

Panel:

“MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FAMILY”

FROM A FRAGMENTED FAMILY TO A FAMILY OF NATIONS

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The Migrant House

Premise

To speak of family today on the one hand means delving into a legal, social, cultural and religious jungle. On the other hand, the family remains a landmark in our daily lives, a sign of contradiction and shifting table for moral, ethical and religious values. I say this in a somewhat radical way to avoid false illusions about a family concept, which many still consider sacred, healthy and resistant to any kind of questioning. The family is undergoing a crisis in its sociological and cultural environment, and therefore it also suffering from a profound crisis in its internal relationships. I am not referring only to the easiness of separation, or divorce, or ad tempus relationships, but also to the educational concept, the relationship between couples and between parents with children and within their neighborhood. In some European legislations, family is conceived as the coexistence of two individuals, whether it be people, or even a person with a pet. There's more. While the family in the traditional religious conception is considered as a whole, for modern marketing it is just a group where there are several targets. Let me explain myself: commercials are directed more and more to the various components of a family, including dogs and cats, with specific messages that disintegrate the concept of togetherness.

For example:

There are commercials for children where the parents end up being obliged to buy the product. Others offer food and medicine for your dog or cat at the same level as if it were for your children, because in the market economy what counts is profit, it doesn't matter whether it be from the sale of valuables or rubbish. Others are

focused on the father or mother to conquer the other with perfume, or shampoo, or a car, etc. And there are still others where they just say, *give yourself this* for Christmas, for your birthday. *You deserve it...* this way they break all ties of affection, values and unity.

Wounded Family

In this context I would like to mention another aspect. Marketing is not just for television, which has already suffocated us, but in all messages found all over buildings, highways, journals, magazines for men only, or so many others for women, where gossip reigns, and even in magazines for children. If we just once had a moment to analyze the content of Latin American soap operas, we would discover codified prostitution, swallowed up and even sought for by viewers. Its content is that of upper class families, where adultery, hatred, greed, gossip and whatever else you want to use to change peoples mentality to kill what we would call the *traditional* family.

Without getting enraged against the mass media, I would like to add a sociological and anthropological aspect of our land that has a destabilizing power on the family: **codified machismo**, which has been imposed, defended and praised. A family like this, which in my experience is very common today, is wounded, bombarded by conflicting messages, caged by that desire of excitement that Zigmunt Bauman calls *the liquid society* because it turns *love and relationships into liquid*. I relieve it is important to stress this aspect in order to avoid certain unilateral campaigns against migration, its consequences and the responsibilities of the various governments. The Central American and Mexican families are already wounded and fragmented before opting for migration.

One last aspect I consider important is the fragmentation and anonymity in which many families live in the city or in the suburbs, segmentation and anonymity that are both territorial and psychological.

THE DECISION TO MIGRATE

The Peasant Family

"Everything had been taken away by the river. Even the dead. My mother said to me: "Son, sell the old radio, take a handful of coins and go north ..." She said this trying to inspire me with hope. She said good bye, laying her hands on me and giving me her blessing. A sad silence linked the two of us: I had just lost my wife and my three children, now it was as if I were burying my mother alive.

This is the testimony of a peasant who lost everything in the unleashed fury of a hurricane that hit Central America and Chiapas. It is the experience of being torn apart in the farewell to the mother and wife and the quiet children in the background, before a drama that surpasses them and is too deep for them to understand.

Migration usually begins as a mission and takes on the characteristics of the response to a vocation. Migrants leave to give back a lost dignity to their homes. In the subconscious, this means complying with the Fourth Commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother". They are not ashamed of poverty, no, because many of them still live it as beatitude. It is the poverty fraught with pain, the home and the streets transformed into roving hospitals that are the motive that drive these Christs of migration to walk their path every day. If in the Bible the mission that becomes exodus is born from the encounter of Moses with Yahwe, who hears the cry of the enslaved people, in the migrant the razor's edge that leads to the rupture between poverty lived with dignity, and poverty that already has a stigma, is composed of various factors.

- a) *The first factor is the perception of poverty that has already exceeded the threshold between death and survival;*
- b) *Secondly, media bombardment, fashion, migrants returning home from the North flaunting facades of empty wealth, and suddenly those who had stayed behind, become the object of derision, of a silent accusation that sounds like defeat and even cowardice.*

There is the perception of being an object of contempt, of being worth less... and on the other hand a suppressed complex of inferiority that claims to have and to be what the others show off. And here starts the process that leads to the dramatic decision of leaving. There is a confusing call that invites to abandon the situations that have crossed the threshold of endurance. There is a rupture with the environment and with oneself that cries out for an improvement. There are the absent and tired eyes of the loved ones, parents and children or couples that end up being interpreted as a request for something else. All these stories of migrants can be compared with the passage of the Gospel: As Jesus got off the boat, he saw many people... and felt compassion for them (Mt. 9,36 and parallels). In my experience with migrants, displaced persons and refugees in many different places and situations of our World, I have come to touch with my own hand the Boundary of the question that can become a curse against God, when it seems that even Providence has thrown in the towel because of the malice of man. *Where are you Lord? Did your promise to take care of those who are worth much more than a few birds come to an end?*

