

The Communicative Dimensions of the Church's Vision of Migrants and Refugees: An African Perspective

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Preamble

(*Note: I have done this long historical part for the sake of many journalists who would read this paper independently and who might not know the development of the Church's vision on migrants and refugees).*

“We would have before our eyes not numbers, not dangerous invaders, but the faces and stories, gazes, expectations and sufferings of real men and women to listen to.” (Pope Francis, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 56th World Day of Social Communications, 2022).

In the present context, it is imperative to remember what happened ten years ago. If we don't remember, we won't know at what point we are now. We need to avoid slogans and speak with our hearts and share to make things move” (Dr. Paolo Ruffini, the Vatican Prefect of the Dicastery for Communications speaking to Vatican News, Andrea de Angelis on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis visit to Lampedusa on July 8, 2013 in solidarity with the migrants who perished trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe)

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I am glad to participate at another *Signis Africa* workshop, this time on the Migrants and Refugees question. I thank the migrant section of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development for the great work it is doing and for supporting this workshop. I also thank Signis World present here in the person of Ms Helen Ousman its president and her husband John for joining us as wella as all Signis International officials. I congratulate the President of Signis Africa, Rev Prof Walter Ihejirika and all Signis Africa officials and collaborators for putting this together. I thank the Uganda Bishops Conference through its President, Bishop Anthony Zziwa for hosting this important assembly. I welcome all participants and trust that your presence will enrich you and enrich this workshop.

The topic I have: “The Communicative Dimension of the Church's vision of Migrants and Refugees: An African Perspective” invites us to expose the Church's vision on migrants and refugees and asks us to confront the often-sad reality of migrants and refugees of the African continent with the vast possibilities of our calling as communicators In the Church in Africa.

1. The Vision of the Church up to Pope Francis

The above citations above from the Holy Father, Pope Francis and from the prefect of the Dicastery for Communications seem to me to give a clear view of where we should be headed, a world with a heart open to all and which treats all as brothers and sisters irrespective of the situation in which they are found. The messages of the pope to the media on Word Communications Day in the last three years provide us with a roadmap for our communications strategy. In 2021, he urged the catholic media to always to “Come and See”, in 2022 he asked that we “Listen with the ear of the heart” and in the current year to actually “Speak with the Heart”. All this, put together, express somehow “the

pontificate of inclusion” which pope Francis has pursued in the Church in his time.

Pope Francis has clearly led the Church further on the road of the civilization of love, promoting encounter and social friendship with the needy, the less privileged and others who do not share our status, situation, and condition. He has sought to increase universal solidarity and welcome especially through his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelium Gaudium* on the joy of the gospel and the encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, on fraternity and social friendship. He has written many messages on the necessity of listening with the heart to the plight of others, seeing with the eyes of compassion and identifying with the condition of the down trodden. That agenda has culminated in the ongoing synodality process which insists that the mission of evangelization in the Church must embrace inclusion, carrying everybody along and not leaving anyone behind.

With the earlier landmark action of the Holy Father's pontificate to reconfigure the Dicastery of Justice and Peace into a new framework of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development we got an early indicator. That Dicastery, has a section that deals specifically with issues concerning migrants, refugees and victims of slave trade, human trafficking, giving necessary attention to issues pertaining to the needs of those who are forced to abandon their countries or those who are without one.

While the world of today closes itself in against migrants and refugees through policies and action, the Church reacts differently. This year 2023 we celebrate the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees on Sunday, 24 September with the “politically incorrect” theme: "Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay." It provides another occasion to express support and concern for people who are forced to flee their homes, to encourage Catholics worldwide to remember and pray for those displaced by conflict and persecution, and increase awareness

about the opportunities that migration offers. The Church is not about to relent in her advocacy and work in favour of migrants and refugees anytime soon.

