope of reaching the so-called “American dream”. This train takes us to the road once again, and to “tie ourselves” tightly to faith, to trust in God. On that road, in the trajectories that migrants undertake, in the border spaces, as producers of a space that is kidnapped, where dignity and humanity hold hands and do not want to let go, but power in its many faces and forms is exercised most of the time in an authoritarian way, and they are stripped not only of their dreams but literally of parts of that first territory, our body.

Eliberto recovered from that tragic accident, tried again and was also returned. Once again, “praying to God in the mornings and also at night”, he told us:

I went through the Reynosa border and walked for two days through the desert, the same coyotes divide up the work, both those on the Mexican side and those on the US side so that people can get to their destination.

My return to Honduras was somewhat difficult, in the United States my mind was no longer right, I didn't feel stable, my sister insisted that I be strong, but I didn't want to be there. At a checkpoint I was caught by the US police. It was difficult for me to return to my place of origin, I wondered where I was going to live, because my home was no longer the same, knowing that my ex-wife was already with someone else, and I asked her to leave the house with her partner. When I arrived there was no furniture, and my children were not there either (Interview with Eliberto, April 2024)

In these four voices, their stories, although they may differ from one another, share the journey or journeys of emigration and their “returns”, as a single process that we assume here as a

continuum. These are difficult journeys, full of emotions, fears and uncertainty, each one of them weighed down by having left their families behind. Here, the analogy we have used of their bodies as territories are like “no man’s land”, no one defends them, no one fights for them, not even they themselves, because they are tired, they surrender to a divine order, they trust. On the contrary, they are stripped, even, on many occasions, to the point of turning them into non-territories. Stripped even of their dignity, of their humanity.

As Pope Francis says in the Encyclical Letter “On Fraternity and Social Friendship”:

migrants are not considered worthy enough to participate in social life like anyone else, and it is forgotten that they have the same intrinsic dignity as any other person. [...] It will never be said that they are not human, but in practice, by the decisions and the way they are treated, it is expressed that they are considered less valuable, less important, less human” (FT 29).

The bodies of Cesia, Julio, Carlos and Eliberto resemble the body of Jesus of Nazareth: thirsty, hurt, tortured, violated, having things thrown at them, insults, mockery. We trust that their bodies, their territories, are theological places. These are some of the questions we intend to contribute to the construction of an epistemology of migrant bodies.

### ***CATEGORY 2. Spirituality as a driving force and as a horizon***

These four stories were only able to live what the journey of emigrating-(being)returned implied, because of their faith and spirituality, as they expressed in the interviews conducted by one of the authors of this chapter, a Scalabrinian, who was on mission at the Centre for the Attention of the Returned Migrant (CAMR), located in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> With a cautious, respectful approach, she obtained the Informed Consent of each person interviewed. The returnees felt important and were very grateful for the opportunity to tell their stories, full of so many experiences and emotions, recovering their memory and testimony, as we have already expressed.

It is important to point out that the CAMR was created by the Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana (PMH), coordinated at the time by a Scalabrinian Sister, in Tegucigalpa in 1997.<sup>5</sup> This type of center has become more than necessary to provide temporary but immediate responses to adult Honduran migrants who are returned from the United States and Mexico by air. They are accompaniment devices with a logic of pastoral service to migrants, whose greatest challenge would be to build the Pedagogy of Jesus of Nazareth in its five steps: path, dialogue, invitation, house, table and finally, the mission. This pedagogy “closely illuminates the evangelical action of the Pastoral Care of Migrants” (Goncalves, 2023).

We consider that this pedagogy is not at odds with religion or with the spirituality that migrants may profess. We take up the following definition of spirituality:

Those aspects of human life that have to do with experiences that transcend sensory phenomena. It is not the same as religious, although for many people the spiritual dimension of their lives includes a religious component. The spiritual aspect of human life can be seen as an integrated component alongside the physical, psychological and social components. It is often perceived as linked to meaning and purpose and, for those near the end of life, is commonly associated with the need for forgiveness, reconciliation and affirmation of values (WHO, 1990).

In several of the interviews, the migrants, the protagonists of this paper, made the distinction between the spiritual and the religious; however, it is not the purpose of this paper to develop the differences in this regard. What we do intend to highlight at this point is how God was the driving force in the journey and in every situation of dispossession, of the withdrawal of dignity, of the violation of practically all human rights.

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<sup>5</sup> Following a significant increase in the number of returned migrants in March 1999, the PMH, in coordination with the Caritas government of Honduras and with the support of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), was set up by the General Directorate for the Protection of Honduran Migrants (DGPHM). The CAMR was moved to San Pedro Sula in 2016 and was reopened in 2020, after hurricanes Eta and Iota, which left it completely disabled. It is administered and managed by the Association of Scalabrinian Sisters (AHS) and has a technical team to support the services provided, food, transport, medical, psychological and psychosocial care.

***Cesia: “My God, you have forsaken me”.***

Cesia, who lived for months in a detention center, told us:

Well, God gave me strength, [...] because when I felt anguished, when I felt I couldn't go on, when I felt I was drowning, what I did was bet, pray and ask God to give me strength, because the only thing that gives you strength is God in that place, that there is no one else, that there is no one else for you. In other words, they don't care if you are well, if you are bad.

Thank you my God, because you took us out of there, thank you because we can see the light of day, we can see the walls. I mean, besides, just yesterday I saw a night, I hadn't seen the night for two months, I hadn't seen the day for two months, just today I was able to see a sunrise. In other words, they deprive you of everything, like you are a criminal and like you are paying for something serious that you did. And the only mistake was crossing the border. My God, what happens to people who don't have the mental capacity to endure these processes? Many women, don't even believe me, but according to what is believed in the center where I was, two people have committed suicide. I live in gratitude to God because I arrived in my country, I returned safe and sound, something that doesn't happen to many people, they don't return to their country safe and sound, they die on the way, they are raped. Not me, God kept me in every way” (Interview with Cesia, April 2024).

Cesia expressed at all times that all her rights were violated: from the most minimal, such as brushing her teeth, having some privacy in the use of the bathroom, bathing daily, sleeping on at least one mattress, changing her underwear, seeing the light of day, receiving a decent meal, drinking water, to the use of sanitary towels when her menstruation came, to professing her faith, the use of sanitary towels when menstruation came, even the right to profess their faith, “I would prostrate myself to pray and the guards would lift me up and tell me that I couldn't do that, that I had no right to pray, to profess my faith” (Interview with Cesia, April 2024).

She says that despite the psychological damage, the suffering, the racism she felt because she was Latina, because of her skin

color, only her faith sustained her. But, when she was told that she was not fit to stay in the United States, “I felt that God had left me alone. [To be told that they are going to send you back to your country like that, with nothing, without giving you the opportunity to even go home to get your things. But I had my things, I had my clothes, my belongings, and they denied me the opportunity to go and get them. My God, you have abandoned me. But yet I realized days later that God had not abandoned me” (Cesia interview, April 2024).

***Carlos: “The north is God, it is within us”.***

Carlos, for his part, has a representation of God, of companionship and that he is good, with a preponderance centered on the person of Jesus Christ, whom he accepted more than 15 years ago as “the savior of my life”, he told us. The experience of the accident he suffered has led him to experience his life with God more closely. “There is a very important voice and it is the voice of God, sometimes when we don’t listen to the voice of God, we let ourselves be carried away by our own ideas, our own thoughts and our own emotions. That’s why we often find ourselves in conflict” (Interview with Carlos, April 2024).

Carlos, in addition to what happened to him, wants to tell his story. He believes that “I think it would be very important, to be able to tell and for people to be aware of what they can do along the way” (Interview with Carlos, April 2024).

Carlos, in his re-signification of his return and of the accident he suffered, based on his close relationship with God, undertook an apostolic service in his country of origin, which is why his conception of spirituality is an active one. He points out:

I share with people in need and that is why I made the decision to travel to the United States, one to help my children and the other to be able to help people in need. [...] God knows why things happen and you don’t have to claim anything from God, because in his sovereignty he is perfect and he knows what he does (Interview with Carlos, April 2024).

This brings us back to the words of Pope Francis, alluding to Francis of Assisi,

He did not wage dialectical warfare by imposing doctrines, but communicated the love of God [...] In this way he was a fruitful father who awakened the dream of a fraternal society, because 'only the man who accepts to approach other beings in his own movement, not to keep them in his own, but to help them to become more of themselves, really becomes a father' (Leclerc, 1987, p. 205; FT 5).

Regarding the idea of spirituality and religion, Carlos, in an authoritative way, comments:

Religion has no impact on my life, what makes me feel good is the presence of God in me and my obedience to Him. All of a sudden, religion is for me, common and ordinary, regardless of what religion it is, but what is important for me is consecration and obedience to God, because it depends on me that I am a church and that all of us who seek and live together with the word of God, that makes us guarantee that God is more than religion. The north is God, it is within us (Interview with Carlos, April 2024).

### ***Eliberto: God and the Virgin***

Eliberto, as we have already mentioned, is a Catholic. He is devoted to the Virgin Mary. He lives his spirituality through prayer, morning and night. It is something his parents taught him, to have God in his life, in good times and in bad.

For him, God is the best and he is everything and comments that without him we would not exist. He stresses that "we have to thank him in good times and in bad".

In his interview he commented: "I don't feel abandoned by God in spite of the situation, God himself was the one who helped me to get ahead, and I was accompanied by a pastor in Honduras and another in the United States, who told me "life goes on" (Interview with Eliberto, April 2024). This is because his wife left him for someone else.

On several occasions, his family told him to return to the United States, but he said he no longer wanted to, because for him “having gone there in pursuit of the American dream only made me lose my family and my children’s growth”, and he emphasizes “even more so my daughter’s”. He continues: “even in poverty I was happy and now I am not entirely happy, but I have life, work and God”. He ends by saying “God always has a purpose in life, but sometimes we don’t know how to react to the situations that happen in our daily lives” (Interview with Eliberto, April 2024).

On this point, it is also worth bringing in the words of Pope Francis in the same Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*: “Those who migrate ‘have to separate themselves from their own context of origin and often experience cultural and religious uprooting. The fracture also concerns the communities of origin, which lose the most vigorous and enterprising elements, and families, in particular when one or both parents emigrate, leaving their children in the country of origin’ (CV 93; FT 28).

Pope Francis reaffirms the right not to emigrate, referring to the fact that the communities of origin, the countries, should provide and have the best conditions for their inhabitants, so that they can remain in their own land.

## **In closing**

In this work, we have started from the category of territory to understand it beyond borders, beyond physical space, but rather as a theological place, which is spiritual, but also political, social, economic and cultural, which shapes the experiences of migrants and embodies them in bodies that are also territories, but which are, as a non-place-new place, in that dialectical way, as Pe. Alfredo leads us to consider the border space also as an epistemic place, where bodies should be recognized and thought of as subjects, yes, “subjected” by their faith and spirituality, humanity and dignity.

Migration is a complex network, which today more than ever, given the crises that exist at all levels (environmental, economic, political, cultural, spiritual), threatens the political systems and democracies of the countries of origin. But human mobility is not a



problem in itself, it acquires this tinge because of the existing crises we have mentioned and because of the excessive power in terms of the imaginaries that are held about migrants. The different types of political-administrative authorities must begin by raising awareness of the issue of migration from a human rights perspective.

As Pe. Gonçalves puts it: “True spirituality is necessarily centrifugal. Starting from the central mystery, it radiates its radiance in all directions, in a spiral network that expands to the exact extent that it creates and recreates new nuclei, ready in turn to spread the original luminosity indefinitely” (Gonçalves, 2023).

This paper is just one more input to contribute to the debate on migration as a theological place, through these two analytical elements that we have considered throughout this paper - territory and the body as territory - to reaffirm a commitment, which should be intersectoral (from the academy, the church, the police, the state in general, civil society organizations, among others) to think, propose, debate and defend the idea that the bodies of migrants are not territories in dispute, which can be discarded, dispossessed, their rights annulled; Rather, a society founded on fraternity and social solidarity is needed today more than ever.

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# 10



## **“¡MADRE, DAME TU PAN!”, A CLAMOR THAT WAS HEARD A clamor that transformed**

*Luz Elena Arozqueta Villeda*

### **1 Human mobility through Mexican territory**

Human mobility is a phenomenon that has been constantly repeated throughout the history of mankind. Migrate, emigrate, move from one place to another, change residence, transit, whatever the name we refer to it<sup>1</sup>, is a practice that is carried out under circumstances mostly beyond our control, which push us to leave in search of more favorable living conditions.

The reasons for migration obviously change with the passage of time according to the circumstances, although we can observe that they generally revolve around economic, political, social, environmental or personal problems; that is why the migration issue is of vital importance, since factors are involved that constantly link the migrant person in relation to the world, but the link is not necessarily made in the opposite direction. It is this point

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<sup>1</sup> The terms and categories used to talk about human mobility vary depending on the approach, meaning and discipline from which it is analyzed. For this reason, here I will only mention some of the words used commonly and on a daily basis, without specifying whether we are talking about exit, entry, temporary or permanent.

that makes us realize that today the global phenomenon of human mobility tends to be ignored, ignoring not only the reality but also the person who is part of it.

Nowadays, we live in immediacy, practicality and detachment, living more with ourselves than with those around us. Anything that could take us out of our comfort zone or involve us in situations of conflict is avoided. Consequently, there is a lack of involvement and understanding of what is happening in the world and in this, the complex situation of the migrant fades away.

Leaving a country is a complicated reality; it is leaving behind a life, what is known, what is one's own to embark on an adventure that is not easy. Those who migrate<sup>2</sup> have the purpose of settling temporarily or even permanently in a territory different from their own; they know what it entails; they are not unaware of the risks and obstacles they will have to confront; however, they have the hope that in the place of destination they will have the tools and possibilities to achieve a substantial improvement in their current living conditions.

When speaking of human mobility, the dynamics in which it takes place must also be considered. In the case of Mexico, for example, this implies keeping in mind that, in addition to being the busiest migratory corridor in the world, it is a nation in which there are various migratory dimensions, presenting itself as an emitter, expeller or of origin (place from which one departs to another territory); of transit (the temporary passage to a destination); of destination (where the migrant goes and it is almost always with the idea of temporary stay); of permanence (not necessarily given by initial intention and also occurs when processing the official request for stay); of return (voluntary or forced return as in the case of deportation); and, in recent years, as a deported (expulsion from the country).

