

5TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF RECOWA/CERA0

**Theme: "For a synodal and self-reliant Church in the service of justice
and peace in West Africa"**

Communication of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on Migration - Wednesday 7 May 2025

Excellencies,

Rev. Fathers,

dear friends,

It is a pleasure and an honour to be with you on behalf of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Please receive the greetings of the Secretary, Sr. Alessandra Smerilli, and of Msgr. Anthony Ekpo, Undersecretary, who is originally from a RECOWA country, Nigeria.

In this very peculiar moment of *Sede Vacante* – as we pray for the College of Cardinals called in the coming days to elect the Roman Pontiff – it is with a profound sense of humility and hope that I address you today on behalf of the Dicastery.

Human mobility, forced displacement, and irregular migration are not isolated issues. In fact, they have become defining signs of our times. These signs made of the flesh and blood of our brothers and sisters on the

move summon us, as Church and in collaboration with people of good will, to a prophetic, coordinated, and faith-rooted response. Pope Francis stated in his Message for the 2023 WDMR: "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"¹. In their Pastoral Letter of February 2021 "Les Migrants et les Réfugiés", the Bishops of Senegal described the tremendous challenge facing the Church along the coast of West Africa in this way:

Les naufrages de pirogues et les nombreuses disparitions qu'ils entraînent ont envahi, depuis de longues années, nos médias, télévisions et réseaux sociaux. Ils se font sans cesse l'écho de ces populations en mobilité, chassés par la misère, en quête d'une vie meilleure ou obligées de partir de leur région à cause des conflits ou des guerres civiles. Et que dire de ces milliers de jeunes africains, partant vers des terres dites d'espoir pour se forger un projet de vie, ou encore de ces départs organisés pour monnayer leur *force de travail* ? Ce sont là autant de trajectoires collectives et singulières qui révèlent la réalité des migrations dans toute son épaisseur et sa complexité.

For many years now, our media, televisions and social networks have been invaded by the shipwrecks of pirogues and the many disappearances they cause. They are constantly echoing the stories of people on the move, driven by poverty, in search of a better life or forced to leave their region because of conflict or civil war. And what

¹ Francis, Message for the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 11 May 2023

can we say about the thousands of young Africans heading for so-called lands of hope to forge a life for themselves, or the organised departures to make the most of their *workforce*? These are all collective and singular trajectories that reveal the reality of migration in all its depth and complexity. [*unofficial translation*]

As we consider questions of migration in West Africa, let us begin by reflecting on **the right to remain in one's homeland**. As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us "Even before the right to migrate, there is need to reaffirm the right not to emigrate, that is, to remain in one's homeland."² This is a primary right and a right too often denied. In this perspective, our beloved Pope Francis chose to devote the already mentioned Message for the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees to the theme "Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay", that is to say to "the freedom that should always mark the decision to leave one's native land," as Pope Francis described in the Message.

In fact, too often, migration is not a free decision, but a desperate necessity. People do not decide to leave their homes lightly. They are forced to flee because of violence, poverty, climate change, conflict, corruption, and a widespread loss of hope in the possibility of a dignified life in their home countries. For many young people in Africa, these pressures mean a painful separation from their lands, their families, their roots. As the Church marks the Jubilee Year under the motto "Pilgrims of Hope," we

² Benedict XVI, Message for the 99th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 12 October 2012

cannot ignore that so many today are indeed pilgrims – but not of hope. They are refugees of despair.

What we are witnessing is the loss of almost an entire generation of youth from countries across the African continent. These are young women and men who are the very future of their churches, their communities, their societies, and indeed, of humanity. To confront this, we must look at the structural injustices at play, such as the systemic underdevelopment caused by exploitative economic structures, the climate crisis and the ecological degradation of lands and water sources, the absence of decent work, quality education, and basic health services, and the terrible plagues of endemic corruption, ethnic violence, religious persecution – so often targeting Christians –, conflicts, and the breakdown of public trust in institutions. I again quote the Bishops of Senegal in this regard:

Tout ceci est révélateur des paradoxes de notre monde. D'un côté, le progrès technique rapproche le Nord et le Sud, l'Est et l'Ouest, avec une économie mondialisée qui nous rend interdépendants. Notre monde est devenu un village planétaire. De l'autre, il n'a jamais été aussi polarisé, indifférent et égoïste devant la souffrance de ceux qui veulent aussi bénéficier des avantages de la mondialisation en tant que migrants. Leur diabolisation, le rejet dont ils font l'objet, *la culture du déchet*, le protectionnisme social, culturel et économique de l'Europe et des Etats Unis, et même de certains pays africains, sont révélateurs de l'enfermement des nations et de leur repli sur elles-mêmes.