Christianity, from its patriarchal origins to Jesus Christ, is a migrant religion. Going by the Christian eschatological faith, we are all on a pilgrimage to heaven and none has a permanent home in this world. Abraham our father in faith had to migrate from Ur of the Chaldeans to a place where God would show him. Can we say that God who followed his people from Egypt to the promised land is also a migrant God? Jesus Christ himself, faced with the threat of King Herod, became a refugee in Egypt. That is why Pope Pius XII already in 1952 taught: The exiled Holy Family of Nazareth, fleeing into Egypt, is the archetype of every refugee family. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are thus the models and protectors of every migrant, pilgrim, and refugee.

2. Key Elements of the Church's Vision on Migrants and Refugees

On broad lines, the Catholic Church's teaching on migrants and refugees establishes:

- That all are obliged to welcome the stranger. That such welcome is an opportunity to practice the commandment of love (Mark 12:29-31) and the work of mercy. That Christ has in some way united himself to every person especially those in need (cf.Mt.25:31ff)
- That all peoples have the right to live a dignified life in their homeland.
- That people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families, and to seek asylum:
- That anyone whose life is threatened whether because of persecution, armed conflicts, natural disasters, or economic

conditions or physical integrity has the right to support and protection.

Catholic teaching on migrants and refugees is therefore informed by:

a. *The human dignity principle*

Human life is sacred because each person is created in the image and likeness of God. Human dignity is inalienable. The human dignity and human rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers must be respected, regardless of their citizenship, visa status or mode of arrival. In addition, the Catholic Church teaches that the demands of human dignity always take precedence even over national interest.

b. *Devotion to humanity*

Countries have the right to regulate their borders and to control immigration meaning that all nations have a right to regulate migration across their borders. This right is however mitigated by the duty of nations to protect and help innocent victims and those fleeing for their lives. The right of nations to regulate their borders is an extension of the right of all persons to live a dignified life in their community. Borders are for the protection of people, not for the exclusion of people seeking protection.

c. *The prerogative of justice and mercy*

The purpose of the law is to serve justice and mercy (cf. Matthew 23:23). Laws which subject immigrants and asylum seekers to arbitrary and prolonged immigration detention or banish them from seeking protection, fail to uphold justice and mercy and are immoral. It is not illegal to seek asylum. Many asylum seekers are survivors of crimes, torture, and trauma. Indefinite detention increases their stress and suffering, impacting on their mental and physical health. The Church advocates the implementation of just and rapid procedures to determine each person's claim for protection if only out of mercy.

d. *Solidarity*

The most vulnerable people are not simply those who are in a needy situation to whom we kindly offer an act of solidarity, but are members of our family with whom we have a duty to share the resources we have. Solidarity towards migrants and refugees is inscribed in the common membership of the human family.

e. *The right to be part of any community*

The Catholic Church teaches that all people have the right to be part of a community. Asylum seekers who have been forced from their homeland have a duty to integrate into their host community. We must favour this integration by helping migrants to find a place where they may live in peace and safety, where they may work and take on the rights and duties that exist in the country that welcomes them.

f. *The intrinsic value in human migration*

This also makes it imperative that we recognize and value how much migrants can contribute to the process of building of the society and church community. They might be foreigners, not invaders or destroyers, but willing labourers who rebuild the walls of the new Jerusalem, that Jerusalem whose gates are open to all peoples (cf. Is 60:10-11). The arrival of foreigners is a source of enrichment (cf. Is. 60:5).

g. *The need to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate*

Pope Francis' mantra for sane attitude towards migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons has become the catchphrase for a healthy attitude to the phenomena under scrutiny. His elucidation of the concepts in Fratelli Tutti reinforces the imperative of a civilization of love in the Church's vision.

3. **The Challenge to African Church Communication**

Last month, June 2023, the prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, Cardinal Michael Czerny, speaking as papal representative at the 140th anniversary celebration of the evangelization of the Congo, highlighted the link between evangelization and the promotion of the human person and the social magisterium of Pope Francis, which appears especially in the Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and the encyclicals *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*". He said:

"It is the encounter with Christ, and not an ideology or a sociology, that generates the preferential option for the poor. Let us regain compassion and solidarity and express them daily. Let us develop true development. Let us generate responsibility and mutual accountability between the individual, society, the state, and the religions,"; I see this challenge as fully applicable to the theme of migrants and refugees in Africa.

