



WELCOME ADDRESS

“The Religious and Migration in the 21st Century: Perspective, Response and Challenges”

Dear Friends,

I have the privilege today to welcome you here to the Passionist General House of St John and Paul, Rome on behalf of the four co-hosting religious congregations/order who have NGO status representation at the UN. They are: *Passionists International, Congregations of St Joseph, Augustinians International, and Congregation of the Mission (Vincentians)*. So, WELCOME! I hope you will feel at home in this place, will enjoy each other’s company, and will also be refreshed by the pleasant and serene surroundings of our home in the heart of the Eternal City.

We gather to reflect and dialogue about a specific humanitarian reality alive in our world and which is critical and urgent. It is a “sign of the times” and, as religious, it cannot leave us indifferent. In fact, this phenomenon pricks our conscience and challenges us to find practical responses. This situation concerns MIGRATION and the topic of this conference is:

“The Religious and Migration in the 21st Century: Perspective, Response and Challenges”.

My name is Joachim Rego and I am a “migrant”. But remember that this is a label we put upon certain groups of people and labels are often layered by many connotations which encourage prejudice and the creation of borders. In truth, however, I (like all migrants) am a member of the human race and a citizen of Planet Earth which, as Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si’*, is “our common home”.

Forty six years ago, in the second half of the 20th century, my family made a courageous decision to immigrate from an oppressive and brutal military regime in the

land of my birth: Burma (Myanmar), to a land of greater opportunities in Australia. At that time, there were several nations which were opening their borders to receiving skilled migrants who would contribute to the development of their respective countries. However, I want to emphasise that the only reason for my parents to make such a courageous decision to leave our mother country and go to a place we knew nothing about, was security and concern for the future of their children. It was necessity, and not just an unreflected choice. This was a great sacrifice on their part and undertaken with a firm hope rooted in God.

Today, migration continues on an enormous scale globally; however, the situation is different. Millions of people, many with families, are fleeing their mother countries for a range of reasons: war, poverty, human rights abuses, religious intolerance, persecution, oppression, threats to personal security and peace – but always motivated by hope for a better future for their personal good and the good of their children. However, unlike my situation, those seeking asylum today find greater hostility and lesser welcome.

As people of faith gathered for this Conference, let us recall this short text from the letter which the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon:

Yahweh declares: Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you, plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer. 29:11)

From my experience, I can share that being a migrant is a frightening experience. There is no sense of excitement about the 'new', because one is gripped by the immediate feelings of insecurity and uncertainty – of having left everything familiar behind (even if not ideal) and of not knowing what lies ahead. There is that sense of being a stranger in a strange land! Consequently, one needs to find his/her identity and belonging in a new context amidst much internal confusion, learning and struggle to integrate.

As a young lad (together with my 3 younger siblings), I can never forget that day we landed in Sydney (a gloomy wet Friday early morning: 10th October 1969) and seeing my mother burst into tears, not from the joy of having made it to a new place, but from the fear and worry of not knowing what lies ahead. Knowing no one, having no place to stay, with no job and very little money was an isolating and dispossessing experience forcing us to cling to the “anchor of faith” and find hope in God. I am filled with admiration for my father who, having brought his family to a new land, now had to find within himself the confidence, courage and all the resources needed in order to take up his responsibility of searching for work and provide the basic necessities for the family.

However, what we needed most was not pity or sympathy, but the sense of welcome and acceptance, without the fear of difference, and it was this response from so many ordinary people that eased our anxiety and gave us hope of a promising future.

In the end, it's all about building relationships and fostering the growth of harmonious communities, isn't it? – welcoming, hospitality, making friends, encouraging inclusion, being sensitive to understanding and dialoguing with the other as different, and accepting them whatever their faith, manner of thinking and living – as another 'citizen' of our common home. I believe this to be our specific response and challenge as Religious who are called to show the Face of Christ through our respective charisms and to witness in every situation the commandment of Jesus to Love with open minds, open hearts and open hands.

I read recently a little piece by the Lebanese-South African author Cecile Yazbek in which she says:

We, who are distant from conflict, lose hope in alternatives as governments stifle our souls with fear, preaching war as the only response to those wielding swords that maim and kill. We fall prey to dehumanising labels in a discourse designed to make us feel entitled to safety and comfort and others less so. Our own comfort and safety then preoccupy us. [Khalil] Gibran, in The Prophet, wrote that "our lust for comfort kills the passions of the soul" – compassion, empathy and generosity being major casualties of a self-centred life.

In welcoming you to this Conference today, I thank you for your witness of compassion, empathy and generosity towards all those people who are seeking a hope-filled future in a new place of our common home. May your dialogue here in the name of Jesus Christ who commissions us to "Do this in memory of me" motivate your desire to find effective strategies which will assist us all in responding to the challenges of the growing phenomenon of migration in the 21st century.

~ Fr Joachim Rego CP
Superior General