



## **Pope Francis' vision of migrants and refugees: Lessons for media workers**

**Workshop of the Catholic Journalists on reporting issues of migrants and refugees,**

**SIGNIS Africa**

*Message by Card. Michael Czerny S.J. Opening ceremony, 11th July 2023*

Thank you for inviting me to share some introductory words in your workshop which starts today. I will strive to offer some questions for your reflection, based on the teachings of Pope Francis, and point out some documents which you might find helpful for your work.

For the 109<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2023, which will be held on 24 September 2023, Pope Francis chose the title 'Free to Choose whether to Migrate or to Stay'. What does this mean for journalists in Africa?

First, as a synodal Church invited to walk close to migrants and refugees, I think that this year's message clarifies “**what**” you are supposed to do. Journalists have the responsibility to offer a new narrative, putting our migrant siblings, together with their families, at the center, linking their sufferings and aspirations to the causes of their migration – to the “**why's**” behind their being forced to flee – so as to connect with solutions that would end or “**heal**” their displacement.

Famine; new and protracted conflicts; persecution; natural disasters, wars; etc. make it impossible to continue living a decent and developing life in one's homeland. Such factors force around 35 million refugees to abandon their homes, crossing international borders, plus, twice as many, 71 million persons displaced internally.

If we listen carefully to each migrant or refugee or displaced person, we discover that their strongest desire is to go back to their place and live with decency and security. But until the causes forcing them to flee are addressed, no solution is possible.

“Clearly the principal responsibility falls to the countries of origin and their leaders, who are called to practice a good politics – one that is transparent, honest, farsighted and at the service of all, especially those most vulnerable”<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to listen to our siblings on the move since they should be protagonists of the solutions towards peace and development in their own countries. Let them express their aspirations. As journalists, you are in a privileged position to listen to their cry and make their aspirations known to the world. So, you become contributors to the practice of good politics, bridging the aspirations of migrant people and offering recommendations towards possible solutions to their plight. By promoting the right to remain in dignity and security in one’s own land, you are contributing to the good politics which is so badly needed.

“The migratory flows of our times are the expression of a complex and varied phenomenon that, to be properly understood, requires a careful analysis of every aspect of its different stages, from departure to arrival, including the possibility of return”<sup>2</sup>. In this regard, Pope Francis calls us to join a fascinating adventure: “Eliminating these causes and thus putting an end to forced migration calls for shared commitment on the part of all, in accordance with the responsibilities of each. This commitment begins with asking what we can do, but also what we need to stop doing. We need to make every effort to halt the arms race, economic colonialism, the plundering of other people’s resources and the devastation of our common home”<sup>3</sup>.

A second reflection is about the “**how**”. “A soft tongue will break a bone”, says the Book of Proverbs (25:15). “Today more than ever, speaking with the heart is essential to foster a culture of peace in places where there is war; to open paths that allow for dialogue and reconciliation in places where hatred and enmity rage. In the dramatic context of the global conflict we are experiencing, it is urgent to maintain a form of communication that is not hostile. It is necessary to overcome the tendency to “discredit and insult opponents from the outset [rather] than to open a respectful dialogue”. We need communicators who are open to dialogue”<sup>4</sup>.

As Pope Saint John XXIII prophetically urged in *Pacem in Terris*: “True peace can only be built in mutual trust” (No. 113). Such trust has need of bold and creative communities who are ready to take risks to find common ground on which to meet. It is terrifying to hear how easily words calling for the destruction of people and territories are spoken. This is why belligerent and xenophobic rhetoric must be rejected, as well as every form of propaganda that manipulates the truth, disfiguring it for ideological ends.<sup>5</sup>

As Christians, we know that the destiny of peace is decided by conversion of hearts, since the virus of war comes from within the human heart<sup>6</sup>. From the heart also come the right words to dispel the shadows of a closed and divided world and to build a better civilization. This effort especially falls to communicators carrying out their profession as a mission.<sup>7</sup>

As a third point, I invite you to understand and **value** the opportunities that migrants offer as a way to bring new life to local communities. Their presence is a providential opportunity to fulfil the evangelizing mission through witness and charity. By doing this, Catholic journalists will naturally promote effective cooperation among all entities and highlight the variety (not uniformity) the variety of Christian members as a wealth and the contributions of those displaced as an opportunity for a more robust and visible expression of the catholicity of our faith<sup>8</sup>.

I invite you to explore the *Pastoral Orientations on Intercultural Migrant Ministry*<sup>9</sup> and the good practices of many communities throughout the world in their efforts to enlarge “the tent”<sup>10</sup>. As journalists, you are also dwellers in this tent, invited to promote the dignity of all people and the right to remain in their own land.

May the Lord Jesus, the incarnate Word poured out from the heart of the Father, help us to make Catholic communication clear, open and heartfelt<sup>11</sup>. Thank you for your committed service.

And now, let me conclude with a question for your reflection:

What can I as a journalist and together with other influencers do so that our people are free to choose whether to migrate or to stay?

Thank you and God bless you.