4. **Human Mobility and the Church in Africa**

We must continue to interrogate the popular assumption that Africa is a continent on the move to the outside world. One of the implications of that myth is that too many push factors provoking this abound on the continent and that the youthfulness of its population makes Africans aggressive, and adventurous. Less cited but better researched data show that most migrations in Africa are driven by economic considerations and study. Not for nothing that the highest concentration of migrations within Africa are in economically and educationally viable countries like Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa (*African Migration Trends to Watch in 2023 by Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Infographic January 9, 2023). The Bishops of Africa under the umbrella of the Symposium of

Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) have been concerned about African migrants and refugees, and have done considerable work through their secretariat, especially through their Justice Peace and Development Office.

However, many African migrants languish and suffer because of discrimination, racism, disinformation, xenophobia and sheer indifference. The refugee and migrant situation in Tunisia, Morocco, Eritrea, Sudan, Ivory Coast, South Africa, Nigeria, Somalia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Congo even here in Uganda and elsewhere continue to cry for attention. In July 2022 the Bishops of Africa studied the phenomenon of migration on the continent during their plenary assembly at Accra, Ghana. Cardinal Lopez Rome Cristobal of Rabat, Morocco provided some working insights at the assembly. He cited contemporary data that 1 out of every 30 people in the world is a migrant. This adds up to about around 258 million people, about 50 million of whom are children. He therefore confirmed that migration is not an African but a global phenomeon and should be seen as a human phenomenon or a social reality rather than as a problem. He emphasized that in Africa most migrations are done intra continentally and are done legally. Studies as cited above have shown that the contemporary myth that Africans in their millions are waiting to invade Europe or America is simply not true. What is true is that only 14 percent of the global migrant population is African, compared to 41 percent and 24 percent for Asia and Europe respectively. (Africa and Europe: Facts and Figures on African Migrations, by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation and Africa Europe foundation). The Bishops of SECAM strongly counseled that all who would migrate in Africa strive to do so only through legal means.

Nonetheless it is true that the wars, the political and religious conflicts, hunger, the north-south dichotomy, human misery, the ecological crises, and bad governance etc. push many in Africa to relocate and

seek greener pastures and security away from their countries of origin. This is the original sin of the refugee situation. As is often said, even in Africa, if jobs, wealth, and security are not found where people are, people will go where jobs, wealth and security are found. Well-to-do people, can generally circulate all over the world freely without hindrance. What is rejected is more than not, the poverty not the migrant. Even in Africa, hardly anybody not even government complains when a billionaire superstar decides to live in another country other than his.

In Africa like elsewhere in the world, migration provides manpower and expertise, promotes growth and development both in the countries of departure and in the countries of destination or welcome. In 2017 alone migrants (all over the world) sent to their country of origin an estimated 450 billion dollars, which was thrice the sum of development aid which all the rich countries sent to other countries. That figure becomes even more relevant considering that migrants spent an estimated 85per cent of their income in the countries which welcomed them. In fact, migrants are not rejected because they are migrants but because they are poor.

Cardinal Cristobal noted that migration and the refugee phenomenon is also fuelled in Africa largely by:

- The ignorance of those who migrate about the laws of where they are going and the reality of life there,
- The brutal but effective work of the cabals that profit from migrations
- The disinterest of national authorities in discouraging migrations, believing that the more people move, the lesser mouths there are to feed
- Ignorance of religious organizations about the real situation and their unwillingness to get involved with migrants and refugees

- The attraction of the loudly-proclaimed success of a few migrants who make it and the silence of many who fail or die trying to move.
- Ignorance of the Church's solid teaching on human dignity and the right of migrants and refugees to seek security and livelihood anywhere possible.