All this reveals the paradoxes of our world. On the one hand, technical progress is bringing North and South, East and West, closer together,

with a globalised economy that makes us interdependent. Our world has become a global village. On the other hand, it has never been so polarised, indifferent and selfish in the face of the suffering of those who, as migrants, also want to benefit from the advantages of globalisation. The demonisation of migrants, the rejection to which they are subjected, the *throw away culture*, the social, cultural and economic protectionism of Europe and the United States, and even of certain African countries, are all indicative of the isolation of nations and their turning in on themselves. [*unofficial translation*]

In addition to these already existing push factors, we must now add the ongoing cuts to international cooperation and development assistance. These cuts have already begun to stall critical development and humanitarian projects and will only increase irregular migration and brain drain—draining communities of their most qualified and committed members. Moreover, every indication points to the health sector being particularly hard hit by these cuts.

Our commitment to integral human development means that we are not simply concerned with humanitarian aid or development assistance. It is, more so, about building just and inclusive societies, where people are not forced to leave their homes in order to survive. The goal of our efforts is to create societies where migration becomes a real choice, not a last resort.

But, as a second point I wish to raise for our reflection, when people do move, we are called as Church to walk with them. The journey itself that

migrants take has become increasingly perilous. Migrants and refugees crossing deserts and seas face human trafficking, abuse, starvation, and death. Let us remember the haunting stories of boats found adrift in the Caribbean, filled with the lifeless bodies of migrants who left from these shores, from Senegal, Mauritania and other countries. Nor can we forget the many boats or pirogues that simply disappear without a trace, without even adding to the casualty statistics. These are sons and daughters of God. These are our brothers and sisters for which we have a shared responsibility.

The bishops and other pastoral agents of the region have shown a growing concern around the appalling dynamics of this perilous migratory route from the Northwest of Africa to the Spanish Canary Islands or across the desert to reach Morocco and the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla. As many of you know, in January 2022, the Dicastery organised an online consultation with the aim of promoting dialogue and pastoral cooperation regarding this complex situation. One of the proposals that emerged was to consider creating a diocesan network along the route, that could accompany with reliable information, and humanitarian services when appropriate, the journey of those who are already on the move, those who are considering leaving and those who are on their way back home. Since then, a small and effective coordination team has been working to create an "Atlantic Hospitality Network" among those responsible for the migrant ministries in different countries. This has been a joint effort of African dioceses in several countries of the region, the Commission for Migrations of the Bishops' Conference of Spain and RAEMH, a working network on migration between several

African and European national Caritas. In May 2024, two years after the first consultation, a second consultation with Bishops was organised in order to present the network's developments and to understand the new challenges along the Atlantic route. At the same time, virtual meetings were held between diocesan delegates for migrations appointed by their respective bishops. And in parallel to your Plenary Assembly, over the next two days, these same delegates will meet here in Dakar to continue deepening their joint discernment of ways to collaborate.

Therefore, the Atlantic migratory route is not just a challenge for one local church or for one country alone. It is a regional issue, a cross-border challenge. It requires responses that are interconnected. These responses must be rooted in a sense of a shared responsibility. We are invited to move beyond any pastoral fragmentation or Church organizational divides. Moreover, our efforts cannot be isolated initiatives but must involve bishops, clergy, religious, and lay leaders. Even more, we must engage in interreligious cooperation, as well as forge meaningful partnerships with civil authorities and civil society organisations. This also means embracing the local Churches' role in advocating for public policies that honour God-given human dignity and that uphold the fundamental rights of all vulnerable people, particularly, in this context, the dignity of migrants and refugees.

The recently published [Atlantic Hospitality Guide](#) offers a practical example of what such a network can do. Some of its goals would be:

- Sharing of good practices in accompaniment and protection

- Providing legal guidance and reliable information to those considering migration
- Developing pastoral tools, which are rooted in local cultures and traditions
- Advocating together, across borders, for safe and legal alternatives to irregular migration.

Above all, such a network would become a space of communion, a visible expression of the one Body of Christ, transcending national and ecclesial borders.