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<sup>2</sup> Although they are better known terms, I believe it is appropriate to point out the differences between the three words that refer to displacement. Migrate is the movement of a person or persons (animals are included in this concept) from one place to another, either country or region, temporarily or permanently. Emigrating is the movement of people out of one country to live in another and immigrating refers to the entry of people into a foreign country for the purpose of settlement. In the latter two there is an intention to stay.

Continuing with Mexico and focusing on it as a transit country, which is the category in which I place this article, it should be considered that most of the people entering and moving through national territory seek to reach the United States. Until recently, the entry contingent came from Central American countries; however, this has been changing in recent years, giving way to the reception of people from South America, Europe and Africa. It is important to note at this point that accounting for the entry of persons in an irregular migratory situation is not a simple matter and even less so incorporating this current increase in migratory flows, which causes the data to vary constantly and it is not possible to speak of an established movement or circulation of origin, nor of a regular amount, making it difficult to have accurate and verifiable information. However, it is also worth mentioning that the support of advanced technologies that intervene in the monitoring of social networks and digital platforms, as well as the use of drones, sensors and surveillance cameras along migratory routes and at border surveillance points, is currently proving to be of great help.

In Mexico, approximate data is obtained through public administration institutions; government agencies and security forces in control and patrolling operations; shelters; medical or legal assistance points; civil or ecclesiastical associations for help and accompaniment. To give us an idea, according to official sources, the panorama of irregular migratory entry in 2023 was as follows:

According to Mexico's Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB), approximately 686,732 people in an irregular migratory situation presented themselves to Mexican authorities upon entering the country between January and November 2023. Of these, three out of ten were from Central America, a proportion similar to that represented by Venezuelans alone. This period also saw a notable increase in the number of Ecuadorian migrants, many of whom were seeking refuge from the growing wave of violence that has been affecting their country for months. Despite the diversity of origins, the final destination of most of the participants in the so-called migrant caravans is the United States.

In total, the SEGOB registered around 178,000 arrivals of Honduran and Guatemalan migrants to Mexico during the

first eleven months of 2023. Almost a quarter of them, some 44,242 citizens, were deported or received assistance to return to their countries of origin (Chevalier, 2023).

On the other hand, data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicate that in 2023 the number of people in an irregular migratory situation was 782,176 people, which implies the highest increase so far recorded, exceeding by 77% the figure recorded in 2022,

In the case of the number of migrants in an irregular situation who leave the country, arriving, transiting and staying in Mexico (either temporarily or permanently) reached never-before-seen levels in 2023, following what were already record years in 2021 and 2022. Among these flows are large numbers of women (including pregnant and lactating women), children (including unaccompanied and separated children), members of indigenous peoples, persons living with disabilities and chronic diseases, LGBTQ+ persons, and other populations in complex situations of vulnerability (IOM, 2023, p. 2).

In addition to these data, the specific characteristics of migratory transit through Mexico should be analyzed, such as the migratory routes that go from the southern border to the northern border of the country, including the Gulf corridor (Veracruz, Tamaulipas), the Pacific route (Oaxaca, Guerrero, Michoacán, Jalisco) or the Central route (Mexico City, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí). Also, the way in which travel is carried out tends to combine walking with the use of freight trains, automobiles and buses. Thus, by having several elements of analysis, it is possible to know everything faced by those who have to cross Mexican territory, recognizing, unfortunately, that it is a dehumanizing and painful experience. It is known that no matter the route chosen or the means by which the migrant will move, it will always be in a permanent state of defenselessness and vulnerability. They will have to resist the climatic conditions of the places they pass through; the lack of food and drink; non-existent or deplorable hygienic conditions; and, above all, to loneliness, fear and uncertainty, knowing that they will encounter deceit, robbery,

extortion, kidnapping, sexual violence, trafficking, as some of the examples, which are practices controlled and executed with total impunity and support of corrupt authorities, by hired killers, organized crime, cartels, criminal gangs, authorities, polleros or coyotes.

As if this were not enough, the migrant will be immersed in a narrative that presents him or her as a risk to the economy, culture and security of the country through which travels and to which intends to arrive, and which is reinforced by the media and exclusionary, xenophobic and discriminatory political discourses. This will impact on a repressive and undignified border policy that clearly marks an arbitrary and prejudiced tendency. All this traps them in a circle with no way out, borders that are not only material but also symbolic that point to and constantly remind them of the social narrative of rejection and non-belonging in which they have been pigeonholed, coupled with the adversities and suffering they must deal with.

However, despite all the vicissitudes and degrading treatment faced by the migrant, he or she maintains the hope that at some point and in some place will obtain recognition of their rights and that these will be respected, beginning with the recovery of their dignity. Thus, when a friendly face appears on the road, the desolation is compensated by the encounter with that Good Samaritan<sup>3</sup>, who without knowing him or her, makes them see that perhaps they feel alone but they are not, that they have value and are worthy of attention,

[...] our society, our communities and relationships are not permanently broken. We can restore them. And it can all start with reaching out to each other, whoever they are, in whatever state they are in. We can decide that we will not let anyone, or any circumstance, diminish our humanity or the humanity of another person (Hanvey, 2020).

Yes, the migrant in transit through Mexico before even starting the journey is already wounded by all those circumstances that

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<sup>3</sup> Echoing the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37).

lead them to leave, they carry a lot and carry it with them, but the parable of the Good Samaritan in the contemporary world becomes evident to those who pass through the route of Veracruz, since they will coincide with those who stopped one day to attend the brother and sister on the road, to lift them up, heal their wounds, feed them, welcome them. This good Samaritan is embodied in a group of Mexican women, originally from the town of Guadalupe (*La Patrona*), located in the municipality of Amatlán de los Reyes, in the state of Veracruz, who are known by the nickname of *Las Patronas* and who reflect deeply on the real meaning and significance of welcoming their neighbors<sup>4</sup>.

## 2 *Las Patronas* see and listen

In the analysis of human mobility, several elements can be appreciated that converge and give a broader vision of it and can provide a hopeful perspective. For example, there are people who, without moving, accompany and are part of the same experiences of exclusion and invisibility to which migrants are subjected. Among them are precisely *Las Patronas*, those women who in February 2025 will celebrate 30 years of carrying out what they proudly and simply call their humanitarian work, providing food, water, shelter and clothing to people who, with the desire to achieve the “American dream”, pass through their town on their way to the United States. They are the face of encouragement that not only exposes the harsh scenario of migration in transit through Mexico, but also the reality in which women from rural communities live, where they face conditions of inequality and marginalization. In the population where *Las Patronas* live, access to quality medical services, education, job opportunities, decent and adequate housing, is little more or less than a chimera; and, in addition to this, there is the presence of a macho and patriarchal environment; therefore, it is not strange that women who were born or live in this environment are educated and thought to marry, procreate, take

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<sup>4</sup> In *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to invite us to reflect on the meaning of neighbor, recognizing the intrinsic dignity of the fallen, wounded, ignored and abandoned brother along the way, and the role of the neighbor who is willing to heal his wounds.



care of the family and work for them. Consequently, the school dropout rate of girls and young women is very high, since they are condemned to serve in “household chores” from a very early age. The opportunities to get out of this situation are almost null; so, knowing and having to cook is not a voluntary option, but an irremediable part of the social and cultural gender programming and identification to which they are subjected. However, it is precisely this task, cooking, that served Las Patronas as a tool to turn around the established sociocultural system that relegates them and tries to silence them.

Providing some context to understand the kitchen as that key factor in the transition of Las Patronas’ lives, I place them on February 14, 1995, when, without intending to, they first encountered the image of migration. On that day, two very young Patronas were sent by their mother, Doña Nila, to buy milk and bread for breakfast and on their way home walking alongside the train tracks, they heard the cry for help from the people climbing on top of the freight train nicknamed *La Bestia* (The Beast)<sup>5</sup>. “¡Mother, give me your bread!” was the phrase that made them pay attention. In these words, there was the request for something concrete, but they also knew how to perceive perhaps the pain, the dismay, the uncertainty, the hopelessness, intermingled with the longing and desire for a better future. This call touched them, made them stop, and in a matter of seconds they made this cry their own. Without hesitation and without thinking too much about it, they gave what they had brought as food and went home to tell what had happened, satisfied, although at the same time fearful of being reprimanded, since they were returning empty-handed, not that they lived comfortably. Doña Nila, however, praised their action and decided that if anyone was hungry, they, without knowing how, would help them.

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<sup>5</sup> *La Bestia* is the name popularly given to freight trains in Mexico. These trains are not designed or suitable for the transportation of people; however, as they connect routes that cross the country from the south to the north, they have been used as a transportation vehicle by migrants, mainly of Central American origin, whose intention is to reach the United States. The trip is carried out on top of the wagons or between them, which makes it a highly dangerous route.

Doña Nila, that quiet woman who has worked since she was a child in the fields and at home, is the one who, without being aware at the time of what her willingness to help would trigger, started a great story of fraternity, love and solidarity. She exemplified what it is to truly commit oneself to reach out and look towards others, and with her the faces of many other women emerged from the shadows between the stoves to the rails, to the world. They organized themselves to get food to cook so they could go to the train tracks to wait for *La Bestia* to pass and give what they had prepared to eat and drink to the migrants. From that moment on, they became aware of a reality that was alien to them. They did not know what migration was, what a migrant was, why they were migrating, where they were going and why. Little by little they became aware of the problems in the countries of origin of those who passed through their community and understood the reasons they had for leaving and venturing on this journey, also verifying the danger it entailed and what they were continually exposed to.

Facing this reality was not easy and even less so because in their community, family and circle of friends their initiative was not well received, since it was considered that they were neglecting their family obligations as women, in addition to the fact that the perception of the migrant began to become negative and they were accused of carrying out an action contrary to the law by helping “criminals”. Thus, during the first few years they had to deal with this as well as with the ecclesiastical, political and governmental sectors. But they did not lose heart and continued with more determination and dedication as the flow of migrants crossing through their town of Guadalupe La Patrona increased. This increase made them work harder and not be satisfied with the little they had. They found a way to obtain more resources so that no one would go without food, getting support first from individuals and groups close to them, and the more their work became known, the more they also got support from small and large businesses, markets, universities, etc... They had to reorganize and coordinate in order not to neglect their families<sup>6</sup> and to be in time in the kitchen to cook and prepare

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<sup>6</sup> They knew that if they wanted to continue assisting migrants, they had to reconcile their freely chosen activity with the one imposed on them. Otherwise, they would create a conflict situation that would prevent them from continuing their humanitarian work.

bags of food for the migrants and deliver them as soon as *La Bestia* passed through their town.

At the beginning they used the small kitchen of their house and later they set up a larger area next to which they later installed a dining room and years later they built a shelter with a capacity for 30 people. And it is that the background of the four words “Mother, give me your bread!”, remained in them; that cry that said and captured from the fragility produced strength, endurance, tenacity, determination and much love. That phrase challenged them and sensitized them to the suffering, accompanying them forever in the whole process of feeding and assisting migrants, responding to the invitation to serve, to compassion, to love as Jesus loved, recognizing the face of Christ in each migrant person, giving meaning to the New Testament passage, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35).

They heed the call of Pope Francis who asks to assist those who migrate around four verbs: welcome, protect, promote and integrate, saying that,

Every stranger who knocks at our door is an occasion for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies himself with the stranger welcomed or rejected at any time in history (cf. Mt 25,35.43). The Lord entrusts every human being who is forced to leave his homeland in search of a better future to the maternal love of the Church. This solicitude must be made concrete at every stage of the migratory experience: from the departure and throughout the journey, from the arrival to the return. It is a great responsibility that the Church wishes to share with all believers and with all men and women of good will, who are called to respond with generosity, diligence, wisdom and open-mindedness —each according to his or her possibilities— to the many challenges posed by contemporary migration (Francis, 2018).

Las Patronas makes these four verbs alive from the moment they stopped in front of *La Bestia*, unleashing a courageous action through a loving gaze and listening that is replicated in the physical space where they gather to cook. Since, from there, is the place

from where they take responsibility and solidarity with migrants; there where they are themselves, where they talk about everything that happens to them, their concerns and their achievements; it is there, between confidences and stoves, that they laugh, dance, sing, cook, and cook. And it is also from there, where it has always been clear to them that suffering cannot be ignored; that is why they continue to act for recompositing a world badly wounded by indifference, thanks to a cry that, when heard, transformed lives, perceptions and histories.

### 3 A clamor that transformed

The work carried out by Las Patronas allowed them to learn about a different scenario from the one they were accustomed to; migration understood from the circumstances and conditions of those who are forced to migrate. And it is there, when they became aware of the denial of the rights of migrants, the undignified and inhumane treatment to which they are subjected, the violence, the dangers and threats they face before, during and after migrating, that they discovered that they, as women in their community, were also part of a socially forgotten and violated group. They, who fought so that migrants would not be marginalized, and their rights would be recognized, they, who saw the suffering face of migration, did not see their own and did not realize that their rights and their own worth were not recognized. It was then that they realized that, despite being attacked, misunderstood, forced to choose between what they wanted to do and what they supposedly “should do”, they had not given in, they resisted and went ahead with their project, breaking with the social and cultural molds that tried to invalidate them. Sorority women who are united in *doloridad*<sup>7</sup>, because pain identifies, unites, shares, and undoubtedly transforms,

[...] Doloridad carries, in its meaning, the Pain caused by Machismo in all Women, I emphasized that when it is about Us, Women *prietas* (black), there is an aggravating factor

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<sup>7</sup> The term and concept of *Doloridad* was born with the Brazilian philosopher Vilma Piedade, who in defining it says that it should not be understood as an opposite to Sorority, but as a critical complement to it.

in that Pain, aggravating factor caused by Racism. Racism that comes from the White creation for the maintenance of Power... And Machismo is Racist. That is where Race comes in. And Gender enters. Enter Class. Out goes Sorority and in comes Doloridad (Piedade, 2021, p. 55-56).