The foregoing then seems to me to be the important areas of focus for Church media intervention if the situation must change. How the African Catholic media professionals can contribute with their skills to the amelioration of the situation seems to me to be the task around which we are assembled,

5. The Communicative Dimension: What Must Be done

5.1. Evolve alternative media tools and strategies

The entire communication apparatus of the Church in Africa is challenged to feed, sustain, and support the vision which the Church embraces. The vision of the Church characteristically challenges all predominant nationalist and protectionist stance and policies which many countries and institutions of the Western world operate today. African migrants and refugees also suffer from such restrictive policies. Institutions and governments which operate such policies are generally supported by their own cooperative, sensationalist media. Since media eventually define communion and influence community, the Church media and press in Africa must challenge the agenda set by the “cooperative” media which amplify, restrictive anti migrant and refugee policies. There might be a call to duty here to evolve an “African lexicon” of terms and phraseologies informed by Christian vision and values that Christian journalists can adopt in order to educate, inform, critique, and influence governmental policies and institutions. They can over time use such a lexicon, to set an alternative, welcoming agenda for migrants reporting and self-regulation.

5.2. Amplify Church Teachings and Related Declarations

To feed the Church's vision Catholic communicators need to know that vision in the documents and teachings of the Holy Father, and of the competent offices and officials within and outside the Church. Making them more diffused and breaking them down into catchy digestible messages that impact into society and people is also necessary. Messages given during special occasions like the United Nations World Refugee Day each year and the Church's own World Day of Migrants Day and Refugees have such quality content. Such must be exploited to celebrate the heroism, talents, strength, and courage of African peoples who are forced to flee from their homes and thus improve public perception, understanding and solidarity for their situation.

In Africa where the Church has configured herself as “The Church Family of God,” catholic journalist would do well to help bridge the gap between policy and action. African governments and institutions generally agree that mobile populations should be treated with dignity and compassion but for various reasons, lack the memory, the will and capacity to make this happen. Journalists are known to take on with their skills, issues that politicians would generally rather avoid. The four favourable concepts of Pope Francis about migrants and refugees, to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate migrants and refugees can be a useful tool for this task.

5.3. Interrogate Current Paradigms

Sensationalist media reports, reinforced by politicians and even partisan scholars about masses of Africans dying to get out of Africa, to populate the West need to be challenged. (How diffused for example, is the information that 86 percent of migration within Africa is not related to conflict but to education and the search for a better life? And is it not true that much of the refugee crises in Africa is caused by exploitation and interference from outside Africa?) We must discard what has been

referred to as Africa's chronic, psychotic addiction to definitions that originate from the West, about Africa and African life because he who defines the subjects determines the understanding of the same.

According to a Zimbabwean lawyer's submission on African migration, African communication professionals must change current narratives about migrants and refugees in order to modify public perception of the realities which migrants and refugees go through. The only way to make this happen is to control the narrative in both analogue and digital forms. Only by so doing can we interrogate the data and statistics imposed on these phenomena. Accordingly, we must take control of the digital platforms which determine how much importance and coverage is given to the positive contributions of African migrants and refugees wherever they are found. Only in this manner can we begin to correct the Western supremacist views about the contributions of black people to the entire world economy and secure more public sympathy for migrants, and refugees.

5.4. Engage the Digital Transformation of Our world to Give Migrants a Voice

Digital transformation in the world is today reversing the personal and social effects of language, by diminishing, or even eliminating the responsibility of the individual from human affairs. Church media must engage this world and promote a process that evolves language that helps to restore responsibility for the other, for the neighbour as well as give a voice to those we seek to help. Migrants and refugees need to be heard in the management of the space and issues that concern them. It might be necessary to launch something like a “Be Fair, Be Bold, Speak Up and Be Blessed” program for migrants, and refugees to express themselves. The journalist can help by creating engaging, empathetic digital stories that favour the experiences of the migrants and refugees. In doing this, the energy and the skills of the young generation, indigenes of the digital media, need to be coopted. The document

recently released by the Dicastery for Social Communications entitled: “Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media” speaks to this need. In it the dicastery emphasized how important it is for Catholics to engage the digital space and turn it into a co-created space where it is possible to provoke communion with and responsibility for others. Catholic communicators and especially the youth must become active participants not marginal ones in the digital conversation. On this I commend and encourage the Citizen Journalism initiative of Signis Africa to give young people in the church the skill and confidence to be part of the conversation around them. Such a presence can serve as a catalyst for giving voice to migrants and refugees and secure their inalienable rights and dignity.

