Migrants and the Search for Home

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I am a sociologist engaged in migration research. As part of my work, I have many close encounters with migrants and pastoral workers involved in the care of migrants, whose experiences I write about, analyze and make known to the larger public, including policymakers, whose decisions have an impact on the lives of migrants. But this is getting ahead of my story about migrants and what their experiences reveal about the story of Jesus in Asia.

Let me start by retracing a personal experience which happened more than 20 years ago, when I left for the United States to pursue graduate studies there. While I was blessed to have been granted a graduate fellowship, the grant did not include funding for travel. At the time, I had about 80 pesos in my savings account. Amazingly, God took care of the minutest details. A family friend lent money for my ticket, a cousin working in Saudi Arabia loaned me precious dollars to cover start-up expenses, and a friend from college welcomed me in Chicago. Throughout my six-year stay in the US, although I had my share of trying times, I never for a moment ever felt abandoned by God. The real and profound experience of God’s grace in the best and worst of times and in the humdrum and ordinary times of my sojourn in the US spoke to me of God’s faithfulness, of God-with-us. God was personified in the people who became family and friends; He was equally real and reassuring in nameless strangers who showed me kindness and strengthened my faith in the goodness of people. Having experienced hospitality, welcome and solicitude in a foreign land revealed the immensity of God’s love, a powerful memory which animates my involvement in the ministry with migrants. My sojourn in the US reminds me of what it was like to be a stranger, not unlike the Lord’s reminder to the Israelites:

And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.
Deutoronomy 10: 19 (NIV)

The US as “my Egypt” allowed me much space for personal freedom, an environment that nourished rather than diminished my faith life. Having grown up in a very Catholic milieu in the Philippines, practicing my faith was something that I shared with many people. In the US, among my classmates and peers, I was one of the few who identified myself as belonging to a Church and who went to Church. Coming to the university with the mark of the cross on Ash Wednesdays was one of my distinctly “feeling like an alien” moments. In the Philippines, it was not unusual for family and friends to ask for a prayer request, but in the more secular and pluralistic context of the US, it was not that easy to tell a distressed friend that I will pray for her situation. On the other hand, it was also in

1 There are other references in the Old Testament that call to memory the Israelites’ experience of being aliens (or strangers) in Egypt, e.g., Exodus 23:9-11 (“Do not oppress an alien, you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt”) and Leviticus 19:33-34 (“When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your own. Love him as you yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”), among others.
the US that I had an epiphany of the power of God’s message to touch people deeply. My encounters with Catholics and Christians from other cultures underscored the meaning of the Universal Church where no one is a stranger. In my travels to other countries, when I come to church, I know that I am in a place where I encounter the Lord just as I am, and I am welcomed and loved unconditionally.

_Migrants: The Doves who Ventured Outside_²

Sadly, the welcome mat is not laid out for migrants in many parts of the world, including in our region. The accident of having been born elsewhere or holding a different passport casts migrants as the “Other” who are treated differently from citizens or nationals. Various human rights instruments have been developed to strike at the sources of discrimination – gender, age, ethnicity, among others – but most of them pertain to the rights of citizens within the territory of nation-states and are not applicable to migrants or non-citizens.

Migration has been part of human history, but then as now, it is a very selective process, i.e., it does not happen to everyone. Today, there are an estimated 191 million people living outside their countries of birth. International migrants comprise only three percent of the world’s 6.5-billion population. In addition, there are some 13.5 million refugees, i.e., those who were forced to migrate because of conflict and persecution.

Asia has been the scene of diverse and intense migrations since the 1970s. Among the people on the move are: (1) permanent migrants or settlers to the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – many are joining family members who have migrated earlier; (2) temporary migrants, which include the large numbers of women and men who seek work abroad as well as young people who are migrating to pursue their studies in other countries; (3) migrants, mostly women, leaving their home countries to join their spouses; and (4) refugees and forced migrants in search of security elsewhere. There is considerable migration from Asia to other regions, but most migration occurs within the region. Although there are legal channels for migration, these are not enough to accommodate the large numbers of migrants seeking to enter other countries. Thus, many end up using unauthorized channels of migration; or worse, women, men and children may end up being trafficked. In general, those who migrate legally tend to be better protected; unauthorized migrants are less protected compared to legal migrants; and trafficked persons are the most abused and exploited.