This is the way in which the act of cooking subverted the system of male dominance and patriarchal gaze to which women are subjected in their population (and outside of it) by opposing the traditional norms that relegate them to the kitchen as part of the domestic and family care work that “corresponds to them”. This task of female subordination made them take control in and from the kitchen, empowering and supporting each other in the sorority that they evidenced as their own. Fighting to win their place, in the same way that they go out to the train tracks to hand out bags of food, attend to migrants, offer them a roof and a plate of food, confront government and ecclesiastical authorities or society, which has tried to restrain them. All this led them to transgress imposed patterns, restrictive and discriminatory gender roles and xenophobic attitudes, to the point of becoming bearers of a change in beliefs and behaviors, long rooted and stagnant.

Cooking became a tool for resistance and liberated them. They managed to redefine the role of women who are limited by their origin, their geographical environment, their context. They made their space their own when they looked at the migrant and when they looked at themselves. When they perceived and understood themselves better in pain,

That doloridad can define a place of affection and reason, of emotion and reflection and point out what we can give to each other (I include here all humanity in a new and more complete idea of community) in the scenario of spiritual and material misery that hangs over all of us today, is what we hope for (Piedade, 2021a, p. 8).

They realized that beyond their corporeality, there was their corporeality, that is, not to be part of the social construct or of the established reification, but to be themselves building their

own identity. Their bodies, like those of the migrants, spoke from their experience, revealing rejection and disapproval to discover themselves strong, brave, free, healed. When they met their brother and sister, they met themselves. Segregated corporealities that converge and become recognizable to each other in the face of solidarity and fraternal action,

The construction of the body of men and women and the construction of power is different in a solidary and equitable society than in a dominating, unequal and patriarchal society. The body is the nuclear axis of everything we think, of everything we do, and it is the vital space (Rojas, 2017, 16:43 min.).

Las Patronas was moved by the reality of migration and “touched” the fragility of these bodies, which in this act made them witness their own,

[...] the body also reveals the most intimate part of us: our vulnerability, the wounds of our flesh. At the same time, through the body our transcendence is also revealed, the image of the divine in us. Therefore, the whole body needs to come into contact with the other. That body which is not ours, reveals another identity, and at the same time, helps us to discover what we have not been able to appreciate in our own ‘I’. The hands of the other can heal our wounds, our hands can heal theirs. These bodies that meet not only see each other, they also touch each other, and in the act of touching they transcend each other (Meléndez, 2016, p. 385).

Those bodies that found themselves united in vulnerability, became similar, arousing closeness, understanding, surrender and love. Bodies all “that move, bodies that are assaulted, bodies that are despised, bodies that are in pain, tired and hopeful, bodies that have identity and bodies that lose it, bodies that shake hands, that cook, that dance, that listen and see, that subvert hegemonic practices as a form of resistance and liberation” (Arozqueta, 2022, p. 162). This is what they understood by challenging an oppressive,

sexist, patriarchal and exclusionary system, challenging a change of narrative in which it is established that they have little or nothing to say, to a narrative of equality, visibility and liberating justice. Yes, people who migrate have the right to have rights, and so do they as women. For this reason, in the ordinariness of their lives, in the kitchen, in the shelter, on the rails where *La Bestia* passes, they reject stereotypes and injustices, vindicating the human rights of those who migrate, as well as rights with a woman's face.

Thus, going against the stereotypes that seek to marginalize them, by getting involved and committing themselves to their struggle as women and in support of the complex reality of human mobility in Mexico, they transmit in the food destined for bodies that also matter<sup>8</sup>, not only a living example of fraternal service, but also of empowerment and sorority. A feeling, an action where an "space of encounter" is emerging.

## 4 Space of encounter

Starting from the assumption that theology needs to be continuously in communication with other disciplines, with other fields of knowledge and, what is more important, that it must show itself in accordance with the realities, the vicissitudes and the constant challenges of contemporary events and circumstances, we can recognize human mobility in all its variants and characteristics as one of those complex realities that impels and provokes theology to reflect and act. Hence, embracing the experience, history and reality of migration from the vision of migrant theology allows us to respond from principles such as social justice, solidarity, hospitality, with respect for human dignity as the main premise. From this approach, migrant theology, as knowledge and action, demands commitment and confrontation at the same time as accompaniment, since responding means not only interpreting, but also providing tools that contribute to dignifying the migrant person. Therefore, responding to the needs of migrants requires "those" places where there is a living experience, that "encounter",

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler when referring to bodies that matter says that not all bodies are recognized as such in the social context, that is, not all bodies matter since their importance/recognition is subordinated to gender and power norms.

that is, places where God is present, places that reveal the Signs of the times.... Signs that in Latin America call for justice and rights in the face of a reality of social injustice, structural violence and endemic dehumanization.

This is where *Las Patronas* burst in, transforming and allowing themselves to be transformed. At the same time that they confront the dominant social and cultural constructs, they strive to help people who pass through Mexican territory, even if it is only a small part of their journey, showing through food that place of encounter. That place where the feminine corporeality and the kitchen are revealed as a place of resistance and solidarity, recognizing theological assumptions that favor a theological reflection relevant to a current world around women and migration. For it is through food that solidarity, communion, corporeality, sorority, fraternity, compassion, the option for the poor, and a “we” are realized.

*Las Patronas* “break bread”, share and distribute with love and gratitude in a space where everyone fits, without differences, without discrimination, that place where the other, the one who is welcomed, fed, cared for, becomes oneself, evoking the goodness and divine generosity. The profound connection between the daily routine of eating, giving and sharing food as fraternal nourishment and the sacramental experience is an act of communion that allows us to experience and celebrate God’s presence,

To nourish implies going beyond oneself to respond to the hunger of the other, and in this act to create a space of true *convivium* that reveals new layers of meaning of oneself as constituted by the other. The word *convivium* —in Spanish, live together— is the double notion of living with. It means creating a common collective space, inaugurated by a gesture of hospitality that offers nourishment to the other. By creating a space of coexistence, nourishment stages a dynamic of exchange of gifts: giving, receiving and returning the gift as a sign of gratitude, friendship and reciprocation. If nourishment makes all this possible, all the more so the Eucharistic sharing that reveals the Self as intrinsically relational. We believe in the Eucharist as *sacrum convivium*: God offers hospitality by transforming himself into food and coexisting with others. This divine-human Eucharistic action



opens a time and space of discipleship where there is no longer physical or spiritual hunger(Méndez, 2022, p. 170).

It is, therefore, in this action of sharing the food of *Las Patronas* that the manifestation of God becomes tangible, emerging the image of commensality (Boff, 2007), that concept that describes in a general way the act of eating and drinking together, but that points beyond, to the direct reference of familiarity and hospitality. There, we visualize that place of encounter, that *locus theologicus*, since that human experience is the one that allows us to reflect theologically on the presence of the migrant Christ. Because it is there, in this context, that God becomes present; in the loving work of *Las Patronas*; in the way they face and live the challenge of migration; in being with the migrants, living with their cross and their pain; in trying to find and give meaning to the current challenges; and, let us not forget, in the glimpse of a glimmer of consolation, because even before cooking, they already have their table and their hearts ready. A table that they already think of as open, inclusive, in which they intend to give a sense of community and belonging, making the affirmation of the dignity of the person prevail, although this table is not always in a literal sense<sup>9</sup>. And it is that, when they cook, they invite them to the shared table that transcends the action of eating together, since the table is prepared to make it visible with that look and fraternal and compassionate listening, either in the shelter or on the rails where it will materialize for those who go on top of *La Bestia*.

In fact, the table, tangible or not, with or without people sitting around it, is the expression of hospitality, welcome and inclusion in which we can glimpse the hope for the construction of “another possible world”<sup>10</sup> in which degrading and absurd social and cultural conceptions will be eclipsed in favor of fairer and more equitable

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<sup>9</sup> Here, it is worth remembering that they welcome, give food and drink in their shelter, even though the beginning of their humanitarian work took place on the train tracks and from there they went to the kitchen to return again and again to that place where they watched, listened and cared for.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of “another world is possible” resonates with the ideas of liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino, who emphasize the need to transform the unjust structures of society, working for a more just and equitable world, in line with the principles of the Kingdom of God.

conditions, in accordance with the Gospel principles towards those who, like some (many) of them, are on the peripheries and ignored under the weight of dehumanizing structures.

It was enough for these women to look and listen to the migrant, the brother and sister, opening their hearts and from that moment on they continue to let themselves be immersed in the migrant experience, receiving first-hand lessons of strength, courage, love and compassion, which they in turn have not ceased to transmit.

## **Conclusion**

We are facing a world in which we live with a marked indifference to the concerns and needs of those around us, and human mobility is precisely one of those issues that society in general tends to reject or ignore. The causes and consequences of displacement do not seem to have a worthy space in the public and social agenda; and the narratives that have been built around it, and which are increasingly taking place in society, are those that socially and culturally install fear, racism and xenophobia. Therefore, prejudices and negative stereotypes do not allow us to understand what drives people to leave their country or to consider that migration in a Latin American context is not at all easy.

However, it is essential to reflect on the fact that migrants face great challenges in their country of origin, a situation that will increase during their journey, and that the decision to emigrate is conditioned and forced by economic, political, social or environmental reasons that they experience in their country. The reality of migratory transit through Mexico is that it is an experience fraught with dangers and difficulties where migration policies, violence, organized crime control, social impassivity and hostile attitudes foster an inhumane and dehumanizing scenario.

However, migration is often seen as a hopeful opportunity for those who live trapped in a system of exclusion whose reality is poverty, hunger, fear, wars or lack of freedoms and rights. Therefore, for some people, migrating can become a “liberating” action, since it represents the desire to achieve a more dignified and humane way of life, even though this liberating action leads to travel a path

(literally and figuratively) that is too complicated and cruel even before embarking on it.

But solidarity is also part of the journey and its presence is materialized as a truce in a small and remote place of the dreaded Mexican migratory route, through Las Patronas, those strong and *sororous* women who by the side of the rails and between the stoves, allow glimpses of a more open, fair, equitable and inclusive world, although their close environment, as well as social opinion tries to disqualify and stop their activity.

The humanitarian work of Las Patronas shows the greatness of acting with love, love that is shared; this reflects the transformation that they have had and that they have provoked thanks to having stopped one day before the clamor that appealed to their attention. Looking and listening allowed them to experience a connection with the face of pain and discouragement and that face made them show compassion and fraternity, while at the same time it made them recognize themselves in the fragility and suffering resulting from a dominant macho and patriarchal culture, subverting the way in which their bodies, like the bodies of migrant men and women, are understood and valued.

This transforming recognition is conducive to carry out a theological reflection from human mobility as that means that allows us to visualize and make palpable *places of encounter*, in which a present and active God is revealed. Therefore, I wanted to show how the relationship of Las Patronas with the migrants and with them, is given through food as a *place of encounter*, in that shared table, in the commensality that makes evident the way in which they accompany and live the challenge of migration, witnessing what led them to a greater understanding of themselves and their lives, teaching that one should never judge the need to survive and that we must strive for a transformation in the look and listening to others. Their actions, which began between the kitchen and the rails to wait for migrants and provide them with food, allow us to focus not only on the context, perspectives, impact and challenges of the migratory phenomenon, but also on the exclusion and neglect in which the lives of women, in this case from rural populations, develop.

May this encounter, therefore, allow us to see and be the hopeful face for all those who find themselves in a situation of vulnerability, being able —and courageous— to stop, look and listen in front of the cry of “Mother, give me your bread!”.

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# 11



## THE CENTRALITY OF THE MARGINAL Spiritualities of resistance, lived from the margins of society

*Conrado Zepeda Miramontes*

### Introduction

In human logic, what is central in today's capitalist societies are the values of success, prestige and efficiency, among others, as norms that help to live a fulfilled life. Achieving this sometimes leads to dynamics of self-destruction, illness and the loss of the experiences that redeem us as human beings. By contrast, in God's logic, the parameters are different, where the marginal to the world is central to the divine ways.

There are many groups in these central marginalities: the poor, black and indigenous communities, gender diversities, widows and orphans, the sick, and forced and vulnerable migrants, among many other groups. Within forced migration, itself a highly vulnerable group, there is another sub-group: migrants who disappear in route and their families who suffer their loss. The disappearance of migrants is a marginal reality that is not very visible and is, undoubtedly, a theological place where God cries out to us and claims us.

The phenomenon of disappearances of people in a situation of migration in Mexico is a collective burden that is a burden on the lives of thousands of families from different parts of the world. The disappearance is abrupt, and the pain is intense, generating subhuman conditions for their families and friends. From this worrying reality, several groups of mothers, wives, women and some men, all of them marginalized, have emerged as a collective to search for disappeared migrants. There are several collectives of Central American mothers in search of their disappeared, who make caravans of enquiry to Mexico, to find some clue that will lead them to their location. Among them are: COFAMIDE from El Salvador and COFAMIPRO from Honduras, among others.

These searching mothers, to withstand the horror of the news of enforced disappearance and face endless governmental obstacles, unattainable visas, and in many cases, the lack of financial resources to cover the costs of the search, also endure some ecclesiastical rejection and social stigma.

But all this generates a way of revealing resilience, spiritual intelligence that helps them to live in resistance, from spirituality, from the marginalities, putting what is important at the center: their loved ones. We need to try to understand that the centrality of God is to be found in the marginal, always as a subversion of what is imposed. The missing forced migrants, whom few seek, are at the center of God's heart and should be one of the priorities of the Universal Church.

Seeking mothers, despite adversity, continue to search, to knock on doors, to raise their voices, to organize; they resist, boldly, to remain in the conformity of calamity, and much of their tenacity and resilience is due to the kind of spirituality they have developed in order not to give up. They have developed a spirituality of resistance from human marginalities. From the spiritual intelligence they have developed, they put systemic victims at the center (Mendoza, 2016).

The aim of this article is to note that systemic victims are in God's predilection and are a source of life for all. Approaching them transforms our life and spirituality.

## 1 Where do we start from?

We start from the certainty that in the divine there is the marginal human. Everything that is segregated, displaced, disappeared and discarded contains a spiritual intelligence that leads us to the heart of God. The marginal becomes, in men and women of faith, what is central for God.

To find this centrality in God, we start from the pain, the horror and the hope of ordinary people: men and women, but mostly women, who have gone before us on a new journey of faith and justice. Migrant men and women who walk like the *anawim* along various roads in the world, where their forced disappearance hurts the heart of God.