5.5. Appropriate Pacts and Treaties Outside the Church

Conversations are continually taking place about migrants and refugees. It is important for Church communicators to know about various multilateral pacts, agreements, treaties that are produced from time to time on the migrants and refugee issues. Even though the problem of non-commitment and double standards may be real and discouraging, the content of such accords can provide inspiration and resources for decisions and policies at various levels. Most of such multilateral treaties, even when signed are not legally binding, but it is helpful to know them because that they can be referred to as evidence of concern on the part of countries and governments that sign them and the content of the issues confronted. One good example of such is the Marrakesh pact which is an agreement by leaders from 64 countries in a global pact to prevent suffering and chaos for global migration. It deserves to be better known. Although some countries like the United States withdrew from it and it contains a clause that it is not legally binding, it did call on states that host migrants to respect their rights, give them basic services and help them to flourish economically. Such positive undertakings which coincide with the Church's vision for

migrants, even if having no legal force at present, can eventually seep into initiatives of groups and nations down the years in favour of migration.

5.6. Compile Database Prioritize Networking of Catholic Resources

To do any battle it is necessary to know one's resources. (Lk 14:31) A credible database would be a firm support for Catholic journalists and a mine of information for reporting on migrants and refugees. Such a database would be a strong resource for the work of the Church in other areas as well because it would be a link platform for higher and more competent platforms and collaboration with the Dicastery for Communications.

5.7. Reinforce Existent Communication Structures in the African Church

In relation to the above, the Church in Africa must put its resource where its mouth is and invest more in communication personnel and skills. This must be done through adequate budgeting and funding of communication plans, processes, and personnel at all levels. This will help strengthen existent structures of church communications in Africa through greater capacity building, commitment, training, and coordination. What we are doing here is part of this. Often, access to information can not translate to social transformation because the capacity for implementation is lacking. Journalists need both, given the dynamic nature of the communication field itself. Another welcome development is the newsletter of SECAM programs and initiatives, recently revived by the secretariat. Such an organ, well supported, will help the collaboration and patronage of African journalists in their work with migrants. CEPACS of which I am President, was established in 1973 to support the work of SECAM and play the role of nurturing and coordinating the pastoral communication structures, personnel,

and resources available to the Church in Africa. It was to work through the eight regions into which SECAM is configured. Despite many bright years of existence, especially around the Synod of Bishops for Africa in 1994, it has also had many dormant ones. Fortunately, there is now a big push to evaluate its 50-year journey and relaunch it on the path of future effectiveness during its forthcoming golden jubilee assembly in November, 2023. All African journalists should support such a revival in the interest of their work.

5.7. Research and Study: Capacity and Coordination

Whoever must control narratives and data needs to do much study and research and constantly build up capacity in order to access and effectively use available data. It is obvious that African Catholic journalists need deliberate research and study to aid the communication dimension of the vision which we aim to promote. Outside of Church circles, the United Nations, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and similar platforms, all offer a rich mine-resource for useful information and contacts. The support of partner agencies is seriously required in this capacity need. Within the Church, the considerable work already being done by the Church in Africa especially through its SECAM secretariat as earlier mentioned can be a great incentive but is largely unknown. Such information could energise and inspire initiatives and collaboration at many levels and serve to ameliorate the plight of migrants. Here is a summary:

Brief Report on SECAM Migration Activities

1. In 2019, SECAM organized a pastoral collaboration on the migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea between the Bishops of West Africa, North Africa, and Europe. The bishops were accompanied by representatives of the International Catholic