_The Meanings of Migration_

Typically, migration is viewed as an economic enterprise. Most people migrate to find a better life elsewhere. In the past, some cultures in Southeast Asia saw migration as a journey of achievement. Thus, men (traditionally, migration was a male domain) left their homes and communities to experience life somewhere else; those who made their way home were considered successful for having overcome the challenges of leaving the familiar.

² Taken from Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem, “Dove that ventured outside” (To Erika, for the festival of praise).

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Migration as a rite of passage has given way to migration as a means to improve the economic conditions of one’s family. In the Asian context, the migration of women and men is very much linked to their aspirations for a better life for their families. Those who are not married usually embark on migration to help their parents while those who have children venture to work abroad in order to provide a better future for their children. Once, on a flight back to Manila, I sat in front of a group of seafarers trading stories about the hardships they encountered in their jobs. One of the fathers mentioned that he hoped none of his children will ever experience what he had gone through, to which the rest of the group agreed. In the case of women migrants engaged in domestic work, it pains them that they are taking care of other people’s children or parents, while leaving their own children or parents to be cared for by other people. For many migrants, migration entails sacrifices, the most difficult of which is the pain of separation from family members. Somehow, migrants find some semblance of family with other migrants they have befriended; in some cases, migrants consider their employers as family as well. For Filipinos, an employer who shows concern or the sharing of meals are indications that their employer has become family sort of, sort of because in the end, they are paid for the work they render.

Not knowing what they will encounter abroad, migrants think of migration as a gamble. For those who will take up domestic work, the stakes are higher because their well-being depends on the kindness of their employers. Many pray that they will have a good employer. Some of those who did not have the good fortune to work with a good employer prayed for a change in their employers’ ways – and there were indeed cases of employers having a change of heart. When I relayed this story to a visiting scholar from the West, she was incredulous that prayers, not political action, could effect such a change.

The many trials that migrants face, beginning with the application process to their departure to their actual stay abroad and to their return, is an experience that is akin to undergoing a purification process or going through a test. For this reason, some social scientists have liked migration to a “secular pilgrimage,” wherein trials and problems are meant to be overcome so that in the end, one emerges as a better person for having survived the odds. This is suggested by how Janet, a former entertainer who had returned to the Philippines, summed up her experience:

“Overall, I would say that going abroad has been a very good experience for me. I learned many things and it enabled me to realize my dreams. I had happy moments, and if there were bad experiences, I take them as part of life.”

Migration, Displacement, Marginalization

You can’t feel at home here, never, even after years and years, even if now we have everything to live like in Kerala. Because we have no right: just the right to work and be silent.
Beemole, a nurse in the UAE for more than 20 years

The quotation above is even more arresting when we consider that it came from a highly skilled migrant, a category of migrant who is usually in a better position than less skilled workers. And yet, despite the trappings that come with a white-collar job, stripped of her rights, Beemole’s statement speaks of being seen only as a worker, much like a commodity or an instrument, and not as a human being.

The experiences of less skilled migrants or those working in the informal sector, or those who are not documented are far worse. According to a Filipina domestic worker in Hong Kong, her employer did not even call her by her name, but instead called her a slave. The abuses of foreign domestic workers are myriad – psychological abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse and maltreatment and sexual abuse, and more common forms of exploitation such as non-payment or delay in the payment of wages, long working hours and no days off. In South Korea, in 1995, a group of Nepali workers staged a protest in front of Myongdong Cathedral to call attention to the punishing conditions faced by unauthorized migrant workers. The protesting workers held placards that said, “We are not slaves – we are humans.” The increasing trend of international marriages in our region has a dark side as well. Involving brokers who match men from the more developed countries in Asia and women from the less developing countries in the region, profiles of women are presented to men like goods on sale. These brokers also relay exaggerated information about the qualities of the men looking for wives. According to a Filipina who married a Korean man two days after meeting him in Manila, her “agent” told her that if she did not marry the Korean man who was interested in her, she may not have another chance to find a good partner. When she left Manila to join her husband in Korea, she was looking forward to starting a family, a dream that was dashed soon after her arrival. On her second day in Korea, her husband beat her up; she worked in the family farm; she was not allowed to call her family in the Philippines; and she was repeatedly told that the family paid a huge sum of money for the marriage. She ran away several times but was told by her agent in Korea that she has to return to the husband. When we met in Korea, she had ran away from her husband (“for good,” she said) because she feared for her life and the child she was carrying in her womb.