We start from a painful-hopeful sentiment-thought, which is generated by the emptiness of the disappearance of people on the migration route and the search for a very limited justice in the socio-political structures. Spiritualities and resistances that cross many human barriers and that professionals, and even churches, do not know how to accompany. We start from a reality that imposes itself and presents itself to us in a forceful way and that invites us to: “take charge, carry and take charge of reality” (Ellacuría, 1991), of the disappeared migrants and the struggles of their searching mothers.

We also start from the collective-personal accompaniment of various collectives at different moments of their struggles and their constant claim that in their parishes they are not treated with respect and care. I do not pretend to be an exhaustive or erudite article. I do not pretend to present myself as a practitioner of spiritualities and the search for missing migrants. I assert that, if it does not help the processes of searching for our missing migrants, what I can say is of no use. I therefore situate myself in my reflection-action as a de-professionalized academic who tries to understand the subversion of the Gospel of Jesus by turning his heart to the sick, the segregated, the suffering and all the marginalized of history.



## **2 Epistemologies of the global south, of the marginalized, the poor, the migrants**

We also start from the need to generate narratives from other epistemologies that help us to understand, from action, the centrality of the marginal, such as Robert and Rahnema's epistemologies of the poor: "those that represent the set of knowledge and practices implemented by a social group at a given time to understand reality and act on it" (González, 2022, p. 409). It is therefore of utmost importance not only to understand the reality of forced and disappeared migrations, but also to act in order to change that reality.

On the basis that all reality is related to all life of all peoples, we recognize that indigenous and Eastern cultures live these other non-dominant epistemic ways of approaching reality (Zepeda, 2021, p. 98). We cannot see life in a dissected, divided, dichotomous, dualistic way. There is a "nosotropic" being (Lenkersdorf, 2002) that is present in everyday reality, we are always one of us interacting with other us permanently; Pope Francis tells us: "the cry of mother nature is the same cry of the poor" (LS, 2015), there is no separation from reality, but we are a part of the same whole.

Therefore, we are not mere people or subjects, as we have been taught in our academic training. We are intersubjective collectivities (communalities) (Zepeda, 2021), as I have seen by living and coexisting for more than 10 years in the midst of indigenous Mayan communities in Chiapas and Guatemala. We are collective intersubjectivities interrelated by the economic, the political, the spiritual, the human, the social, the marginal, and so on. Everything is related to everything. We are a we, in the plural, because we are many possibilities and realities. Everything is related to everything, as some indigenous and other Eastern cultures tell us. The reality of marginalities affects us directly as we know it and God invites us to "make it visible" and to act in solidarity with these marginalities. The reality of disappearance in migratory flows is also our responsibility because we are all connected to everything.

We start from the fact that we are constituted as collective beings and in a synergic way we participate in our own intersubjectivities: we are collective intersubjectivities. We are not isolated individuals;

everything that happens on the planet affects us, especially if we are aware of that reality. As we are part of this reality, the reality of the disappeared migrants is not alien to us. From here we can say that resistance and the search for disappeared migrants are nourished by the spirituality, resistance and struggle of collectives, given that we are all collective intersubjectivities, we are all concerned by the pain of the marginalized.

Therefore, as we are collective intersubjectivities, we look at what concerns us as humans, the pain of others is our pain, especially that which is suffered on the margins. The margins have their time and wisdom, they have the strength of hope and of drawing impulse from where it does not exist. As collective intersubjectivities, the marginal is fought for and put at the center.

### **3 The spiritualities of liberation, of the marginalized, remind us of the essence of the Gospel**

Cry aloud and let no one stop you. Lift up your voice like a trumpet. Denounce my people for their transgressions, the house of Jacob for their sins (Is 58:1-9).

Mothers searching for their missing migrants precede us in resistance and hope. They open new paths through their *kenotic* work, emptying themselves to do the will of God, who cries out for their disappeared children. Most of them are poor women, without resources and with little education. They are women who, in the face of their pain, walk new paths in the face of the indifference of some civil or religious authorities. However, what spiritualities and religions strengthen the hearts of these poor but faith-filled women?

It is important to differentiate between religions and spiritualities, and to highlight what helps us to resist and generate hope, putting the marginal at the center, as God cries out and invites us. Not all religions are spiritually and socially relevant; some are even against anything that sounds new and subversive of the established.

Religions can be life or death for people. Where religions have been death, Karl Marx was able to capture that reality when he said: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of

a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. Religion is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1970. p 101). Marxism-Leninism holds that religion is the opium of the people, in the sense that it promotes passive acceptance of suffering on earth in the hope of eternal reward, makes the struggles of the here and now impossible and puts all energies into the hereafter. But there are other, more positive perspectives on religions. Durkheim, for example, says: "There are, therefore, basically no false religions. In their own way, they are all true, they all respond, albeit in different ways, to given conditions of human existence" (Durkheim, 2012, p. 90).

In history, religions have been for some, death, for others, life. When religions have been death, some of God's saints have reminded us to return to the marginal as a point of departure, of encounter, of renewal. The poor man of Assisi reminded us of this, in the face of a powerful Church, the evangelical poverty lived by him led us to live in simplicity, caring for the most vulnerable. Or in the case of the first Jesuits, who, after speaking at the Council of Trent, went to teach catechism with the simplest. Never forget the spiritual intelligence that the simple and dispossessed have to bring us closer to the heart of God.

Some religions have been able to move beyond fear and eternal punishment to focus on the present realities that concern all people. Liberated religions have been able to link themselves more to the liberations of the people and promote living in the here and now, and not in the ephemeral promises of enduring the present reality and promising a reward only to be received in the hereafter. All these religions, freed from the fear of punishment, speak to us of marginalities as a point of encounter, of liberation, of life, of returning to the essence of the Gospel.

Spiritualities, for their part, while they can be alienating and disengaging with surrounding realities, focused on power and control, killing their parishioners, other spiritualities have also been life, especially some Christian spiritualities linked to political theologies that empower the marginalized: "a critique of power, which has given those dispossessed of power, give strength and courage to oppose those who abuse it", Antonia Wozna tells us (*Apud* Gonzalez, 2022, p. 42) . Liberation spiritualities empower us from the powerless.

Another essential issue in today's life is violence. Religions that live by control and repression are violent religions. René Girard, a prominent French philosopher and anthropologist, developed a theory that gives us much clarity in understanding the origin of violence in society and thus also of religions

Girard tells us that violence is a fundamental component of human civilization and is intrinsically linked to mimetic desire. Mimetic desire is present in all human beings and with it we imitate the desires of others, desiring what the other has for me, and when I cannot achieve it, it leads us to competition, discredit and in some (or many) cases to violence, we do not desire things for their intrinsic value, but because others desire them and I want them for myself, (Girard, 1985).

René Girard's mimetic theory, in his book "Violence and the sacred", tells us that the function of religions was to contain, control and repress violence. By ceasing to perform their function, religions have allowed violence to increase exponentially in the world. Do we want to go back to control, repression, containment? No, we don't, because violent religions have wanted to control our consciences, our sexualities and our whole lives. Violent, controlling, and repressive religions join forces with power in order to survive. The powerless, the marginalized bring us back to the essential, and this has a liberating power that bursts into all areas of life (Girard, 1983).

To avoid an escalation of more violence, but at the same time without a controlling religion, we need to increase our spiritualities of liberation from the marginal, which enables us to live free of burdens, fighting against the violence present in the world and where marginalities have a great light for the life of human beings. When we approach these marginalities, we have the possibility to find what is central in life, and above all what is central in the life of God.

Those religions that help us to increase our spiritualities for resistance and the search for our disappeared are those that help us to be ourselves, to strengthen the many good things we have, to become aware of our limitations, those that strengthen our own struggles, those that unite us with others in a common goal of

caring for mother earth, for our loved ones, for the search for our disappeared migrants, those that enable us to develop justice, love, hope, and life itself for all of us.

We need more liberating spiritualities from the marginal and less controlling religions from the powerful. Marginalities can unveil our own violences. All religions or spiritualities that do not strengthen our daily struggles have no purpose. We need religions and spiritualities that help us resist and fight. We welcome any religion that opens the door and amplifies our cry as we search for our missing migrants.

The inclusion of our struggles in governmental, social and religious spaces must be aligned with the conquest of our human rights, both collective and intersubjective, defending the marginalities of human oblivion.

Anything that sounds like control and repression and takes us away from the struggles of the marginalized is not of the good Spirit. Anything that proposes to demobilize you, that tells you that this is the way you have to live, anything that goes against our human rights, is not of God, even if it is promulgated by the Church, the government or any other organization. We need less controlling religions and more liberating spiritualities.

True spiritualities are full of freedom, personal growth, high awareness of vulnerability, renewal of our need to continue to struggle collectively, strengthening of our convictions to be better people, always contributing to community building and, above all, recognition of how much God has in human struggles, such as that of disappeared migrants, for one's own salvation. Without the accompaniment of the marginalized, we have no chance of the salvation promised by God.

#### **4 The importance of spiritualities of resistance, from the margins of society**

Changing social structures without proposing to transform our hearts as a whole is not feasible; we need a holistic transformation. "The classic religious practice of blaming ordinary sinners, the current (lax) sexual morality and the prevailing materialism, loses

sight of the structural evil” (González, 2022, p. 409). That is why it is essential to dialogue with mothers searching for missing migrants who help us to return, time and again, to the fundamentals, who show us the structural evil and invite us to mobilize ourselves from faith.

They are the “Searching Mothers in search of their disappeared children, of disappeared migrants”, they are the teachers of hope, struggle and resistance. They open paths of faith, of justice, of love, from adversity, from resistance. By not remaining silent, they show us the way back to God. Why don’t the searching mothers give up? They tell us: ‘We do not give up because we want to find treasures that tell us where our sons and daughters, our husbands and wives are. Without God we would not know how to work in the face of so much pain, so much crying, so much work to do. God gives us the strength to go on, in God we can do anything’.

Sometimes we think that we accompany the searching mothers, but I think it is the other way around, they accompany us to return to the heart of God. There is an evangelical subversion in them: we are sensitized by the pains of the Searching Mothers, searching wives; we are participants in a gift, a grace, as we approach these women full of struggle, search, spirituality and hope. From the margins of the searching mothers, new glimmers of hope emerge and give us a new lease on life.

## **5 Collectivizing, hoping, renewing, fighting, resisting; from the margins. By way of conclusion**

“Hope is confident faith in the goodness of life. Desire in a person from whom we await a gift”, says Iván Illich, “Hope implies a new openness to reality”. (Quote from Ivan Illich, taken from Gonzalez’s book, 2022); Permanent renewed creativity, adds Elias Gonzalez. Hope-awakening implies the surprise factor. Awakening from an inner sleepiness and awakening to life in abundance (Gonzalez, 2022).

Liberation spiritualities make social organization and transformation possible. Hope as a social force is a threat to controlling systems. Hope mobilizes people to act in the confidence that what is being done makes sense here and now.

The searching mothers of disappeared migrants are the experts of resistance and the search for truth and life. They search for treasures, for the remains of their sons, daughters, husbands, wives, people they carry in their hearts. How? By collectivizing: that is, by transforming one's grief into a collective. Hope: by provoking hope that our struggles are just and that reality can be transformed. Renewing: our own struggles with a vision of change but being integral and just. Fighting: from all walks of life. Resisting in order to open new paths of hope like the struggles of the marginalized themselves.

I am confident that it is possible to strengthen our liberation spiritualities from the marginalities, because they remind us of what is essential in life. The stronger we are spiritually, starting from the margins, the more resilient we are.

We, the accompaniers: churches, governments, academics, need to readapt ourselves to the needs of marginalized collectives, not the other way around. Let us build a future with hope and struggle from mature and strong spiritualities, standing on the backside of history and let us accompany ourselves from the struggles of many before us, opening paths of hope, solidarity, search for truth and justice, from spiritualities that resituate religions in their work. Let us strengthen our spiritualities of resistance from the marginal and let us be witnesses of true life in God, who is life and life in abundance for all, especially for those who have lived in pain for not finding their disappeared migrants.

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# 12



## HOSPITALITY IN LIGHT OF THE CHALLENGE OF HUMAN MOBILITY

*Jennifer Gómez Torres*

"Here is the Gospel that we are called to  
To live: to welcome, and to light a fire  
Of tenderness when the cold of life  
Looms over those who suffer."  
Pope Francis

### Introduction

The reality of human mobility does not go unnoticed, it is almost impossible to ignore it. In our day-to-day lives, it is not uncommon to find a headline that refers to migration, refuge, "illegal" and/or "undocumented" migrants, the border, etc., and to account for this, there are several words used in the media and social networks to refer to this specific reality. A reality that leaves no one indifferent, a reality that is told in different ways and that tends to be distorted, a reality that says more about us than about others.

Faced with this reality, which deserves our full attention, this article aims to offer a broad-based reflection with a theological approach on the phenomenon of migrations (human mobility) in the typology of forced migrations. This choice is not trivial. We believe that it is appropriate to focus on this specific type of

migration because it shows in a more concrete way the reality of a large majority of people who are forced to leave their places of origin due to different injustices and situations that reflect the failure of the socio-economic system that we have designed. But, in addition, we consider that reflection on human mobility, in the concretization of forced migrations, is a highly relevant issue for theological knowledge, because the preferential option for the poor is vocational to theology, but also, theology is called to be an “outgoing theology”, capable of taking its areas of reflection to the border, to the periphery, thus assuming its fundamentally contextual vocation, as Pope Francis rightly indicates

a theology capable of interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women live daily [...] having as its archetype the incarnation of the eternal Logos [...] mercifully addressing the open wounds of humanity, of creation and within the folds of human history<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, migration is presented to us as a great global challenge that should involve all States and civil society in general. This challenge requires, among other things, political will to offer adequate and lasting responses that favor safe and legal processes for people who move in extreme vulnerability and who are forced to leave their places of origin. Humanity faces a great challenge, to know that we are brothers and sisters without distinction.

