

## **The theological foundations of the right to migrate in Catholic social teaching**

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The concept of the "right to migrate" was originally introduced in Catholic social teaching by Pope Pius XII, as outlined for the first time in the apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia* of 1952. Subsequently, each pope boldly affirmed this right, establishing a theological framework based on four main principles: the universal destination of goods, the dignity of the human person, hospitality, and the Lord's command to evangelize. This essay will briefly present the principles that are at the root of the migration ethics in Catholic social teaching.

Pope Pius XII, addressing the displacement crisis post-World War II, anchored the right to migrate in the universal destination of Earth's goods. Rooted in the theological perspective of church fathers like saints Ambrose and Basil, this principle asserts that God created the Earth for the flourishing of all human beings. Private property, sovereignty, and political boundaries, according to this view, should serve the primary goal of ensuring the well-being of all individuals. For this reason, Pius XII taught that people should be allowed to move across borders in order to find the means to provide for themselves and their families.

Building upon Pius XII's foundation, Pope John XXIII elevated the right to migrate to the status of a fundamental human right in his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. This document reflected a response to the 20th-century experience of totalitarian regimes. Recognizing the inherent dignity of every human person, created in the image of God, John XXIII emphasized the duty to respect and protect this dignity, irrespective of political or national affiliations. Thus, people should be allowed to leave their countries and be admitted into other nations when "just reasons" are in play. The right to migrate is present alongside other fundamental rights like the right to own property and the right to political activity.

Similarly, Pope Francis in his Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2014) affirms that migrants must be welcomed as brothers and sisters, because every human being is a child of God, created in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). The dignity of the human person does not depend on a particular language, ethnicity, visa, or passport, but on the fact that all people have the same Creator and are made in his image. This gives rise to the duty of solidarity and hospitality towards foreign migrants, especially those most in need.

This duty of hospitality is another crucial theological justification for the right to migrate. Drawing on scripture, the Church has historically advocated for hospitality, which meant the protection and provision of resources to those in need, especially foreigners. The reference in the letter to the Hebrews, for instance, to hosting angels without awareness further underscores the importance of extending hospitality (Heb 13:2). In a message in celebration of the World Day of the Migrant in 1983, John Paul II argues that hospitality toward migrants is a Christian duty, which should not be neglected.

Popes have also linked hospitality to the broader concept of solidarity, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all humanity. Pope John Paul II addresses solidarity and migration in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America* in 1999. The Synod of the Americas addressed the theme of the evangelization of the American continent within the framework of the 500th anniversary of the encounter between Europeans and natives. In this document, one of the main issues was the promotion of solidarity, in view of the great socio-economic inequalities between north and south. The Synod Fathers recognized the great human mobility on the continent as an opportunity for solidarity and evangelical fraternity. In his Message for World Migration Day in 1995, John Paul II explains that solidarity is taking responsibility for those who find themselves in difficulty. The Pope uses the story of Cain and Abel to challenge our attitude about the most needy, especially the migrant: "What have you done with your brother?" (cf. Gen 4:9-10). 10). The answer should not be given within the limits imposed by the law, but in the style of Christian solidarity. Solidarity requires a real, generous commitment to the good of the other and not merely being content to offer the minimum according to the law.

Finally, we should mention the principle of evangelization. The spiritual care of migrants has always been at the forefront of papal considerations. The Lord's command to spread the good news to all nations serves as a foundational principle, suggesting that undue restrictions on migration hinder the fulfillment of this divine mission. Pope John Paul II envisioned migrants as missionaries, carrying the gospel to unreached places and re-evangelizing societies facing secularization. This principle is intrinsically connected to the notion of religious liberty, as Christians are sometimes compelled to migrate in order to freely practice their faith, away from parts of the world where persecution exists.

In this context, Benedict XVI comments in the Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees in 2011 that contemporary migratory movements are an excellent opportunity for the new evangelization. Men and women from all over the world who do not yet know Jesus Christ migrate to countries with an ancient Christian tradition. According to the Holy Father, migrants themselves are also called to be heralds of the Word to places where the gospel has not been proclaimed.

In conclusion, the theological foundation of the right to migrate, articulated by the Magisterium in the 20th century, provides a compelling perspective for all Christians on this complex and contentious issue. From the universal destination of goods to the Lord's command to evangelize, these principles offer a holistic framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity and the duty to respect the inherent dignity of every person, created in the image of God. As we navigate the challenges of migration in the contemporary world, these theological insights can serve as a guide for fostering compassion, understanding, and justice for migrants and refugees across the globe.

## **About the author**

Antônio Lemos hails from Curitiba, Brazil. Presently, he is pursuing a Ph.D. in moral theology at the University of Notre Dame. His ongoing research journey navigates the right of migration as laid out in Catholic social teaching and the traditions of Christianity. He holds a particular fascination for the theological and moral principles that serve as the bedrock of this right, while also tracing its historical origins, with a keen eye on the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish scholastic influences. His other interests include virtue ethics, economics, business ethics, and bioethics.