Welcoming Migrants

The sketches above are just a few of the numerous stories highlighting the harsh welcome that meets migrants in the destination countries. The support extended by local Churches and receiving communities is an oasis of welcome in an otherwise inhospitable environment. The presence of the Church is itself a symbol of hope for Catholic migrants away from home. One of the reasons why Filipino migrants are generally better protected compared to other migrants is due to, among other reasons, the enabling environment fostered by the Church. They get to meet other Filipinos, they take part in the celebration of the Eucharist, they get invited to a banquet where there is a place for everyone; for those burdened with problems, in some churches, and the welcome extends to programs...

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and services addressing the concerns of migrants. For migrant workers who work six days in a week (in the case of domestic workers, they work in isolation from other workers), the Sabbath takes on a special significance, the one day in the week when they can be human beings, not just workers. One unforgettable experience during my fieldwork in Sabah a few years ago took place in St. Paul’s Church in Kota Kinabalu. As I was stepping out of the church, I was met by a huge throng of people excitedly entering the church – I was struck not just by their numbers but most of all, by the joy that I saw in many faces. They looked like they were really looking forward to the mass. I later found out that they were Indonesians. Knowing the difficult conditions in the plantations where many Indonesians work and the general working and living conditions of migrants in the area, their joyful expression was deeply moving.

From a secular point of view, migration is part and parcel of the uneven process globalization. From a faith perspective, the unfolding of migration and our response to it can reveal the story of Jesus in Asia. As followers of Jesus Christ, the way we live reveals the real place of Jesus in our lives. In our specific roles as migrants, government officials, recruiters, employers, left-behind family members, pastoral workers, we are all called to be faithful to the commandments of the Lord. As Church, we are challenged to respond to migration in various ways. Migration can entail oppressive conditions which need to be addressed; it can also present opportunities, such as the opportunity for dialogue, which can deepen the life of the Church and its people.

In the countries of origin, part of the Church’s ministry to migrants is to advocate for policies and practices that respect the rights of migrant workers. In countries where migration is sizable, the Church faces the challenge of shepherding its flock beyond national borders. The wide distribution of Filipinos in different parts of the world is a challenge to the Church in the Philippines – in particular, the migration of Filipinos to countries where freedom of religious expression is not respected causes much concern. More recently, migrants as agents of evangelization has dawned on the Church, but this is not to be read as promoting migration for the purpose of evangelization. The late Cardinal Sin had many stories of Filipino migrants, who by their work and the practice of their faith – saying grace, going to Church – have rekindled the faith of the families that they worked for. There is a need for formation and sustaining the faith of migrants first and foremost. Migrants who rose above their problems and those whose families remained intact despite the separation attribute their faith in God as the source of their strength. The families left behind are a special concern of the Church in the countries of origin, where the separation of family members can sorely test marriages and parent-child relationships.

In the countries of destination, the Church is specifically called to the duty of hospitality and to welcome all migrants. I saw in Korea the telling of Jesus’ love to all people by the solicitude of pastoral workers who provide support and build solidarity with migrant workers. In one shelter for women who ran away from their husbands, despite the language barrier, the language of care translated into healing and welcome. Migrants are the strangers who wear the face of our Lord, and those who welcome Him are promised a
place Jesus has prepared in His Father’s mansion. Migrants remind us that we are all migrants whose real home is the Father’s home.