## **1 The Challenge of the Phenomenon of Migration: A Reality That Forces Theology**

Human mobility is a process that has accompanied humanity since its origins, this means that it is not a specific event in time, much less a new one. The phenomenon of migration, as old as humanity itself, opens up new horizons for reflection on our ideal as

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Apostolic Letter in the form of “*Motu proprio*” *Ad theologiam promovendam*. 2023. Available in: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu\\_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html)

humanity, but at the same time it drives debates on the understanding we have of concepts such as identity, nation, society, culture and challenges us about what is different, what is strange, in short, about the question of the “other”. In this sense, the academic approach to human mobility must take into account different mediations that naturally pass through interdisciplinarity, this means that it is not a topic that should be approached exclusively from knowledge, on the contrary, it is imperative to have diverse approaches, views, and epistemes. Based on these observations, we consider that this reflection is of great value, because it aims to offer the reader another view of this issue, in our case, from a theological approach with a transversal and contextual perspective.

It has already been stated that human mobility is as old as humanity. In fact, without the first migratory movements, we would not exist, it was those first movements that allowed the survival of the first human beings on earth. Those displacements of people were most likely driven by climate change, by the need to look for food, shelter and better spaces for life to continue its course. On the other hand, it is possible that the first voyages were undertaken from Africa<sup>2</sup> to explore new parts of Eurasia and other territories. The history of these migratory movements covers very large periods of time and geographical areas, so much so that it is not entirely possible to offer a single explanation about how those movements of groups of hunter-gatherers took place, so it is necessary to insist that the reasons were diverse: climatic adversities, search for food, avoiding dangers, hostilities, or simply the impulse to leave that place in search of a better one. Millions of years later, these movements continue to be repeated in the thousands of people who are currently fleeing their places of origin as a result of droughts and natural disasters caused by climate change, these people are called “climate migrants” or “migrants for environmental reasons”<sup>3</sup>;

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to review the latest scientific studies on the origin of humanity and the first migratory movements. These studies, supported by DNA analysis, reveal new data and question theories already assumed in the past. The reader is recommended to delve into relevant studies and research such as those led by Vanessa Hayes, Andy Moore, or Jessica Tierney.

<sup>3</sup> According to IOM’s Glossary on Migration, environmental migrants are those who, mainly due to sudden or gradual changes in the environment that have a negative impact on their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their place of habitual residence. Available at: <<https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml-34-glossary-es.pdf>>.

but also, millions of people in the world are moving within their own countries fleeing hunger. In the face of violence, internal armed conflicts, poverty, etc., these people are called “internally displaced persons”<sup>4</sup>; but in addition, because of the political, social and economic instability that the world is going through, some countries go to war, destroying the lives of many people who are forced to seek refuge in another country... And we could go on listing reasons, consequences and reasons why today, as at the beginning of life on the planet, people moved and are moving.

In short, migration has always been present, it was necessary and it will continue to be so. In any case, if this is the case, why do we currently perceive migration as a threat? Throughout the article we will try to offer some clues that lead us to answer this issue, or at least to elucidate its relevance and importance.

We are facing a challenge of global proportions. This means that the response and the solutions must be up to the needs. It is no longer enough to “patch up” or give short-term responses, it is urgent to assume the political and social responsibility that an issue such as the one we are dealing with requires. The situation experienced by thousands and thousands of migrants and refugees requires, among other things, a technical, administrative, economic perspective, but also a theological perspective that focuses attention on the person and restores the dignity they have lost. At the same time, it should prompt theology to rethink its own work, while nurturing the episteme of migration, offering new ideas and positions on concepts such as ‘the other’, the border, hospitality, the interreligious, the community, etc., asking pertinent, uncomfortable and meaningful questions within the ecclesial but also civil sphere.

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<sup>4</sup> According to IOM’s Glossary on Migration, internally displaced persons are individuals or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to escape or flee their home or place of habitual residence, in particular as a result of the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, human rights violations or natural or man-made disasters. or to avoid such effects, and that they have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. Available at: <<https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml-34-glossary-es.pdf>> .

Thus, theology, in our case, the theology of Human Mobility, better known as the theology of migrations<sup>5</sup>, must be a theology that knows itself as theology on the border, that is, that whoever does theology is existentially and spiritually located at the borders. Theological reflection must go beyond the “office”, the “classroom” and go out into the world, especially that of the periphery, in such a way that its reflection takes place on the frontiers of life, being a participant in history and not a mere spectator of it. The theology of human mobility is a theology that knows it is crucified because it walks with the crucified of the world and walking with the crucified forces it to leave the walls of its own safety to enter history by discovering new theological places to contemplate the presence of the living God.

The theology of human mobility, which we recognize needs further deepening and systematization in the theological academic field (beyond the efforts that have been made in recent decades), must recognize that its vocation is inspired by the Sacred Scriptures and the Magisterial Tradition, while recognizing that it has a relevant repercussion in the pastoral field and an impact on people’s lives. In this sense, we assume that the theology of human mobility or migrations, assumes its commitment to history and **assumes the reality**<sup>6</sup> of migrations by delving into its academic

<sup>5</sup> It is proposed to deepen the studies that have been carried out on the possible systematization of a theology of migration. In a special way, it is interesting to delve into the different studies of Gioacchino Campese who proposes a method for this theology based on the philosophical and theological postulates of the Basque-Salvadoran Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría, this proposal can be read in the book *Towards a theology from the reality of migrations. Methods and challenges*. At the same time, the doctoral thesis *The Historical Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría is recommended as a key to interpreting the idea of hospitality in the SJM*, which makes a rereading of hospitality based on Ellacuría’s theological thought.

<sup>6</sup> The proposal of the philosophical thought of Ignacio Ellacuría, inherited from his great friend and teacher, the Basque philosopher Xabier Zubiri, is committed to offering a method to the Latin American theological system and does so taking into account the formal structure of intelligence and its function, which is none other than to apprehend reality and to confront it from the triple dimension: taking charge of reality; assume the reality and to take responsibility of the reality. This proposal can be read in: Ellacuría, I., “Towards a foundation of the Latin American theological method”. *Theological Writings*, vol. I. p. 187-218. UCA (2000). Subsequently, the theologian Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría’s companion, introduces a fourth dimension, allowing himself to be carried away by the reality that can be consulted in: Sobrino, J. “*Theology and the Principle of Liberation*”, *Latin American Journal of Theology*, 12, p. 115-140, 1995..

knowledge, understanding what happens and occurs in that reality, approaching the lives of people who migrate in conditions of vulnerability, those whose rights are not recognized, those who disappear or die on migratory journeys; but also, **it recognizes the reality** of migrations insofar as it assumes an ethical commitment and takes responsibility for the same reality, so then, the theology of human mobility does not look the other way, on the contrary, it assumes that responsibility by putting all its knowledge and action at the service of those who suffer the most; this exercise will allow us to take a third step, theology **is concerned with the reality** of migration, that is, it takes a firm and decisive step towards the transformation of that concrete reality, and it does so in the image of Jesus, aware that following Christ implies closeness and movement<sup>7</sup>, closeness to him and to the victims and movement to leave the comfort zones that sometimes prevent us from assuming the historical commitments that correspond.

Finally, the theology of human mobility **allows itself to be burdened by reality**, that is, it recognizes that the theological place that is so proper to it is also a theological place in which to encounter God, contemplate him and be filled with his Grace.

Understood in this way, the theology of human mobility cannot exist and ignore reality. A reality that screams loudly, with pain and with its own voice. There are approximately 281 million international migrants in the world, according to the latest data provided by the International Organization for Migration<sup>8</sup> (IOM), of which 135 million are women; 146 are men and 28 are children. On the other hand, the data collected indicate that approx. 117 million people have been forced to leave their homes and about 43 million are refugees. In addition, the alarms are set off, when the data of missing and/or dead migrants on migratory routes are known. According to The Missing Migrants Project<sup>9</sup>, since 2014 67,951 people have died in journeys and border crossings

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<sup>7</sup> It is recommended to deepen this topic through the reading of the text *Following Jesus* (2005) by the late theologian José María Castillo.

<sup>8</sup> The World Migration Report 2024 can be found at the following link: <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>

<sup>9</sup> Data and reports by country and region are available at: <<https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>>.

around the world, although they indicate that these figures do not completely adjust to reality, this means that the number of people killed or missing is much higher than those registered.

The reality of the phenomenon of migration today represents a great challenge for the political, social and academic world, but also and even more so for theology and for those of us who call ourselves theologians. Migrations are undoubtedly *locus theologicus* and theological place, a place in which to know and contemplate, a place in which to transform. But what does it mean that contemporary migrations are a theological place? As C. Lussi rightly explains, migrations are a theological place because in that special place theological reflection is elaborated and it is at the same time an inspiring source of theological action (2008). Let's dive into the matter. The first step we will take to answer such a relevant question will be to return to the issue of "sign of the times", and for this, we will take as a reference the reflections made at the time by Ignacio Ellacuría. The Basque-Salvadoran Jesuit wrote in 1980 an article entitled "*Discerning the Sign of the Times*" published by the Vida Nueva Magazine in 1981. This was not the only article in which Ellacuría presented his ideas on the subject of the "sign of the times", nor has Ellacuría been the only author who has reflected on the subject. The issue of the sign of the times is already included in the Gospel and put into the mouth of Jesus "the signs of the times" (Mt 16:1-3), but this issue has also served as a theological, magisterial, catechetical, homiletical, etc. analysis over many years. The exhortation *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi* speaks of the phenomenon as "migrations as a sign of the times and the solicitude of the Church", but the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* also included the issue of migrations in a list of signs of a changing era. It is not the task of this article to delve exhaustively into this subject, it is enough to offer an approach to the legacy of Ellacuría and some theologians who followed in his wake.

Now, according to the Jesuit "*our time is full of signs through which the God who saves history is made present*" (Ellacuría, 1980, p. 57) the difficulty of the matter lies in knowing how to discern them, in being able to know what it is that God wants to tell us and how men and women should respond to those signs.

For Ellacuría, the signs of the times are visible, historical signs, and through them the historical God becomes present, because things happen in history and not outside of it. Ellacuría warns that among so many signs that are given, *“there is in each time one that is the main one, in the light of which all the others must be discerned to be interpreted. That sign is always the historically crucified people”* (Ellacuría, 1980, p. 58). Following Ellacuría, and in the light of what was said in GS, the theologian J. Sobrino points out that the “signs of the times” are those events and phenomena characteristic of a historical epoch that the Church must know in depth, but, in addition, and also following the indications of GS, Sobrino affirms that in these events and phenomena God makes himself present and reveals his plan for humanity. It will be in this theological category that reality and history acquire the status of “Place”, a place where God becomes visible, manifests himself in the midst of human shadows and ambiguities. In this sense, migrations are a privileged sign of our time, but it is worth asking ourselves: are we knowing how to discern this historical sign?

The Bible is presented to us, as X. Pikaza affirms, as a book of migrations, which tells us about the migratory movements of the nomadic people of God, it tells us through each character that we have a migrant heritage, God himself shows himself as the one who accompanies us in the tent, an itinerant tent, of mobility. At the same time, the New Testament also presents a clear roadmap on this matter: Jesus himself is equated with a foreigner, his family lived in exile on the eve of his birth, they were not well received, no one offered them hospitality. The Church understands herself as a pilgrim, and humanity is a pilgrim towards the Kingdom of God. We cannot go deeper into this topic, even so, we understand that human mobility is presented to us today as a sign of the times and at the same time as a theological place in which God reveals himself in a special and concrete way, reveals himself creatively and as Campese affirms, in a provocative way.

Those of us who do theology have a great responsibility, among them, the identification of those signs and places to which we owe, *“utopically and hopefully trying, together with the poor, to reverse history, to subvert it and take it in another direction”* (Ellacuría, 1989, p. 1078).



## **2 Hospitality in the field of migration: an appropriate and necessary path**

In this section, we will try to offer some generalities about a concept that has become very fashionable but is as old as humanity itself. At the same time, we will try to offer the reader keys that allow us to open a path that leads to an adequate deepening and understanding of hospitality and how it is a cohesive element in the complex phenomenon of migration. To achieve this task, the biblical world will be used and philosophical indications will be offered in a general way that will allow us to better identify the essential elements of hospitality.

## **3 Hospitality as a caress from God**

The last few decades have been marked by the countless movements of people within and beyond the borders of their countries of origin. The images that migrations leave us can be seen in every corner of the world, the stories of migrants and refugees are no longer alien to us, although some of these stories are not told or heard and others are abusively distorted. The European continent in particular is seeing how migrations are making their way through the Mediterranean Sea, known as one of the great mass graves of recent times, thousands and thousands of deaths and disappearances occur in its waters; by land, hundreds of displacements take place on foot in Eastern Europe, thus portraying the cruelty of the borders, and the vulnerability of people who are exposed to mafias, lack of protection, uncertainty, violence, death. The bodies of migrants become victims of a failed system, of laws that do not provide adequate responses but that do criminalize them, these migrant bodies have tattooed on their skin the pain caused by having to flee home, the stigmatization of difference, rejection, hatred, death. The caress on those bodies has a name, hospitality.

It will be this social scenario in the concretization of migrations that will revive the debate – necessary – on hospitality. Today more than ever, it is necessary to rethink hospitality in practical terms,

but also as a horizon of thought that demands an adequate place in reality.

In that sense, the first thing is to try to clarify, what is hospitality? Hospitality, generally speaking, is welcoming the stranger. In ancient times, it was understood as a sign of civility for societies. Its practice was very common and was quite widespread among the people. In the cultural context of the Middle East, as Navarro (2021, p. 107-108) explains, hospitality was at the same time a need, an obligation and a value. It is understood that it was a necessity especially for the people who inhabited the desert, either because they were nomads or because they lived in towns and cities. It was an obligation regulated through laws between the host and the guest. It was a virtue of a moral and religious nature lived naturally and considered as a manifestation of God.

Hospitality, as Hobbs (2001) indicates, was a means of protecting the home and the immediate moral community. Also, as Malina (1986) argues, hospitality can be understood as the process by which the status of the outsider changes from foreigner to guest.

On the other hand, it is important to indicate that hospitality, given its characteristics, generally refers to the house, to the home, that will be its privileged space, in such a way that, as Rivas (2008) indicates, hospitality allows a bond of solidarity to be generated between the host and the guest, to the point that the person welcomed becomes “family”.

