

Elements for a Sapiential Reading of Migrations

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This article seeks to unite various elements to enable a sapiential reading of migrations. It is not an academic study; rather, it is a simple social–pastoral reading to be used mostly by those who work in the wide universe of human mobility. Today, such reading cannot ignore the person of Bishop John Baptist Scalabrini (1839-1905), just as it cannot ignore two fundamental and complementary aspects of his historical memory: his encounter with the migrants at the Milan railroad station and the inspiration and the legacy of the Scalabrinian charism. In both aspects, migration, with its wounds and opportunities, shows at the same time its positive and negative sides, revealing the ambiguity of the great mass movements.

On Scalabrini's Footsteps

John Baptist Scalabrini's rendering of his encounter with the migrants at the Milan railroad station represents an indispensable reference for his understanding of the phenomenon of migration.¹ In the life, writings and the work of the Bishop of Piacenza, there is a point of arrival and a point of departure. In fact, in his human and ecclesial journey, the so-called "Milan railroad station" is preceded by a precocious and intense attention toward those who, whether definitively or seasonally, are forced to migrate to earn their daily bread. At the same time, it is also followed by the solicitude of the true shepherd toward the great migration movements, which, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, have marked the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. According to the historian Peter Gay, between 1820 and 1920, about 62,000,000 people left the European continent.² For his part, Maurice Aymard, states that Italy alone, between 1860 and 1970, "registered over 25 million departures, corresponding to half of the population in 1960". In 1901-1910 the migrants were 6 million and a record number of 872,598 migrants was recorded in 1913".³

This solicitude began quite early in the life of the Bishop of Piacenza, especially regarding seasonal migrants and particularly the daily-wage workers. Many were migrating to the farms for the harvest or in the coal mines. This same pastoral zeal will produce later a lay organization and two congregations, one of men and one of women, with the charism of working in the world of migrations. For this solicitude he is called "Father and Apostle of the migrants".

¹ All the quotes from JB Scalabrini are taken from the book "Scalabrini. A living voice". The page number is reported at the end of the quotation.

² Peter Gay, *A experiencia burguesa: da rainha Vitoria a Freud* (5 volumes).

³ Maurice Aymard, *Migrazioni in Il Mediterraneo. Lo spazio, la storia, gli uomini, le tradizioni* (Firenze 2007) 242-243.

We recall his words full of compassion at the railroad station of Milan. *“There were old men bent with age and labor, young men in the prime of manhood, women pulling along or carrying their little ones, boys and girls, all drawn together by the same desire, all heading toward a common goal. They were emigrants...”* - The Shepherd realizes. And then he goes on: *“I picture the poor wretches landing in a strange land, among people with a language not their own, easy victims of inhuman exploitation. I see them moistening with their sweat and tears an unyielding soil.”* (375-376).

These, and other writings of J.B. Scalabrini, reveal, jointly the suffering migration inflicts on people and on families who migrate as well as the problems awaiting them in foreign lands. It is *“the painful dilemma”*, as the Bishop of Piacenza surmises in an exchange with one of these migrants. *“Either you steal or you emigrate. I am not allowed to steal nor do I want to, because God and the law forbid it. But in this place there is no way I can earn a living for me and my children. So what can I do? I have to emigrate: it's the only thing left”* (379-380). These words, like an echo of a divine appeal or intervention, remain branded with fire in the heart of the Shepherd.

In his words, there is the understanding of both the causes and consequences of mass migration. On the one hand, the Industrial Revolution has had political and social implications, which have given origin to an unprecedented human mobility, first within each country and within the old continent, and then towards the lands across the ocean. On the other hand, *“many evils both material and moral”* await those who leave the land of their birth, and venture *“out over uncharted seas”*, just to use an expression by the Portuguese poet Luís de Camões. *“And just as ignorance and poverty here in their own country make them easy victims of migration agents, so, in the far-off lands the isolation and the misery will make them easy prey to speculation”*, or of the *“merchants of human flesh”* as J.B. Scalabrini stated. *“For this reason, I could cite many instances showing how bitter to the taste is the bread of the emigrants, of those unfortunate souls, attracted either by vain hopes or false promises”* (383-384).

The apostle to the migrants aligns this forced mass movement with the observation that *“migration is a natural phenomenon and an invincible necessity”*, insisting on the *“natural and sacred right to migrate”*. *“A theoretical debate on whether emigration is good or bad is here a waste of time, since what is important for me is that migration exists”* (380). He immediately warns, however, that *“migration must be spontaneous”*, pointing to the *“freedom to migrate, not to coerce migration”* (382).