For your consideration of the question of the Church accompanying people on the move, I would like to describe briefly two good practices, two examples of the Dicastery, as deeply committed to the Catholic Social Teaching principle of subsidiarity, working in close collaboration with the local Churches in Europe and the Americas.

In early March 2022, the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union, the Council of the European Bishops' Conferences, the International Catholic Migration Commission, and several Catholic organisations, such as the Order of Malta, Caritas Internationalis, and the Jesuit Refugees Service, with the support of the Dicastery, started a joint reflection around the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine and the neighbouring countries, to take stock of the aid that the Church was already deploying in the different countries and to explore further synergies among the group and with additional actors.

The representatives of these organisations decided then to establish a Catholic Response for Ukraine Working Group to coordinate their actions

in the affected region. The group's strategic plan aimed to coordinate the Catholic response for displaced people in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries and carry out a coordinated and collaborative response that meets needs, prevents duplication of efforts, and tries to leave no one behind. The five areas of work were the following:

1. Data gathering and analysis
2. Humanitarian assistance
3. Advocacy
4. Religious assistance
5. Communication.

As for the example from the Americas, the Dicastery followed a process that culminated last December in the publication of a pastoral letter addressed to the entire People of God and all people of goodwill, titled "He saw them, He drew near to them, and He cared for them. Walking with those who migrate, refugees, internally displaced persons, and survivors of trafficking."

This document is the result of a series of meetings that took place over the past few years with bishops from both North and South America. Each meeting involved the bishops from across the borders of a migratory route, for example the TexMex (U.S. and Mexican) Bishops met, as well as the Bishops of Central America and the Caribbean (*Encuentros de Obispos y Agentes de Pastoral*). These meetings discussed the ways that the Church can spiritually and materially assist people on the move. While the Dicastery encouraged and assisted in the various meetings, it was the local Bishops who directed the conversations and who produced the final

document. Moreover, the Pastoral Letter itself was drafted following a synodal exercise and collegial work including bishops, different pastoral agents, and the displaced people themselves. Their Pastoral Letter offers not only a tool to guide the pastoral actions of each Diocese but also calls the whole American Church to ensure that each pastoral response should be integral, discerned at a regional level, and coordinated among the Bishops' Conferences and the Dioceses in the countries of origin, transit, and destination.

Now, I'm not here to suggest what you should do - this is absolutely not the way our Dicastery operates! -, nor am I here to present the ecclesial efforts of other continents to respond to the needs of people on the move as models to be simply imitated. As I have already said, the effort to create an Atlantic Hospitality Network in this region is already a very significant step, born of local efforts and reflections, which deserves to be better known and supported.

Allow me also to highlight the Pastoral Letter published by the Bishops of Senegal to which I have been referring, as another excellent example of a good practice. Their letter is addressed to African leaders, youth, families, the Church and the entire community. The first three chapters describe the situation of human mobility in Africa and, particularly, in Senegal. The focus is on Sub-Saharan Africa and the young Africans who leave for Europe. But the Bishops do not fail to point out that the majority of African migrants remain within the continent and that the narratives of a supposed invasion of Europe are clearly exaggerated, even the subject of manipulation and disinformation. Apart from the danger of perishing in the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean or the desert, migrants who

reach the destination country also face discrimination, exploitation, insecurity and extreme economic conditions. That is why this appalling situation concerns not only the Church but also the State, the families as well as the community at large. To understand which role the Church should play, the letter addresses the causes of human mobility. They recognize that economic factors, geographic proximity and cultural affinity are among the pull factors. The bishops go a bit further to recall the exploitation of Africa and the western countries' policy to attract top talent to their countries to strengthen the workforce as a major cause of migration.

The last three chapters focus on the future and the way out. Fundamentally, human mobility provides the opportunity to put into practice Gospel values. The bishops, following the teaching of Pope Francis, identify the core Gospel value as the need to safeguard the human dignity of every person. Then the bishops give the example of the Church in Senegal, which works hard to welcome and provide social assistance and social security to refugees and immigrants. According to the bishops, Caritas Senegal has already been doing it for many years.