Thanks to ancient texts that also include biblical texts, Arterbury (2005, p. 132) defines hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean world as that social convention that was used when a person decided to help a traveler who was far from the country/region of origin and provided this person with food and protection.

For the Christian tradition, hospitality has an immeasurable value, it has been practiced without any difficulty and has been considered a manifestation of the presence and love of God in the midst of the community.

Already in the Old Testament we have a diversity of stories that are an example of how the people lived and practiced hospitality. Abraham is one of the most relevant representatives of this practice

in the ancient biblical world. It is enough to recall the story of Mamre, in which three men (angels) visit the house of Abraham and Sarah and they respond by offering hospitality to the travelers, let us remember that about this event the letter to the Hebrews will say: "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels" (Heb 13:1).

Hospitality was a necessity, remember that in those times there were no hotels in the desert, and the journey could be dangerous because travelers were exposed to possible attacks by thieves or hostile tribes.

Now, biblical studies indicate that for the Old Testament there are various terms to designate the stranger-foreigner, we refer for example to Hebrew terms such as: *ger-gerim*, *nokrí*, *ben nekar*, *zar*, *toshab.*, each of these terms has a particular meaning. We cannot go into each of them, but we will present some common ones, following the proposal of Varo Pineda (2020, p. 25-45). As this author indicates, the Code of the Covenant probably designates the *gerim* (root *ger*) as a person of Israelite or Judaetian origin who was uprooted from his/her home and in a situation of grave need. To this day, there is debate about the specific status of *ger-gerim*, but it is possible that he had better appreciation compared to a *nokrí*. As for the term *nokrí*, mentioned only once in the Code of the Covenant (Ex 21:8), it is possible that the *nokrí* was viewed with suspicion. They were probably self-sufficient people, with economic status, perhaps specialized workers who arrived in Judah thanks to the works undertaken by Hezekiah (Varó Pineda 2020, p. 28-29), but who remained on the margins of the religious and cultural community of Judah. Thus, a *ger* is welcomed, hosted, considered a brother, to such an extent that the Deuteronomic laws recognize in the *gerim* the same rights as poor Israelites; on the contrary, a *nokrí* can be denied and will be subjected to evaluation so that the community can examine whether or not he/she is a candidate for hospitality insofar as he/she may represent a threat. *Nokrí* coexists in Israel, but it is not considered fully integrated.

In any case, with the passage of time and thanks to the evolution of the people themselves, ideas about the foreigner are transformed, the contribution of the image of Abraham is significant

and relevant, while at the same time it takes on more meaning as “father of many peoples”. The later texts give an account of this slow process and show how the integration of foreigners into the society of Judah was conceived and made possible, which kept alive the teaching “You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt.” (Ex 22:21).

It can be said that hospitality was a highly valued social practice in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament. Hospitality was given a double perspective, according to Rivas (2008, p. 376), the first as the duty to welcome the stranger (ethical dimension) and the second, considered as the presence of God in the needy, as well as the blessing-reward of the person who welcomes (theological dimension). These two perspectives were completely linked. Thus, the biblical accounts, as Ares (2020) indicates, are evidence that the migratory reality is a common reality and also represents a key element in the history of salvation.

Representative figures such as Abraham are key to this understanding, but other characters are also highly significant, such as the case of Moses who was welcomed by Reuel (Ex 2:15-22), also Jezebel’s hospitable attitude towards false prophets (1 Kings 18:19), as well as the constant message that reminded Israel of its vocation as a wandering and pilgrim people: “My father was a refugee Aramean” (Dt 26:5).

In the New Testament, hospitality is also a central element. Ares (2020, p. 21-23) reflects especially on the representative figure of Jesus as a key to understanding hospitality. The account of the birth of Jesus (Lk 2:1-20) is a sample of various images related to migration, for example: the escape, the journey, the search for lodging, the rejection, the weathering of the manger, the hostility of the inhabitants of that place, the arrival of some humble shepherds who offer hospitality to the family of Nazareth. All these keys lead us to affirm that God is incarnate in a very concrete reality.

Jesus was able to put hospitality at the center of his mission, to such an extent that, according to the account of Mt 25:31-46, he is equated with a stranger (migrant): “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Jesus was able to seat many at the table, even those

who were not in good standing. He practiced hospitality in different ways: feeding a large crowd (Mt 15:32-38); becoming a guest in the house of Martha and Mary (Lk 18:38-42); inviting himself to the house of a sinner, Zacchaeus, making himself the recipient of hospitality (Lk 19:5-10). The story of Emmaus (Lk 24:29-32) is a clear example of hospitality, the disciples invite him to stay and share the table, and it will be precisely in the act of breaking bread (in the meal, in the sharing) where their eyes are opened, and they recognize the master.

Later, in the formation of Christian communities, hospitality will play a fundamental role. Most New Testament letters are a clear invitation to hospitable practice (1 Peter 4:9; Acts 13:3; Rom 12:13; 2 Jn; 3Jn)

In short, various biblical accounts of hospitality are a clear manifestation of God's caress to the most vulnerable through the practice of hospitality.

#### **4 Brief philosophical generalities of hospitality: the thought of E. Lévinas and J. Derrida**

The epistemic framework on the concept of "hospitality" has been built thanks to the contribution of different thinkers: philosophers, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, artists, etc. But perhaps, among them, two stand out in a particular way, we refer to the Lithuanian philosopher Lévinas and his disciple and friend the Algerian French philosopher Derrida. We warn the reader that we will not be able to dive into the depths of his proposals, but we will offer relevant keys that help to understand a little more the essence and points of view of hospitality.

Emmanuel Lévinas exposes in his works the failure of Western philosophy because it is centered on the "self", thus displacing reflection and the relationship with "the other". Lévinas denounces that philosophy has fallen into an egology that makes itself as the foundation of the ultimate, this means that if the *being* is the one who has the first and last word, there is no possibility for the existence of the *other* (Gómez, 2024, p. 67). This position that enhances

the relevance of the self can lead to unfairness, is unethical and leads to the reducibility of the other, that is, death itself. In short, Lévinas criticizes that Western philosophy has been aiming at the oblivion of the notion of the “other”, hence the strong criticisms of Heidegger’s philosophy.

In this sense, the philosophical work of the Lithuanian thinker focuses its attention on the “other” and on the consideration of ethics as the first philosophy, in which the “other” comes before the “I”. Ethics as the first philosophy is presented as an alternative to the thought that has permeated all philosophy, as it is centered on the “I”, so then, this ethics must be understood as “a relationship of infinite responsibility towards others” (Fleisner, 2010, p. 79). Along these lines, Lévinas (2002) had already expressed in *Totality and Infinity* that the condition of possibility of ethics is the *face* of the other, and the relationship with that “other” questions me, empties me of myself and does not stop emptying me, always discovering new resources (Fleisner, 2010, p. 80). In short, the *face* is the so-called ethics that challenges me. This means that Levinasian ethics should be understood as the relationship of infinite responsibility towards others (Critchley, 2005, p. 12).

It is from these brief considerations that the basis of what Lévinas means by “welcome” (hospitality) will be understood. According to the Lithuanian philosopher, in order for hospitality to be given in a real and truthful way, the subject must go out of himself, go out to meet the other by recognizing his real presence. The encounter is then the absolute responsibility for the otherness, and will be the foundation, the cornerstone of the welcome (hospitality). At the same time, it is necessary to understand that the “face” is nakedness, it is the nakedness “of the poor, of the widow, of the stranger” (Lévinas, 2002, p. 9). The face is vulnerable, it demands justice from me, it speaks to me, but I must not thematize it, encapsulate it, imprison it, because when the face is used, it is thematized, hospitality is broken. The *other* – *the face* – is the evidence of an asymmetrical relationship, hence the other counts more than the self, and it will be this asymmetry that grants access to holiness. Lévinas (2002, p. 211) states that “the expression that

the face introduces into the world does not challenge the weakness of my powers, but my power of power”.

Lévinas’ thought is not only novel but also absolutely necessary in the so-called “era of migrations”. It is Lévinas’ ability to place otherness at the forefront of his philosophical project that must illuminate reflection today and encourage the necessary debate on hospitality and migration, putting people at the center and not placing them on the margins or using them as scapegoats to justify “evils” that find their root elsewhere than in that of human mobility. The welcome (hospitality) based on Levinasian thought is based on the encounter with the other, the non-thematization of the face, and demands responsibility before the other, an unavoidable responsibility. Hospitality is presented as an always yes to the other.

However, this reflection would be incomplete if Derrida’s contributions on hospitality were not presented, also in a general way. Jacques Derrida, an Algerian French philosopher, is one of the greatest representatives of philosophical reflection on the concept of hospitality, perhaps much more so than his friend and teacher Lévinas. Derrida is also one of the most influential thinkers in contemporary times and in the French philosophical field of the second half of the twentieth century. With Derrida’s death, the circle of French thinkers who led a production in philosophical thought that sought to overcome the traditional interpretative methodologies of hermeneutics was closed (Gómez, 2024, p. 75).

Derrida thinks of the issue of hospitality as a mode of relationship that necessarily puts different cultures in contact (Benítez & Fusco, 2021, p. 21), the culture of the guest and that of the host, that is, it puts the foreign in relation to the known, the already assimilated. In this sense, we speak again of the relationship with the other.

The Algerian philosopher argues that hospitality rests on an aporia: that of unconditional hospitality, also called the “Law of Hospitality” and conditional hospitality, also called “laws of hospitality”. One of the most significant contributions of this thinker has to do with affirming that in every human being there is an unconditional duty of hospitality, hence all hospitality policy must be based on this ethical conviction.

It must be said that unconditional hospitality is, according to Derrida, the only acceptable ethical position, indicating that any conditionality becomes a certain violence. Let's take a closer look at what this issue is all about. Unconditional hospitality, as the word indicates, is unlimited, it is completely given, it obliges us to welcome regardless of the name and surname, the language, the place of origin, or the situation. This unconditional law is deeply related to what Derrida defines as "the visitation", that is, the surprise of the arrival, the unannounced visit. On the other hand, conditional hospitality, as the word indicates, has to do with those norms that are used for welcome, that is, the establishment of laws, rights, duties and obligations that can be of a legal, political or ethical nature. This conditionality is deeply related to what Derrida defines as "the invitation", that is, the recipient is already prepared, has launched the invitation proposal, there is no surprise from the unexpected visitor, from the event. In the exercise of conditional law there is a perversion of unconditional hospitality, but that perversion is absolutely necessary to guarantee hospitality. In Derrida's words:

[...] The unconditional law of hospitality needs laws, it requires them. This requirement is constitutive. The law would not be effectively unconditional if it did not have to become effective, concrete, determined, how it needs to be. It would run the risk of being abstract, utopian, illusory [...] To be what it is, the law thus needs the laws that deny it, or in any case threaten it [...] Conversely, conditional laws would cease to be laws of hospitality if they were not guided, inspired, aspired to, even required, by the law of unconditional hospitality [...] these two regimes of law, are therefore at once contradictory, antinomian and inseparable. They imply and exclude each other (2000, p. 83).

Thus, in order for unconditional hospitality to be real, feasible and verifiable in time and space, it must assume that aporia, that pervertibility. Only by assuming this contradiction will hospitality be able to happen in reality and generate spaces for transformation,



of course, always illuminated by the premises of unconditional hospitality that are an ethical beacon for hospitality laws.

Derrida's thought is absolutely necessary to reflect on and influence the reality of migration. Hospitality that refers to the obligatory understanding of what the house, the home, the other/stranger and the community mean must occupy a privileged place not only in theology but in other knowledge and disciplines. The tensions presented by the experience of hospitality must lead us to welcome the stranger as he or she is, and not to fall into the temptation of "taking over" the other. Hospitality should not be limited to creating groups that include others, on the contrary, hospitality focuses its strength on the creation of common spaces where each person reaffirms their identity, within the framework of the community, and does not renounce differences, but rather embraces them, values them, assumes them, and respects them. Hospitality does not suffocate, but rather shows itself as that space where you can breathe fresh air, always renewed. Anything that points to the thematization of the other is shown as an act of violence and destroys the very essence of hospitality.

In short, Lévinas's thought is the invitation to openness to the other and this willingness to open up is already an exercise in acceptance. Derrida puts on the table ideas that delve into the depths of hospitality and takes us through the possible transgressions of it. He explains that hospitality is always unconditional, open, perfect, and for that very reason, it is impossible. Thus, for unconditionality to be real, it needs conditional hospitality, which is presented in the form of norms, duties, rights that are conditioned, but that must always be inspired and guided by the Law of Hospitality.

In the next section, we will address the conditionality of hospitality illuminated by unconditionality based on a model that balances tension and shows that hospitality is a real and effective ethical response to the challenge of migration.

## 5 Hospitality: an ethical concretion in the face of the challenge of migration

We assume, as Derrida points out and as the biblical tradition confirms, that hospitality is an ethical concretion and is also an effective response to the challenge posed by contemporary migrations.

In this section, the experience of the community reception model launched several years ago in the Society of Jesus in Spain, through the Jesuit Migrant Service<sup>10</sup> (SJM for its Spanish name) and which promotes the culture of solidarity and inclusion of migrants and refugees through the activation of citizen networks, will be presented as a good practice. This specific model of reception, which has been taken as a reference in other ecclesial entities in Spain, has also been the subject of research in many doctoral theses<sup>11</sup> and has different publications<sup>12</sup> that account for the innovative capacity of the model and its impact on the reality of the people who participate in it.

Along the lines of this article, an attempt has been made to present, in a global way, the current state of the phenomenon of migrations, indicating that this reality obliges theology to an intellectual exercise of liberation in the field of migrations and to a praxis of liberation through concrete tasks that attend to the reality that corresponds to it. In this way, theology will not be “dispatch” theology but incarnate theology. On the other hand, some hermeneutical keys have been offered to understand the issue of hospitality from the biblical tradition. Finally, and in order not to overlook the importance of other disciplines involved in this

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<sup>10</sup> More information about the Jesuit Migrant Service’s hospitality program is recommended at: <<https://sjme.org/hospitalidad/>>.

<sup>11</sup> On this subject, the doctoral thesis entitled *The historical theology of Ignacio Ellacuría as a key to interpretation of the idea of hospitality in the SJM has recently been defended at the University of Comillas in Madrid* and can be accessed in the repository of the University through this link: <<https://repositorio.comillas.edu/xmlui/handle/11531/88500>>.