In spite of the sufferings, wounds and hardship, the Bishop of Piacenza concludes that migration is part of the plan of God. With the clarity of a wise man, of a poet or of a saint he wrote: *“Seeds migrate on the wings of the wind. Plants migrate from continent to continent on the waves of the seas and rivers. Birds and other animals move from place to place. But even more do human beings migrate, sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, and, in so doing, are always the free instruments of Divine Providence, which presides over human destiny, leading all people, in spite of great calamities, to their final goal: the perfection of man on earth and the glory of God in heaven.”* And more yet, migration *“is undoubtedly a good thing for both those who leave and those who remain, a true safety valve, relieving the country of excess population [...] but it is always a very grievous individual and national evil when it is allowed to take place without laws, limits, guidance, or effective protection”* (389-390).

In other words, within well guided and monitored migration flows, the migrant turns into an active agent of a “*universal citizenship, with no distinction of persons*”⁴ and this is part of the divine plan of salvation in the measure in which it allows the ongoing interchange of values and the mutual enrichment of peoples and cultures. Or, referring again to the *Aparecida Document*: “*The migrants are both disciples and missionaries, called as they are to become new seed of evangelization on the footsteps of many migrants and missionaries that brought Christian faith in our America.*”⁵ Within this view of human mobility as a permanent reshaping of the world and of history, we must close this reflection with two beautiful quotes from J. B. Scalabrini known in the four corners of the world, just as the migrants are. Migration “*blending and perfecting civilization, broadening the concept of motherland beyond physical boundaries, making the whole world man's motherland.*” In this context, “*for a destitute the place that provides his bread becomes his country.*”

It was said that J.B. Scalabrini’s “heart was bigger than his diocese.” In fact, in addition to caring for his diocese, he moved beyond its boundaries to visit migrants in the United States and South America, and, seeing firsthand the conditions of his countrymen, he sent them missionary priests and sisters to assist them in their needs. We can make a comparison between Scalabrini’s address to his first missionaries leaving for the Americas – July 12, 1888 – and the Jesus’ priestly prayer when, during the Last Supper, he is about to leave his disciples (see Jn 17). In both cases the words denote a profound tenderness, affection and an appeal to love one another.

Israel: a people on the move

From J.B. Scalabrini’s voice and testimony, we can rely on his vision for a bird’s view of various biblical texts. Rather than choosing the texts that underscore the person of the migrant, we attempt to read the totality of the Word of God as it refers to a people on the move. From the Old Testament Patriarchs up until Jesus Christ and the New Testament texts, through the experience of the liberation from Egypt, the prophetic times and the wisdom writings, the Bible tells the story of the people who knows firsthand and in its own flesh the Exodus, the desert, the exile and the diaspora.

On the one hand, Abraham is asked to leave his own land (see Gen 12) and on the other, Moses is called and sent on a mission to free his brothers held slaves under Pharaoh’s yoke and then set out with them for the Promised Land. (see Ex 3). In this epic experience for the people of Israel – the liberation from Egypt – four verbs help us to contemplate the mystery of a God who journeys with his people through the tortuous and bloodied roads of history. “*The Lord said: «I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against the attached Masters, so I know well what they are suffering. So, I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey»*” (Ex 3,7-8a). Comparing these words with what is known as the “historical creed” (Dt 26,5-9)⁶, we are clearly seeing two versions of the same narrative.

⁴ *Final Document of the V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Conferences*, Aparecida SP 2007, 414.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁶ The comment in the Jerusalem Bible states: “The Profession of Faith of vv. 5-9 is a compendium of the history of salvation centered around the liberation from Egypt”.

The four verbs we wish to point out – *I have witnessed, I have heard, I know, I have come down* – are all in the first person singular, attributed to the Lord. We wish to stress immediately the profound sensitivity and solidarity with the people fallen in disgrace, subjugated by the great empire of the time, showing in the dialogue with Moses, the Lord's concern in the face of a situation which deprives each and every one of their human dignity. But there is more to it. He is also a God who doesn't stop at "*seeing, listening, knowing*" but is ready to "*come down*" and walk with his people over the sands of the desert.

This experience is so fundamental and primordial as to serve as a point of reference for the foreigners living among the Israelites. "*You shall not oppress a resident alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were ones aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt*" (Ex 23,9). During the prophetic times, it will serve as a warning against the manner in which the workers were treated when they were forced to leave the fields and sought refuge and opportunity in the cities and in the royal palace (see Amos and Micah). It will also serve as comfort for the diaspora Israelites exiled in Babylonia (see Jeremiah).