Sometimes it seems that God has abandoned our land. *"I looked at my village, Muñoz shattered by the war between brothers. The cornfields destroyed, mother earth lacerated in her intimacy, torn by the rage of warring brothers."*

The concept of land lacerated in its intimacy is perceived by the migrant who abandons his land as having to leave the garden of Eden, to leave the place chosen by God because of a repeated sin. It is the same concept expressed with dignity and tears by another peasant, who told us: If I have to die of hunger in my country, I'd rather die taking a step toward the horizon and leave behind a country embittered by the squandering of its governors. In this passage and in many similar others, we can see the inexpressible desire to rescue this Mother Earth, and to some day, give her back her dignity. The exodus here is transformed once again into a mission.

The Urban Family

The parting is less dramatic, the roots with the land, with neighbors, with the past, are often changeable so ties are also not so deep. But they still have to face a rupture, a wound that adds itself to other wounds, and that in time unfold hidden or camouflaged corners that end up exploding leading to total collapse. In both types of families, the main reason for migration is economic, which can vary from the need for survival to the hope of moving up the social ladder.

The increasing difficulties of achieving the dream of crossing over to *the other* side have eradicated the values that up till yesterday were considered and proclaimed as sacred. The most significant example is the ethical relationship with the body. In migrant slang, and even at other levels of society, the term **bodycard** has become more frequent. It is the subtitle for a credit card, to which the female migrant has no access, so she uses her body to achieve what would otherwise be impossible to attain. For undocumented migrants, the *bodycard* becomes a visa or a passport. This explains in part the tendency for women in general, and many young girls, to see the possibility of migration as an adventure that leads to easy money or fame as actresses or cabaret dancers. They start out as waitresses, or by trusting someone who tricks them for some pictures, promising they will be sent to professional magazines, or to television or film agencies, and they wake up in a brothel or as victims of trafficking.

The Social, Economical and Psychological Context of the Family in Relation to Migration.

Today everything in legislations concerning migration definitely constitutes an attack on the family unit. Migratory flows, migrant settlements in the new land, and neighborhood relationships are becoming increasingly hostile and discriminatory, like a time bomb against the family.

When, in the '60s the Swiss philosopher Max Fischer condemned the situation referring to migrants, when he said, "We have called for arms and we have received

men”, (in German *Menchen*: people - person), he pointed to the deep and holistic core of migration: it is always a people who migrate, it is the history of a people that moves and has the power to move boundaries, to change establishments, to shape a new social and national identity. Migration cannot simply be considered as an import - export product in political or economic agendas. It is a nation on the move, it is a past and a present that pose as a project of tomorrow, when migration is up to our borders and challenges globalization, so that the common courtyard may be shared by all of us together.

However industry, trade and the economy in general relate themselves to a family member, whether it be a man, a woman, or any individual. The family relationship does not matter. It's a labor contract, almost like hiring another machine and adding it to my production.

On the other hand, societies that host migrants perceive the danger of these newcomers, either as individuals or as a family. They are not tractors that I can put in the fields and accommodate according to my needs. Nor are they wheels or cogs in a machine, they are people. Karl Marx said: *“sow an idea and the war tanks will soon come to crush it.”* Until yesterday I personally answered: *“sow an idea and a nation will be born.”* Today, in the face of a human river set on the way of migration, I say: *“plant a people and an idea will be born.”*

Almost all the immigration laws ignore family reunification or make it difficult for families to reunite. I will not go into the legal details of the different countries. It is enough to say that from a political and economical standpoint, seeing migrants as bearers of tradition, culture, values and dreams, does not pay, and is therefore ignored.

The Impact with the New Reality: Emergency and Justification of a Transgressive Ethic.

Migration is lived and contemplated by the migrant, male or female, as an emergency situation, where economic profit tends to justify any sacrifice, and allow

the diminishing of conscience and of values that were believed in or professed right up until the day before. What do I mean by this?

The entire journey of migration is seen as a war-like strategy, where normal life patterns change to cope with a temporary and dramatic situation, which allow for behavior that before was either rejected or forbidden.

Having sex with various partners, including homosexuals, lying and cheating to get out of trouble, even small thefts at the expense of fellow traveling companions, are justified by need, loneliness, stress or sleepiness, and become a psychological whip to get ahead.

Once the trip to the destination is over, unfortunately the emergency mentality continues. Wife, parents and children can wait, or even the husband if he was the one who stayed at home can wait. This scourge which has many facets, from the desire to send the most money possible, even a bet with oneself or with those left behind, the lust to be able to achieve dreams that were before forbidden will put chains on the migrant. This creates situations that with time become more comfortable, conscience is silenced and new chapters are opened.

