

# A message from the Swiss Bishops on the occasion of the implementation of the new concept of pastoral care of migrants.



SCHWEIZER BISCHOFSKONFERENZ  
CONFÉRENCE DES ÉVÊQUES SUISSES  
CONFERENZA DEI VESCOVI SVIZZERI  
CONFERENZA DILS UESTGS SVIZZERS

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Römisch-Katholische Zentralkonferenz der Schweiz  
Conférence centrale catholique romaine de Suisse  
Conferenza centrale cattolica romana della Svizzera  
Conferenza centrala catolica romana da la Svizra

## A message from the Swiss Bishops on the occasion of the implementation of the new concept of pastoral care of migrants

The new concept of pastoral care of migrants, which has now been communicated to all the actors concerned, is the result of much reflection and consultation. It is meant to address the need for intercultural pastoral care in the current context of migration. To consider present-day migration, and the many challenges it poses, is indeed to evoke the very roots of the Church: God's Pilgrim People. It reveals our identity as believers, descendants of Abraham, our father in faith, because our roots connect us to him. «My father was a wandering Aramean.» (Deuteronomy 26:5)

Thus begins the Creed of Israel, which speaks of the life of the faithful with their God. The Letter to the Hebrews echoes this profession of faith: all those ancestors, whose only baggage as they made their way through history was their unshakeable belief in God, «acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.» (Hebrews 11:13). Without pretension, but with a conviction as solid as the faith of their fathers because it is based on their example, the Bishops of Switzerland, in close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Central Conference of Switzerland (RKZ), have ordained that this concept of pastoral care of migrants be put into practice. The current crisis, a result of population movements caused by forced migration of refugees, as well as by the increasing numbers of economic refugees arriving at our borders, impelled the re-activation of the project. The findings of a first analysis highlighted a forgotten fact: approximately 40% of the Catholic population of Switzerland comes from migration. Many may see the faces of their parents or grandparents when they say «my father was a wandering...». The resulting diversity of origins, cultures, languages, traditions and liturgical rites gives the Church in Switzerland a distinctive colour, a unique identity. It is up to us to welcome this reality as an opportunity. It will indeed be one if we all respect our differences in building a Church of Jesus dedicated to the common good. A Church in which no one feels forgotten, abandoned, left out (Colossians 3/22; Galatians 3:28), a Church that affirms that the communion established by Jesus Christ (John 17) requires our full commitment.

The guidelines given by Pope Francis, who invites us to welcome, protect, support and integrate the migrants, are our compass. The following brief commentaries by two priests whose pastoral care is daily confronted with the realities of migration provide an illustration of the beauty of an evangelical project that actively promotes coexistence based on mutual respect.

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**The following are two testimonies of the daily pastoral commitment of many missionaries of the Gospel.**

As priest moderator for ten years in the region west of Lausanne, I have had the pleasure of meeting those who represent the majority of Catholics in the LGF (Lausanne-Geneva-Fribourg) Diocese, the allophones! They are of diverse origins: Italy, Portugal, South America, France, Poland, but also the Swiss German speaking region of Switzerland, to mention only the main ones. Although migration in Switzerland dates back over a century, today the urban parish community of Renens includes 3rd generation southern Italians, 2nd generation northern Portuguese, recently arrived South Americans with children, and French who work at the EPFL (École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne) and at companies of the secondary and tertiary sectors.

- A new type of migration is also arriving from the above-mentioned countries. Academics, researchers, or specialists in advanced computer science and robotics, these people come for a given period, often with their families, and if they are practicing Catholics they require, at a minimum, the Mass and Catechesis in their mother tongue. Their time is limited: 5 to 8 years on average before they return home.
- Two consequences of the pandemic are that long-established parishioners are reluctant to return home, whereas newly arrived parishioners in a precarious situation who seek better economic conditions on the outskirts of the large cities in the French-speaking region of Switzerland seem prepared to emigrate...
- Under the supervision of pastoral agents who are appointed according to the specificities of the parish, this diverse population must interact with its environment. As for the «natives», they are encouraged to migrate as well, towards their neighbours – to live in a community made up of 51% of allophones is a migration in itself!
- In the pastoral work to facilitate coexistence and promote interaction among Catholics of different origins, one has also to allow that there may be friction, tension, incomprehension, even failure. The aim is not «unity in diversity» no matter what, but rather the building of intercommunal trust – slow and patient work that requires an ability to listen, to encourage, and to build relationships...

Being Catholic, *cath'olikos*, means being open to plurality, being inclusive, centrifugal rather than centripetal... when one is anchored in Christ, our universal brother, the son of «Our Father».

(Abbé Thierry Schelling, priest)

During my pastoral ministry I have observed that the pastoral care of migrants is often mired in an ask/receive rationale: hospitality, the use of a church or of a parochial venue, the financing of pastoral activities, etc. I think it is necessary to avoid limiting oneself to the allocation of liturgical and parochial places, or of economic resources and expenditures, but rather to seek a sharing within the Church to achieve a wider communion.

«For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.» (Matthew 25:14-15)

The Lord called unto Him His servants and entrusted to them His goods. To each according to his own dynamism, his ability to lead and to work, to administer and to be productive, to achieve, to preserve, and to promote. Then the Lord set out; He was the pioneer migrant, the first-born of the Church was a pilgrim on the Earth.

Still today, it is He who calls to us and entrusts us with His goods, of which the most precious is His people and ours, His Church.

We are all pilgrims on this Earth and in this country, where we were born or where we arrived, which welcomes us all, and for which each of us is responsible. Great is the value of His Church, which is His house, but also our house, the physical and spiritual place where God's People meet and live in a personal and communal faith, a faith that is expressed and experienced in its diversity. Great must be the dynamic love for the women and men who comprise the Church, who serve and guide it and watch over it. Through baptism we have all been welcomed into the Church; we are all called to take care of it and to watch over each other, to remain open in our welcome and vigilant in our promotion of man and his rights. Whatever our origins, the Lord entrusts His goods to us according to our abilities to welcome and listen, respectful of different customs and traditions, respectful of diversity.

Even though we may sometimes succumb to the temptation to "bury" those goods, by hiding them in the ground and isolating them from the rest of the Church, the Lord continues to entrust them to us.

It is up to us, migrants and residents together, to take care of His goods, to be ready to welcome Him upon His return, and to hear his invitation: «Well done ... enter thou into the joy of thy lord.» (Matthew 25:21).

(Francesco Marra, deacon)

Our heartfelt thanks go to these two colleagues. Their testimonies illustrate the daily pastoral commitment of many missionaries of the gospel. On the one hand they bring to our attention new forms of migration as social, economic and political events change our world, and on the other they remind us of the need for a strong biblical anchor, the first source of inspiration of any pastoral response.

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For the Swiss Bishops

**Mgr. Jean-Marie Lovey CRB**  
Head of the sector «migratio»