The verb "*come down*" receives strength and fulfillment in the mystery of the incarnation: "*And the Word became flesh and came to live among us*" (Jn 1,14). In Jesus' walking the streets of Galilee, Judea and Samaria, this "*becoming flesh*" means being attentive, reaching out and being present... It is, however, even more than this. It is going toward the poor and the oppressed, the sick and the vulnerable, the sinners and the marginalized, those excluded and "*rejected*" as Pope Francis continues to remind us. In a word, it means becoming a "*marginal Jew*", to use an expression by Meier.⁷ Rather than proclaiming a God who lives in his temple, Jesus announces the good news of the Gospel in the synagogues, and the fields, in the villages and in the cities. The "*Word made flesh*" is born on the edge of society, on the frontier - "*because there was no room for them in the Inn*" (Lk 2,7) -, so as to show where the Kingdom of God has its deeper roots.

Here we need to pause for a while, over what the experts call the *résumé* of Jesus' activity. "*Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them, because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd*" (Mt 9,35-38). Three are the aspects to consider.

The first, "*Jesus went around*". Once again, we encounter a dynamic verb, meaning action, mobility, moving from one place to another. This is the experience the migrants know very well as they walk the roads of the entire planet. In fact, the members of the early Christian communities were called "*the people of the Way*".

Jesus encounters "*the crowds troubled and abandoned*". It is not hard to apply this image to the millions of persons and families sailing the oceans, crossing deserts and borders, fleeing violence and poverty, intent on securing a more promising future. They are migrants seeking to change their flight in an attempt to reconstruct their lives.

Finally, "*he was moved with pity*". Being compassionate does not mean giving objects but giving oneself: being with the other in the hour of suffering, of despair and dire need. Offering one's own time, as the Samaritan did, with the man who was felled on the edge of the road. Not a few are the migrants

⁷ John P. Meier. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (5 vols.). Yale University Press, New Haven 1991-2016.

fallen on the edges of the road, of society and of life. In the specific case of the parable, Jesus, the Teacher, is quite categorical and lapidary: “Go and you do the same” (Lk 10,25-37).

Migrations: crisis and crossroad

With the eyes of J.B. Scalabrini and inspired by Word of God, we follow closely the migrants’ steps. Individual names, faces and personal anecdotes, but large mass movements as well.

First, we must pay attention to what political authorities are saying, then to the media and to the public at large. At the start, we need to remember that language is never neutral. It is suitable, therefore, to look at some expressions used to define human mobility in general: “*migration crisis*”, “*humanitarian crisis*”, “*invasion of our country*” (without mentioning the “*black wave*” or other such things).

Allow me an extended quotation from the German theologian J. Moltmann (*Theology of Hope*).

The word “crisis” points to an event that is new and unintelligible from the point of view of the traditional order of human experience, which has entered into a crisis and feels threatened, and in need of being saved, defended or renewed. The term “crisis” is always in reference to an established “order”. A crisis questions such order which can only be overcome by a new order. The reference to something new in the event called crisis is an aspect that is always ignored. The philosophy of history, seen as the philosophy of crisis, always has a conservative nature.⁸

The concept of crisis – whether individual, familial, social or institutional – comports much ambiguity. It has an initial phase consisting of a series of failures, falls, discouragement, powerlessness, prostration. We feel as if the ground is gone from under our feet, there are no stars in the sky and no signs along the road. Fears, doubts, uncertainties, torment take over our soul. But there is a second phase consisting of a step forward. Fear and frustration are overcome by a new burst of energy, which infuses the courage to lift our head and move on. At first, emotions and feelings prevail, imbued in tears and weeping. We become blind and deaf within a thick layer of fog. Then, reason begins to clear up the fog and shows clearly the contour of things around us. According to J.B. Scalabrini’s vision, in the migration phenomenon every crisis, seen at first as a negative moment, holds also a positive side.

The moment of discouragement is conventionally called the true crisis. It leads to the temptation of retreating within ourselves in an indecipherable mute attitude, of returning to our cradle or holding on to our mother’s neck. According to J. Moltmann, it is nostalgia of the past and of the old order. In extreme cases, the negative phase can even lead to wanting to die. We find this in two O.T. prophets: Jeremiah’s lament “*cursed be the day I was born*” (Jer 20,14) and Jonah in the belly of the whale, the symbol of the mother’s uterus or of the wish of never having been born (Jon 2,3-30).

When the moment of weeping and obscurity passes, we come to a crossroad, which shows different roads and a choice. The time has come to wipe the tears, get up from the ground and decide. While the crisis is trapped in the past, the crossroad scrutinizes the future with its potentialities; according to J. Moltmann, it represents the “new dimension” among the ruins and the remains of the old order. If the crisis is a furrow in our individual and social history, the crossroad perceives it at the opportunity to cast seeds in it. It is not a time to gather but to sow. The first could lead to a paralysis, whereas the second opens a field of

⁸ Author’s translation from the Italian version.

renewed alternatives. Returning to the migrant, crisis corresponds to the flight from an unbearable situation, whereas the crossroad represents the search of a land to call “Homeland”. Here, in J.B. Scalabrini’s vision, God’s design for the history of salvation enters the scene.