<sup>12</sup> Recently, the SJM, in collaboration with the University of Deusto, has published the report *Lives accompanying lives*, which details the model of community reception. Available at: <<https://sjme.org/2023/12/18/vidas-acompanando-vidas-un-informe-de-deusto-y-sjm-sobre-el-modelo-de-acogida-comunitaria-de-la-red-de-hospitalidad/>>.

matter, the reader has been presented with the vision of hospitality from the philosophical thought of Lévinas and Derrida, as great representatives of the epistemic development of this concept.

Starting from these questions and following the route traced, we conclude by presenting a model of hospitality that includes both the biblical-theological and philosophical premises on hospitality, allowing it not to remain in the realm of the abstract, but to touch the ground through real concreteness for people.

## **6 Caressing vulnerability: the community reception model**

It has been seen in previous sections that hospitality is welcoming the stranger/foreigner. The starting point for addressing the issue of foreignness is the figure of the “other” and its influence on what we understand as “identity”; “us”, “nation”, etc. Immigration has been a matter of study in different disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, literature, anthropology, sociology, of course theology, among others. We cannot delve into this interesting topic, however; we agree with the statement that, in our case, God himself is called a foreigner (Mt 23-25) and it is that foreign God who also offers hospitality.

The concept of foreignness, given its close relationship with “strangeness”, broadens the range of possibilities, that is, perhaps we are not only foreigners because we come from a different country, but also because we think differently, have another belief, other customs, another lifestyle. Foreignness accompanies daily life, not only that of migrants, but also our own. It will be the recognition of one’s own strangeness that will allow us to connect with the vulnerability of foreignness and open us to the possibility of a hospitality that is a caress and an always open door.

Hospitality, as has been indicated, was practiced especially with travelers and pilgrims (foreigners/strangers) who, being far from their land, sought shelter after facing inhospitable and dangerous roads. That need for welcome and shelter, to experience been outside the land, in exile, exclusion or marginality, evoke

our own fragility, our own vulnerability, remember that “you were foreigners in the land of Egypt”. Ares (2020) reflects extensively on this theme and indicates that “radical hospitality reminds us that God is welcoming, recalling the memory of our own vulnerability as pilgrim people who are based on key experiences of exile” (p. 28) Hospitality is presented, as a caress in the face of vulnerability and human fragility from where God becomes present and companion on the journey.

Vulnerability is a shared issue because humanity is vulnerability. However, and recognizing this ontological disposition, we are perplexed by a social scenario that violates rights, especially the rights of the weakest, among whom we count hundreds, thousands, millions of migrants and refugees who see how their rights are trampled on. Faced with this reality, hospitality has a word that needs to be reinforced with effective policies and not with patches that evade the burning issues of human mobility.

As has already been said, for several years, the Jesuit Migrant Service has been working on a model of community reception that welcomes the vulnerability of people, defends their rights and accompanies them to begin a path of autonomy and integration in the host societies.

This model can be replicated in any entity/institution willing to offer human and creative possibilities to migrants and refugees and is presented as an alternative to a reception system that is lacking and that fails to provide adequate responses to people’s needs. In this sense, the pillars that make up this hospitality model are:

- **People-centered approach**

People come first and are at the center of the model. It focuses attention on those people in vulnerable situations. The model allows us to weave networks of support and containment to generate links, horizontal neighborhood relationships, thus creating personal and family experiences of coexistence.

- **Comprehensive approach to migration and asylum**  
Comprehensive look at the reality of migration and refuge. Comprehensiveness makes it possible to reduce people's risks of vulnerability.
- **Flexibility to adjust and adapt the itineraries of hospitality recipients**  
The aim is to offer a response that is not robotized but agile and that adapts to the reality of people and their migratory situations (asylum, international protection, irregular administrative situation, etc.).
- **Participation and consensus**  
Participation involves people and institutions involved in hospitality processes. It is a community relationship.
- **Opt for small, family-friendly physical spaces**  
This pillar is essential to guarantee more family experiences within the resources allocated for hosting. Large centers can be used for situations that do not require long processes and are exceptional. Small physical spaces (flat, house, etc.) allow for adequate accompaniment and individualized interventions.
- **The community as a support for integration**  
It is about activating citizen networks, the local community so that they participate in the integration processes. This pillar is essential to guarantee the success of hospitality.

The commitment to an alternative and innovative model of hospitality that activates and involves the community, balances the tensions of hospitality (remember Derrida) because it is inspired by an unconditional Law that must resort to certain regulations and protocols that, although they pervert it, make it real and visible. The conditionality that runs through the model is appropriate and necessary, it allows hospitality to touch the ground, to generate an impact on the people involved in the process (host and foreigner) and to promote integration into the host society.

It is a model inspired by the Gospel and rooted in Ignatian spirituality, tracing a clear route that leads to the building of the Kingdom and to the option for the poorest and most discarded of our times.

This model shows that hospitality can be lived on a daily basis, offering lasting solutions to people and responding to the challenges of human mobility.

## **As conclusion**

It is not trivial that an article dedicated to the issue of migration as a theological place, assumes within its reflection the very current and complex issue of hospitality that with its points of view and meanings is presented in the academic and social debate as a relevant and necessary issue. Thus, in the realm of contextual theologies (although we assume that all theology is contextual) addressing hospitality is not only necessary but urgent. Necessary because biblical history, the history of humanity, the history of the Church, are woven with and from hospitality, it is essential to the person. It is urgent because theology cannot ignore the signs of the times, it must discern them, nor must the Church look the other way while the socio-political scene bursts forth with a negative message about migrants and refugees and tends more and more towards an individualistic culture that rejects the “other” without any filter.

The fact that migrations are a sign of the times, and a “theological place” opens a horizon of understanding of the presence of the historical God and of this phenomenon that has coexisted with humanity since its beginnings, but which today appears paradoxical and disturbing to us. Thus, we need a serene, multidisciplinary and intelligent look at the matter, but also a look from tenderness, from faith and spirituality on a reality that speaks of people and stories. We need a look from and with migrants and refugees, a look that alleviates pain and suffering, a look that offers alternatives and light in the midst of so much darkness.

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# 13



## KENOTIC PASTORAL WORK WITH HOMELESS MIGRANTS

*André Luiz Bordinon-Meira*

### Introduction

The proposed reflection is set in this challenging time for human society and the pontificate of Pope Francis with his proposal of the Church “going forth”. It seeks to understand the Samaritan proposal of the Church “going forth”, ready to bend down, look, listen and heal the wounded along the way. The road is on the streets of the cities, moving towards the migration of homeless people as vulnerable to political, economic, social and religious systems.

The parts of this reflection propose a paradigm with migrants for the missionary and kenotic pastoral work of the Church “going forth”. It is necessary to understand the migratory dramas that are also present on the streets of our society, as many homeless people migrate from city to city. These processes will have to be built and realized by involving our communities with this migratory situation on the streets, illuminating a decidedly missionary pastoral approach. The concern will not be to obsess over procedures, but rather to apply Samaritan care to the wounded and to guarantee human dignity.

In this way, to collaborate in the processes of kenotic pastoral care and mission is to “go forth” as a Samaritan, as Pope Francis witnesses and invites us to do. It means walking, stripping down and lowering oneself, enabling the Church to meet the migrants on the streets, who have fallen before the signs of the times. Therefore, walking together in the light of the Gospel, the Spirit and the community should be the credible future of the Church, ready to welcome, protect, promote and integrate street migrants.

## **1 The drama of homeless migrants: welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating**

Global society faces the drama of growing human mobility, emerging as a sign of the times (Francis, 2013). This situation includes various economic, political and cultural issues, challenging the conditions of human life in terms of dignity and survival. Based on this realization, it is necessary to look at and denounce the fragility of migration on the streets of large, medium-sized and now small towns. The phenomenon of migration is observed between the tension of seeking better living conditions and the defeat of not achieving them. The streets today are home to a growing population, migrating from pavement to pavement. There are many reasons for this migration, but there is a unique sign in indifference, welcome, solidarity and coexistence with these street migrants.

The migratory drama can be seen on the streets, as the São Paulo city census shows:

Among those born in Brazil, 55% are from the state of São Paulo, with 34.0% from the city of São Paulo and the other 21% from various cities in the state. This was followed by 9.5 per cent from the state of Bahia, 6.3 per cent from the state of Minas Gerais and 5.1 per cent from the state of Pernambuco. Those from the northeastern states account for 25.1% of Brazilians not born in São Paulo (SMADS, p. 28, 2019).

And the realization of emigrants:

When we investigate the country of origin of foreigners in the composition of the homeless population in São Paulo, we find that more than a third of foreigners, 38.8 per cent, come from a single country, Venezuela. This presence may be related to the economic and political instability experienced by that country in recent years. The second country with the highest percentage of people living on the streets in São Paulo is South Africa, with 9%, and in third place are Angola, Argentina and Portugal with 6.0% each. The sum of foreigners from Latin American countries is 56.8 per cent, and those from Africa 25 per cent. The presence of homeless people in the city from developed countries such as Portugal (6%), Australia (1.5%), the United States (1.5%), Italy (1.5%) and Japan (1.5%) is noteworthy. These people entered the country mainly through the states of Roraima (34.3%), which borders Venezuela, and São Paulo (29.9%), which has the country's largest international airport (SMADS, p. 27, 2019).

Despite the problems encountered by the homeless in terms of housing, food, addictions, sexual exploitation, violence, prostitution, work and health conditions, indifference, rejection and social hygiene are symptoms of society's attitude towards them. The search for integral development for homeless people becomes the hope for a better future in their migratory drama, looking for food and survival. It's itinerancy, but at the same time safety from threats and hope for better days. The need for inclusive public policies for these street migrants is the first step towards offering them the possibility of dignified and humane conditions.

The proposal will be to look at the homeless as a member of society, which unfortunately discards them. This look requires a kenotic attitude of lowering oneself to the reality of being discarded. The migrants on the pavements are not pieces of the city's chessboard, but people who have had to look for another way of life, regardless of the toxicological reason or misery. However, they share the same migratory flow with the hope of overcoming the negative effects caused by their marginalization. The reality on the streets needs to be dealt with in a new way, seeking justice with compassion, solidarity and social inclusion. Working together

to welcome, protect, promote and integrate the human person, especially marginalized migrants who need to be harmonized by the various social sectors. And in this way, seek to safeguard them from being victims to being protagonists.

It is important to emphasize collaboration with the protagonists of the streets, making it possible to create conditions of respect and humanization. Overcoming prejudices, pre-ideas and pre-understandings of street migration lies in the fear of criminality associated with the vices caused by marginalization. However, looking at human beings on the margins of the street means understanding them not as angels or demons, but as people with virtues and defects. Our social responsibility is to unmask stereotypes and misinformation, signifying prophecy against the throwaway culture (FT 19). A culture of encounter with homeless people is capable of building a more inclusive, just and fraternal world, encouraging a change in the hygienic behavior that has taken hold.

Let's think about how the family of Nazareth experienced being left on the streets, subject to rejection (Lk 2:7) and threats to find another place to live (Matt 2:13-14). A more inclusive and fraternal world will come about with a Christian community that is more open to dialogue (FT 12) about migratory dramas, such as those on the streets of the cosmopolitan city of São Paulo. Open dialogue will mean welcoming, offering street people the safe possibility of a better life (FT 198). Protecting them with broad defenses of their human rights will help them to participate in this open dialogue. Promoting them will help society understand the conditions necessary for urgent change. And integrating them will provide the opportunity for new proposals to face the challenge aggravated by the inhuman conditions created on the streets.

Looking at the victims of street migration invites us not to turn away from their suffering faces. The Church without frontiers sets out to "go forth", spreading the culture of welcome and solidarity, because no one should be considered disposable (Francis, 2014). The Church "going forth" is invited to exercise her maternity accompanied by patience, in solidarity with the incarnate praxis

of mercy (MV 3). Migratory movements seek more humane living conditions, while at the same time causing persecution or misery for the people involved. And in the case of the street population, suspicions and prejudices are heightened by their hostility. Evangelization should encourage the Church to take on new commitments of solidarity and insertion in places that threaten human life.

God's merciful love lies in his choice to make everyone part of his family, without exception. The parables of mercy in Lk 15 encourage us to be sensitive to the needs of the most wounded, tired and sick sheep. The same proposal in Lk 19:25-36 demonstrates the kenotic and merciful attitude of leaning in, the more the situation worsens. In our time of *rapidification* (LS 18), migratory flows are advancing in all directions. Homeless people are our brothers and sisters who are looking for better existential and real conditions. And in this search, they end up forced to live on the streets, while at the same time becoming obstacles for society. They therefore challenge institutions, individuals, NGOs, churches and parishes on how to help them and how to deal with these growing migrations around them. However, shouldn't the Church act inspired by the examples and words of Jesus? (Francis, 2015). The first step will be to understand and learn the merciful capacity of the Master, for a conversion that overcomes prejudice.

Hospitality and friendship with our homeless brothers and sisters will contribute to their well-being and the progress of all, making them members of society. Christian welcome is the enthusiastic imperative that brings the most vulnerable closer together. How can you not get involved with the dramas of marginalization present on the streets, such as drug use, the lack of dignity in work, prostitution, delinquency and the fear of violence? These questions emerge from those who approach those who are forced to migrate from city to city in search of better conditions to survive with their daily hardships. This phenomenon is a sign of the times with its dignified welcome of these people, encouraging the Church to practice Samaritanism.

The theological question is how to deal with this issue that is present in the signs of the times in the light of the Holy Spirit. Every homeless person is an opportunity to encounter Christ, as one who is welcomed or rejected in the basic needs of human life (Mt 25). We are called to give a common response, articulating the verbs founded on the doctrine of the Church and used by Pope Francis: welcome, protect, promote and integrate (Francis, 2016). The scenario of the streets includes malocas, pontoons, aporophobic architecture, hunger, the violence of scavenging with GMs<sup>1</sup>, contempt, prejudices of marginalization and rejection, but welcoming means offering them the chance to be seen as human beings. It is necessary to think about and provide adequate and decent accommodation. The condition of being able to use the basic services of human dignity and health

Protecting street people means extending their rights, which are the same as those of every human being, in other words, human rights. Human dignity is independent of which pavement a person lives on because urban cleaners often sweep them away with their documents and belongings. That's why protecting them starts with the right information and public services to safeguard their livelihoods, assistance and social reintegration. Promoting means welcoming migrants from the streets with conditions that allow them to work and socialize without discriminating or labelling them. Integrating is the hope that every homeless person has with the possibility of making the process of a new life and path.