- Migration Commission (ICMC), Regional Secretaries of RECOWA, and CERNA. The meeting was hosted by Cristóbal Cardinal López Romero, the Archbishop of Rabat, Morocco. The bishops had an opportunity to interact and visit migrant transit centres in Tangier and Rabat, and commended the Catholic Church's pastoral engagement with the migrants in transit. SECAM plans to continue such collaborations in future.
2. SECAM continues to collaborate with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), particularly in the area of the promotion of the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. In the focus for 2023, ICMC intends to aid the SECAM working group by helping them become more acquainted with the Global Compacts and offering them assistance in comprehending their present state of implementation in Africa.
 3. SECAM is also collaborating with Caritas Internationalis Geneva Office and Caritas Africa to empower Caritas Offices and Departments on the continent on submission of the Universal Peer Reviews (UPRs) on the status of migrants and other human rights-related issues. For 2023, the plans include the organization of capacity-building workshops for those countries whose UPRs will be reviewed this year and in 2024.
 4. SECAM enjoys a cordial working relationship with the African Union CIDO, through its observer status that was obtained in 2015. SECAM representative at the AU is Berhaneyesus Cardinal Demerew Souraphiel, the Archbishop of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. One of the staff of the AU Commission is a member of the SECAM Working Group on Migration and Human Trafficking.

5. The SECAM Migration and Human Trafficking Working Group recently (on 20th April 2023) organized a continental online conference on Statelessness, where the Most Rev. Buti, the Archbishop of Johannesburg gave a Key Note Address. The Conference was called to reflect on the magnitude of statelessness on the continent and what the Church could do to address this perennial challenge affecting people on the move. The conference, inspired by Pope Francis' 2023 theme on migrants "Free to choose whether to migrate or to stay" was one of the SECAM events to commemorate the 109th World Day of Migrants and Refugees World Migrants Day to be held on Sunday, September 24, 2023. Among the key issues stressed for action included the need to continue raising awareness about birth registrations, advocating for policy reforms and laws, providing humanitarian aid to stateless individuals, and offering emotional and spiritual support to those affected by statelessness.

Through the Department of Justice, Peace, Development and Good Governance project, between 2016 and 2021, SECAM has strengthened its collaboration with the African Union, with which it has signed an MOU specifying several areas in which the two institutions will work closely together to promote justice, peace, and human rights on the African continent.

Since 2022, the Working Groups (Good Governance, Environment and Migration) have been revitalized and many people have joined the networks that have been set up to promote the participation of everyone and at the same time strengthen collaboration with the regions.

The novelty in 2022 is the partnership agreement signed between SECAM and the Dicastery of Integral Development regarding the creation of an office at SECAM that deals with the regional

coordination of the activities of women's congregations related to the pastoral care of migrants and refugees. According to the recommendations of the Dicastery, the new coordinator (a religious woman belonging to a local congregation) will carry out data collection and plan a series of training sessions for the religious women as part of their capacity building.

Another agreement was signed between SECAM and SIMI (Scalabrini International Migration Institute) which is one of the partners of the Dicastery. The purpose of this MoU concerns: collaboration between the two institutions in several fields, in particular research and the publication of works on problems linked to migration, cooperation at the academic level, the organization of workshops and training for educational purposes, information exchange, international collaboration program

In Conclusion

All in all, Church media in Africa must exploit all perspectives and dimensions that can help the Church to increase awareness, reawaken consciences and revive brotherly responsibility and sensitivity about migrants and refugees. As we meet, there are migrants expelled from Tunisia, barred in Libya, drinking seawater, in the scorching heat, injured people with no shelter, helpless women and children pouring out of Syria. Migrant issues in Tunisia, Morocco, Congo South Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt condemn widespread global indifference and handwringing while migrant ships filled with African people get missing on the high seas. Catholic Communicators in Africa must be of the general disposition to put their skills and technology as well as values at the disposal of the Church's vision to mitigate the situation, engender a fraternal and friendly society and build a welcoming for all. Thank you for your attention.