Regarding the ways to avoid the displacement of young Africans and Senegalese, in particular, the bishops suggest the involvement of different actors. The bishops mention first the local community and the Church in Senegal. The two are called to work for national development and for the families in particular, the bishops stress: "*ne pas pousser coûte que coûte les jeunes à la migration*" (p. 23). The second is the State, which should design policies that respond to the needs of the youth. Moreover, the State should address the question of unemployment and encourage the return of

highly skilled professionals. The third group of actors are the African leaders who are called to work for good governance. Finally, the youth, who are at the heart of the bishops' preoccupation, should avoid embracing irregular migration. The youth are also called to protect life, avoid putting it at risk, and further transform Africa into a place of hope.

Of course, the Church in Senegal has not been alone in their efforts to respond to the challenges of migration. All of the Bishops' Conferences in the region share this concern in different ways, which has given rise to concrete actions in various dioceses and by various Church organisations, with national Caritas at the forefront. Let me, just by way of example, acknowledge the magnificent action of the very small Church in Mauritania in favour of our migrant brothers and sisters, whether Christian or Muslim, under the leadership of Bishop Martin Happe and now of his committed successor, Bishop Victor Ndione. Their success is encouraging.

The third cornerstone of our reflection on migration in West Africa is spiritual: a meditation on the **God who walks with His people**. Scripture reveals to us that God is never distant from those who suffer, those who flee, those who wander. "I have seen the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... I know their sufferings" (Exodus 3:7). This is the foundation of our pastoral mission. Every migrant is a face of Christ. To walk with them is to walk with God. The God who in Jesus, in the Holy Family of Nazareth, became a migrant to Egypt, on this very African soil that welcomes us. This truth must shape all our pastoral initiatives, both in the countries of origin and at the points of transit and destination.

Pope Francis repeatedly invited us to see in the face of every displaced person of our time not only the face of Christ, but our own face, mine too. 'We are all migrants', in one way or another, is the message that he is challenging us with. Each one of us has a history of migration in our genes, whether it's more remote or closer in time – as Francis knew, the son of Italian immigrants who left as children for Argentina – as I know, as the grandson and great-grandson of Portuguese people who migrated to Mozambique.

We must not think of ourselves therefore merely as "helpers," as ones providing the assistance, as the ones with something to give. In many ways, we are evangelized by the migrants themselves. Their strength, their faith, their dreams are signs of the times that invite us to conversion.

Hence, the whole Church should work together on:

- Sacramental and spiritual care for uprooted people
- Pastoral accompaniment that listens, heals, and empowers
- Cooperation and exchange of good practices and replicable projects

Let's not lose sight of the four verbs introduced by Pope Francis in his Message for the WDMR in 2018 – to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate – which are already well integrated by the pastoral care of migrants around the world. To help in this endeavour, I would also like to remind you that the Dicastery has published several Pastoral Orientations aimed at offering practical guidelines: for the pastoral care of migration, with migrants and refugees, with internally displaced people, victims of human trafficking, those displaced by the climate crisis, and for an intercultural migrant ministry. These Pastoral Orientations

have all been drafted after processes of listening and dialogue - in-person and online consultations - with Church organisations and religious congregations working in the field of migration, as well as with Bishops from all over the world. Some of those present here also took part in these consultations.

The efforts of the Church should be guided in this way by the four verbs for pastoral ministry suggested by Pope Francis: in the countries of origin of migration flows, the Church is called to assist in the promotion of integral human development, to guarantee those conditions that prevent forced migration. In the countries of transit, the Church should accompany people on the move in this difficult process, preventing abuse and exploitation. Finally, in the countries of destination, the Church is to develop welcoming practices aimed at promoting integration in hosting communities and taking up the challenge of evangelisation.

The Church is being invited to rediscover its itinerant nature. We are a pilgrim people, moving through history, journeying together toward the Kingdom. This itinerant nature of the Church inspires us to continue working together, as our beloved Pope Francis reminded us, to become "a safety net" (cf. *Address of the Holy Father to Participants in the Fourth World Day of Prayer and Reflection against Human Trafficking*). That same net of the Galilean fishermen (Luke 5:8) is the one that bishops, local churches, and lay faithful can "cast," helping to recognize and interpret both the present and future needs and concerns of the children of God.

The words of Christ to his disciples – “*Laxate retia*”, “Let down your nets” (Luke 5:4) – echo for us today as a bold invitation. Just as Jesus invited the disciples to cast their nets into the deep, He invites us today to cast the

nets of compassion, solidarity, and prophetic courage. Let us walk with the migrant People of God. Let us build networks of hospitality. Let us proclaim—not only with our words but with our united actions—that another migration story is possible, a story of hope, of pilgrims of Hope. Thank you.