Homeless people are among the poorest, most disadvantaged and vulnerable, and are used by societies with a utilitarian, media-driven mentality that generates the globalization of indifference (LS 108). In this scenario, we have displaced migrants, creating a space for the throwaway culture. The problem lies in the way of thinking and acting, which makes society intolerant, closed-minded and prejudiced. The Church "going forth" carries out kenotic pastoral work because it "knows how to take the initiative without fear, to go out to meet those who are far away and to reach the crossroads to invite the excluded" (EG 24). Include everyone! It's about putting the least first and not giving in to the logic of the world, justified

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<sup>1</sup> Municipal Guard.

by 'me first' and then discarding the least. Creating conditions and contributing to societies that are fairer, more inclusive, more fraternal and more open, according to the Gospel. It is the Church's mission to stoop to place itself at the service of all in the real and existential peripheries, in order to realize integral human development.

People living on the streets give us the opportunity to meet the Lord "with torn clothes, dirty feet, disfigured face and a beaten body" (Francis, 2019). This is the pastoral challenge with both smaller towns and metropolitan areas, realized in a kenotic way. The Word who became flesh, became *kenosis* and lowered himself in the form of all human beings, especially those most displaced in society. In these steps of the Lord's *kenosis*, the Church is called to make the journey of understanding the stripping down, emptying oneself, humbling oneself and lowering oneself, because the Triune God himself made this journey with his Son (Phil 2).

We need to get closer to the realities of the streets with their pain and suffering, making it possible to let go of the fears that keep the Church away from others. Drawing close to your neighbor means being willing to take the same risks as the suffering. The greatest example of this service was left by Jesus, when he washed his disciples' feet by taking off his cloak, kneeling and with his hands in service (Jn 13:1-15). Stooping down to the same level as the discarded people on the street makes it possible to listen to them, to reconcile and to offer humanizing mercy.

Migrants live in both real and existential peripheries, but homeless people live in the third periphery, that of indifference. This periphery is made present by retreating, looking away and blaming them for their marginalization. That's why it's necessary to endeavor to break down these social walls. The first step will be to build a "we" in the face of this challenge, collaborating with more inclusive churches and societies. Moving towards this reality, a culture of inclusion is built, overcoming the fear of caring for those who are uncared for and displaced in their existence. The street is the theological place for kenotic pastoral work, and it is a missionary frontier, without proselytizing, but one of evangelical welcome.

The future of the Church “going forth” lies in enabling a more inclusive world, making possible a future with the call for all people to be able to walk together. Attention will be paid to ensuring that no one is excluded, favoring the bridges necessary for a culture of encounter. This means that the situations of migration in our streets are opportunities to overcome fear, making room for a culture of encounter that is transformative. It becomes the privileged place of encounter that humanizes and thus transforms the human person seen and encountered. It’s the miracle performed by us as a healthy witness to future generations (LS 13).

Building humanity and future cities lies in plural construction, because everyone is involved and co-responsible. The certainty that the street is not a choice of housing or traffic, but a consequence of each person’s history. This will not be a reason for discouragement, on the contrary, personal and pastoral conversion to a commitment to a just future. This justice is a possibility for changing the inequalities and discrimination of the present world, as Pope Francis says: “the inclusion of the most vulnerable people is a necessary condition for achieving full citizenship” (Francis, 2022).

A future built with the participation of street migrants means enabling them to play a leading role in this process, including them. Guaranteeing their free choice to help or stay on the streets and their destination allows us to help them accompany and manage the best possible path. Emphasizing that God walks with us allows the Church to go out and be with those who are on the streets, migrating. Migration and mobility on the streets are distinct human and social processes, yet many are migrants and end up surviving on the streets.

Street migration has the characteristics of the suffering of God’s people in the exodus, fleeing the oppressive situations, insecurities, discrimination and lack of prospects of their slavery. They also encounter many obstacles on the streets, such as disbelief, hunger, thirst, tiredness and illness. This experience is marked by despair and is the occasion for a pastoral approach to welcome, protect, promote and integrate. And in the Gospel of Matthew 25 we read how the Lord expects to meet us, committed to people’s hunger,



thirst, nakedness, pain and migration. That's why we need to learn to strip down and lower ourselves in order to do our pastoral work kenotically.

## **2 Get down in the city streets**

The New Testament presents Jesus to us as a migrant, rejected, hungry, thirsty and in need of clothing (Mt 25:35-43). Jesus is always there and teaches his disciples to be with the poor, making them part of his Kingdom (Lk 14:13-24). The Torah itself teaches the good Israelite to help the poor and suffering, always giving them hope of overcoming poverty. The biblical legislator emphasizes the bond of faith and solidarity, making the liturgical celebration the opportunity for this action. The destitute were to be helped with agricultural offerings and sacrifices (Deut 12:12), so the community was blessed by this act of reparation. Biblical law should guarantee the rights and not exploit the poorest, seeking to equalize social differences.

Love God's Way is a work realized and written by the witness of Father Julio Lancellotti. His pastoral praxis is developed from the pedagogy of his Master, that of love. His witness is the exercise of kenotic pastoral care, because from the start of his day, nourished by the Eucharist, he goes out to feed those on the streets. Just as God made himself small by stripping himself away in order to come closer to us, Fr Julio's attitudes towards homeless people point us to the kenotic attitude needed today. These attitudes are learnt from the Gospel and from our brothers and sisters migrating through the streets. The divine *kenosis* was an attitude beyond the discourse on Christ, and it calls us to the same path of detachment and closeness out of love (Balthasar, 1993, p. 20).

Acting kenotically is a challenge, because we don't know what the consequences will be. Just as God was unprotected in the incarnation of his Son, love also leaves us unprotected. The practice of love requires detachment and emptying oneself of conflict, hatred, insults and curses. Divine *kenosis* reached its peak on the cross as a scandalous consequence of God's choice and love. Jesus

suffered the misunderstandings of practicing his commandment of love, which is why his followers who are convinced of his proposal will have to renounce themselves (Lk 9:23).

The persistence of this love will lead to mercy, turning our hearts towards the poor. This attitude is kenotic, because it leads us to strip ourselves bare in order to look at others and not ourselves. The image of the field hospital allows us to understand the need for openness, to stoop down to those wounded by the hostility of street migration. God's love urges us to this openness, to go out and make the streets a field hospital, because as Pope Francis says: "God is a God who goes out: he goes out to seek, to search for each one of us. Every day, he seeks us, he is seeking us. As he did and says in the parable of the lost sheep: he seeks. It's always like this" (Lancellotti, 2021, p. 29). In the same way that God is looking for us because we can't go to him, we are impelled to go to our brothers and sisters in street situations.

By getting down on the streets of the cities, street ministry is making possible the transformation of thought that we need to make. The need for conversion of mind, heart and praxis in order to transform the relationships and lives of these people who live wandering from protection to protection on the streets. Love in this pastoral practice transforms when instead of criticism, *it shows mercy*, condemnation and rejection. Religious and civil laws cannot transform people, and love is needed.

The great transformation through kenotic gestures lies in loving others, making the conditions of life solidary and humane for everyone without distinction. It means living an alternative life in the midst of political, religious and social contradictions. Building the alternative possibility of life requires stripping down to rejoice, console, defend and fulfil the lives of those who are discarded and forced to live on the streets. The difficulty of understanding God's decision to strip himself, empty himself and lower himself to the little ones and to be neighborly with love prevents us from going towards the discarded. The image of an all-powerful God who readily does our bidding still hinders our action towards the hungry and defenseless. That's why we judge and appease our ego.

The divine movement is one of descent, not ascent. He is always ready to lower himself in order to be near and not far away. God's will to make the Son fragile, small and low is contrary to our will to be strong, big and above others. Our understanding of God's power is necessary to enable us to choose this path, and at the same time, to invite us to this choice. The marginalized and discarded show us the absence of God in society (Lancellotti, 2021, p. 50), prophetically affirming the denial of God through injustice and misery. God's kenotic choice is uncomfortable for the churches, and his presence on the streets goes against the grain of religious power (Lancellotti, 2021, p. 51).

God stooping down and acting in the streets questions success, proselytizing, advantages and privileges. The street thus becomes a theological and pastoral place, bringing conflict. However, it enables conversion and the necessary transformative changes. Therefore, instead of condemning, criticizing and rejecting street migrants, it is necessary to use mercy, because the law does not transform people. Transformation lies in stooping to love, because love is transformative. Transformative and demanding gestures of our ecclesial stooping towards street migrants express the conversion of coming out of oneself and entering into the pain of hunger, thirst, nakedness, contempt and rejection. In this way, the Lord's teaching is to bring people down and not up, in other words, to draw near and not turn away from human pain. It's the same movement as that of the Liberating God who came down to free his people from the hands of Egyptian suffering (Ex 3:8a).

In the face of religious faith and pastoral praxis, we are confronted with some kenotic questions: Is God strong or fragile? Is God big or small? Does God want religious praise or commitment to the suffering? Is God up there or down here with us? These questions are provocative if the Church fulfils its pastoral vocation in the light of the divine option by acting in history, or if it closes itself off in its religious maintenance, justifying itself and the reality of history. However, our God is emptying himself, while many expect the omnipotent God to determine and justify the inertia of humanizing.

Scripture tells us that marginalization is the divine absence of society, which has taken a path contrary to God's will. Prophetism echoed in society that the existence of the poor meant the denial of God. Thus, to take on the poor and marginalized with the God of the street would be to go against the grain of history (Lancellotti, 2021, p. 51). The religious God appeases and avoids conflict, but the God of the street questions, enquires and is annoyed that there are street migrants. This God of the streets doesn't ask us for power, success, advantages or privileges, but rather to recognize that he has sent us with him to be there. This is why the street is reaffirmed as a theological place, requiring eyes and hands to change this social contradiction.

Omission in the face of abandonment and injustice becomes a great sin, and the follower of Jesus must always be on the side of the vulnerable, small and unprotected. In this way, following Jesus and Christianity become demanding, bringing to light the uncomfortable issues of society. The logic of the Gospel is not to react violently, being violent like the violent (Lancellotti, 2021, p. 77). Its way of acting is to seek to transform situations of violence, with the aim of not coexisting with social, economic, human and political violence.

The only way forward is liberation from the forces of hatred through the praxis of love, by fighting and resisting alongside the discarded. And today, like many migrants, street migrants suffer from social, political, economic and religious hatred, and need the presence of Jesus' followers alongside them. God is denied in history by religious people who are uncommitted to the poor because of the structures of power and injustice. However, God is visible and witnessed by all those who are close to and resist the discarded of history. This capacity to resist denounces the fact that every power structure creates difference, tyranny and discarding. That's why Christianity is communitarian, demanding care with its actions, organization, opinions, proposals and stances.

Jesus' way helps to transform the discarded, fighting against the logic of revenge. This is the proposal of the Christian faith, proposing to love the enemy without submitting to what they

do. Those committed to Jesus take to the streets to witness to the enemies of the street people, expressing love, making it possible to see them as brothers and sisters. "To love tyrants is to take tyranny away from them" (Lancellotti, 2021, p. 91), making new opportunities possible for those humiliated and weakened by them. It's because of love that we don't hate those who hate us, resisting and fighting hatred.

Jesus guides us to go out of ourselves towards others, realizing altruism. This decentralization of self means thinking about others, making it possible to imagine and get involved in building a society without favoritism or merit. Christian cities must endeavor to welcome everyone who comes to them, making them more hospitable. In this exercise of hospitality, we realize not only their hunger and thirst, but also their fears and anxieties. For this reason, welcoming those who suffer and are wounded upsets the established order, trusting in love and not in established power. The characteristic is to renounce oneself, losing one's security and freely making Jesus' choices.

The challenge of following Jesus is to realize that he became incarnate, and in becoming incarnate he proposes an incarnate following. In this way, living with people becomes unique, urging us to meet their concrete needs. And in street ministry, people are concrete, with concrete needs. Let's remember that Jesus of Nazareth was a wanderer from town to town, in other words, he knew the difficulties of migration, the need to eat, drink and be welcomed. Therefore, he knew the pain and difficulties of people who migrate and live from pavement to pavement. The presence of the Church by getting down on the streets is to follow the incarnate path of her Master, building from the bottom up with the poor. This proposal is very clear in Fr Julio Lancellotti's mission with the street people:

So we always say, and in street ministry we have two aspects, the aspect of living together, that if you don't live together you don't love, if you don't live together you aren't challenged, if you don't live together you don't see that they are human beings who have all the dimensions of a human

being. He also complains, he also protests, he also sometimes bothers you, you also bother him, he confronts you, you have to confront them, because they are also colonized by domination, many of them too (Lancellotti, 2020, p. 39).

## **Final considerations**

The path we have travelled in this article has led us to think about the importance of the kenotic pastoral care of the Church “going forth”, for action with migrants in street situations. The kenotic process will lead to social and ecclesial renewal through contact with the pain of the streets, creating a more humanized world. This humanization will create community bonds for a healthier Church and society. According to data from the megalopolis of São Paulo, there are many migrants on the streets, arriving from other cities, states and even other countries.

The theological implications, together with the irreversible dynamics of the Second Vatican Council and the Church’s disposition, make possible new kenotic processes capable of provoking humanitarian and missionary action. The illnesses of our society must be cured through the process of proximity because human contact will encourage pastoral and missionary behavior in the face of their decline. This is the kenotic task, manifesting the possibility of healing and transforming both society and the Church.

We must always turn our attention to a theological vision that is committed to the pain present in the migration that takes place on the streets. Just as the incarnate Christ proposes kenotic practice for the construction of a healthy and full humanity (Jn 10:10). These kenotic initiatives will be able to bring the Church and society together as a proposal for a better and inclusive world. The paradigm of kenotic pastoral care is the Church’s characteristic way of “going forth”, ready to protect, promote and integrate everyone.

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