According to J.B. Scalabrini’s thinking, the migrant, though seemingly a mere victim of a historical context or a given method of searching, is also the subject of his own destiny in the measure in which he lets himself be guided by the hand of God and by the hope of better days. Although vulnerable to all kinds of speculation, he has the capacity to take a hold of himself and rebuild the texture of his life. It is not an easy task, but “*the comfort of faith and the smile of his homeland*” are his companions and partners.

The Spirituality of the Journey

From J.B. Scalabrini’s point of view, the spirituality of the journey can be summed up in one sentence: seeing the migrants with the eyes of God the Father and looking at God the Father with the migrants’ heart. The heart of the Shepherd was beating in unison with the steps of the migrants and the urgings of God’s will. Jesus, the Son of God, the bridge between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, was nourishing his faith and hope and strengthening his charity. Now, through blessed J.B. Scalabrini’s intercession, we can offer the hopes of those on the journey and of those who, following his charism, place themselves at the service of migrants.

Jesus’ attitude and approach portrayed by the evangelists leaves no doubt. At the beginning of his public ministry, with the book of Isaiah, Jesus introduces his program. “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.*” (Lk 4,18-19). The poor, and among them the migrants, are the favored ones in the Kingdom of God. The Father in the parable of the Good Shepherd never tires of seeking his sheep (Jn 10,1-10), which represent the migrants, the refugees and the dispossessed, journeying on the roads of the world. In place of a God dwelling in his temple, Jesus reveals a Father present and near, who accompanies his disciples to Emmaus and stays with them because it is late and the day is almost over (see Lk 24,13-35).

One who walks a lot has a lot to teach us. First, he rids himself of the superfluous to lighten the heavy burden which is hard to carry. He focuses on what is fundamental. “*What is superfluous is heavy – so says the French philosopher Frédéric Lenoir – whereas, the essential is gratuitous.*”⁹ A traveler keeps his eyes fixed on the goal, making use of only what is needed and indispensable. The journey teaches us to lighten our bag but also to purify our soul. Knowing how to leave aside the things which, in addition to being useless are also burdensome and bothersome. Being purified from the sentiments and attitudes which are hurtful to others and are toxic to the soul. Removing what is secondary, reaching toward the “*hidden treasure in the field*” (Mt 13,44).

More than just a victim, the migrant is also the subject of his own journey and becomes the protagonist on the scenario of history. If migration is the consequence of economic and political circumstances, it unleashes in turn new events that shape the facts of history. As they begin their journey, the foreigners

⁹ Frédéric Lenoir. *L’anima del mondo*. Bompiani, Milano 2017, 73 (Author’s translation).

set in motion also the social forces of the events that define the times. They are a thermometer measuring not only the well-being of a society but also the moral and religious levels of its openness. Ultimately, they are the criteria of salvation. “*I was a migrant and you took me in*” or “*I was a migrant and you did not welcome me*” (Mt 25,35; 25,43).

Resistance and solidarity are also lessons learned on the journey. The one who walks gets tired, suffers thirst and hunger and loneliness. He needs shelter, rest and companionship, enabling him to continue the journey with new energies and renewed courage. Generally, the migrants find within their family and relatives the initial support upon departure and on arrival. This network of assistance can be turned into a model for personal, social, juridical, psychological, spiritual assistance. In the place of origin, of transit or of destination the migrants’ path is full of hardships. New forms of solidarity can be developed, putting into practice Pope Francis’s four verbs: *welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating*.

Finally, as the faces of migration become diversified and migration itself intensifies and becomes differentiated and multifaceted, there arises the challenge of moving from a multicultural coexistence to an intercultural society. It is not enough to live peacefully with other peoples, languages and nations. We must go further, be challenged and be opened to dialogue. Not only mere coexistence in the same place, but also encounter, mutual challenge and exchange of values and counter values will secure a mutual process of purification and enrichment. F. Lenoir writes: “*The world is beautiful for the variety of its panoramas. Spiritual life is beautiful because of the multiplicity of its paths.*” In this sense, meeting what is different paves the way to the encounter with the transcendent. The encounter with the other and with the stranger smooths the path to encountering the ultimate Other.

Today, many are those who are engaged with the reality of migration and discover in the Scalabrinian spirituality a treasure to be explored in order to live fully the Christian life.
(Basic text of the Scalabrinian *Traditio* 2)

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