The children, if they stayed behind with the wife, or grandmother or sister-in-law, become little packages stacked away at the bottom of the father's or mother's conscience. And when the desire or the cry comes from the south for these children to be reunited with their parents, they don't think twice about handing them over to an unknown coyote or pollero, so that they can bring them as soon as possible. The drama is just one more link in a chain that began to disintegrate into missing links along the migrant path.

The violations committed by law enforcement agencies, or common criminals, along the vertical boundary that runs from Chiapas to Rio Bravo, which is rarely discussed, is much higher than what is normally assumed. Using the body as mentioned above, in exchange for a passport and visa is also more common than what we think. We find small groups, usually from towns or villages, with two or three women

or minors, who offer themselves in exchange for financial support and protection in the States, once the journey has come to an end.

With this background, the cultural shock of passing from a farm or a village mentality, where everything under social control to a plain air environment where everything seems to be morally permissible and where you get by as anonymous and unknown, turns into a dangerous crossroad where *traditional morality is thrown away, and with it the other traditions, religion, and the concept of family and parenthood.*

The border in this sense becomes a turnstile where values of old are abandoned or deported without return. At this point I would like to observe that the causes of deterioration within the family, and the consequences it implies, are not always and exclusively to be found in a perverse migration law. There are psychological, social and cultural factors that deeply affect the migrant and can completely uproot his whole life.

The term **absent son**, that is even to be found some liturgies, is very misleading. At a glottological level the term “absent” is closely related to “lost”, referring to a past that does not return. We are speaking of children that little by little are left out of the collective consciousness, of government planning, economies, cultures, etc. and that are mentioned without a face or a name in the statistics. They are remembered because of the dollars they send each month, without realizing that we fall into the same mistake as parents who are satisfied with giving their children Nintendo or TV games, because this way they keep quiet and are happy.

In terms of remittances, the sender ends up being considered, and considering himself, as a cash point that turns out money every time you press a key. The appreciation and gratefulness of the first few months turns into a claim with interest.

From the social aspect of relationships within the neighborhood, the migrant is perceived as an outsider in our world that we have reduced to a nutshell. We fear his otherness and in our subconscious we perceive migrants as betting on a future

that to us is uncertain, unknown and gloomy. We unleash our fears, our failures and anxieties against him, and we make the migrant a scapegoat for our emptiness.

In this framework we can see the first cracks appearing in the migrant family with their parents or their own home. The traditional channels of communication, the letter or the message given by the living voice of a fellow countryman returning, or of a relative, are replaced by digital technology and in time, the relationship becomes virtual.

At the beginning, there are frequent calls, after a while the calls become further apart, the same questions and answers, photos taken with the cell phone are stored with those of other girls and friends and sent by e-mail, they use the Chat, as with many other people and without realizing that the family relationship has been transformed into a digital connection without any serious commitment.

The loneliness and homesickness, that according to Scalabrini, are the subtle evil that quietly caresses and kills the migrant, that push the migrant to seek new alternatives.

Family of Nations.

Migration throughout history has always been a quotation of humanity in its different characters, races, languages, religions and cultures. Migrations are the great crossroads of opportunity; they are like a net thrown into the sea to collect fish of all types and sizes. In this context, the family surfaces as the core that surpasses the state and society, and breaks through the logic of fragmentation, to launch a bridge for dialogue and an outstretched hand. It is an opportunity where one gives and receives. Obviously, with what I've been saying, this *challenge - opportunity* is perceived today as a threat to the status quo, as an economical and social burden, think about school and health in the demographic changes of urban neighborhoods and centers.

The host society does not want to come out of its security bunker and sometimes its arrogance to lean out and look at these new people knocking on their door. There is

no one so rich that they don't need a smile or an outstretched hand. The contempt for one's neighbor because of his citizenship or ethnic belonging is hidden in the host society's fear to change, to face new situations that life will continue to propose and impose anyway.

We are living a childish contradiction. In an increasingly globalized world where we communicate on a global level and within seconds we go from Australia to Tierra del Fuego and travel through all Latin America, buying and selling all types of technology and goods, we close the door to a nation, to the migrant, who brings something more than a shopping.

Accepting Globalization Entails Globalizing Migration...

Migrants, especially undocumented ones, have a fear of expressing themselves, they fear the possibility of being teased, discriminated, or being reported. When the entire family is undocumented, this fear and inferiority complex creeps into the family dynamics, up to the point where family life is covered by a permanent fog, a veil to protect us from prying eyes and questions.

Returning to Max Fischer's statement, which reminds us that every migrant is a person and a nation, the Legislator of the host and countries of origin, must lead the way and lay the ground for migration to once again become an encounter between nations, where cultures and different world views can engage in dialogue and where children of different ethnic groups, oblivious still of border walls, racism and rejection, may build a common tomorrow that is different from me, here and now as a citizen or a foreigner. Humanity continues to walk in the First World and in the Third World, it is up to us to get on this train, which may be a cargo train, or we can choose to stay on the edge of the road: history never picks up corpses. With migration, history moves on and with it all kinds of borders, this is the way things go whether we like it or not. Loneliness always wears the face of death and decline.