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## ONE CHURCH, ONE HOME, ONE FAMILY

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In the plight of today's migrants and refugees, a listening Church hears the cry of Bartimaeus who refused to be silenced by the crowd (Mark 10:46-52). The evangelist Mark narrates the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus on the outskirts of Jericho. Contemplating this healing scene, brings to mind the desperate circumstances of Bartimaeus: he is blind and is a beggar. These two conditions make him a vulnerable outcast. He is most likely pleading for alms from some religious pilgrims passing on their way to Jerusalem. Despite his tragic condition, he has not lost his ability to hear and speak: he hears that among the people passing in the crowd, there is this miracle-worker from Nazareth and he makes a great commotion, crying out: "Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me" (Mk 10:47). The good news is that unlike the crowd that unsuccessfully attempts to suppress the blind man's cries, Jesus does not silence Bartimaeus!

On this World Day of Migrants and Refugees, the story of Bartimaeus challenges us to hear their anguish and pain, and like Jesus, not to ignore or suppress them, but instead to offer them hospitality, to show that the teaching of the Church as the Body of Christ is not an abstract formula but a command to put that teaching into action with tangible results. That teaching calls us again to be "one Church, one home, one family." One of the duties of Christian Religion, as Martin Luther King Jr. once noted, is to proclaim that "every human life is a reflection of divinity, and every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in the human person." Therefore, if the Church does not foster the indissoluble link between the love of God and the love of neighbor, perhaps, it is not being faithful to Christ's teachings and commands. The Church with its professed preferential option for the excluded, the poor, and the marginalized in our one human race must recognize the face of God in them. If we can recognize God in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, strangers and prisoners (Mt 25:31-46), as Pope Francis remarks, "we will be the ones to thank God for having been able to meet, love and serve Him in them." Unless it is accepted that belonging to an ethnic or religious or national community constitutes a punishment deserving exclusion, nothing justifies the dehumanization of so many human beings who are victims simply because of being who they are and where they come from. Theologically, these words affirm the idea that to be human in its most radical sense means to be the vessel of God's offer of self.

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Consequently, we have no reason whatsoever to belittle ourselves, much less any reason to be belittled, look down upon or turn our backs on others, because in doing so, we belittle God. This is so because every human person is an expression of God's love.

Understanding ourselves as "One Church, One Home, and One Family" in which those who accept Jesus as Savior have become sons and daughters of the same Father (Jn 1:12) demands that our Christian mission bring about the reconciliation between and among people and groups affected by past hostilities. Among these we count refugees and migrants. To foster this reconciliation, as theologian Robert Schreier, notes: "we must learn to acknowledge their past, recognize the wounds received and the wounds inflicted, retell their stories that define their identity, and discover themselves as participants in the same history jointly responsible for their common future." If we do this, then there is a great possibility of being transformed.

There is a story of a rich woman who helped a homeless migrant with swollen legs. She approached him and asked: "where are you going?" Saint Peter's Basilica. But your legs cannot allow you to walk there. She offered a taxi to bring him. When the taxi driver stopped, he hesitated to accept the passenger, because he smelled very bad. After a few minutes, the driver agreed, and the migrant and the lady got in and had a long conversation on the way to the Vatican. They spoke about his history, what he has lived through, the trials of being a refugee from Syria, losing his entire family, etc. By the end of the ride, the lady went to pay, and the driver, who initially hesitated to accept them, said: "No, Signora, It is I who must pay for you, because you made me listen to a story that changed my heart and perspective on life."

It is not unreasonable to imagine that it is this kind of change of heart and mind that Jesus brought to the crowd that had unsuccessfully attempted to suppress Bartimaeus' cry for help and for salvation. The evangelist, Mark describes this change of heart in the crowd in these words: "So they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you'" (Mk 10:49).

Those accompanying Jesus can be a hindrance at times. There are Christians who attend community assemblies and share its life, but can still be obstacles to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus. The threat to Christianity is not always from outsiders, but from how those who call themselves Christians live and from those who do not really grasp the real meaning of Christ's teaching and His demands. Nor do some really want to accept that we are "one home and one family."

In our local and universal ecclesial conceptions and perceptions of Church, how often have we silenced those voices that make us uncomfortable? These voices include the laments from migrant and refugees, who are also part of One Body of Christ. The acute

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need of desperate people must, therefore, drive us to break through the barriers created by those who want to silence the crying voices of the needy so that they too can have access to Jesus whom we profess to follow. We can imagine how Bartimaeus must have jumped up (Mk 10:50), still unable to see exactly where Jesus was standing, and yet he refused to be silenced. It is this same refusal to be silenced that we witness in those who seek asylum and safety when they knock at our doors, at our national borders, and most of all at our conscience. In and through them, the Church invites humanity to realize that we are part of one family. Like Bartimaeus who was not afraid despite the pressing crowd, as one human family, we must overcome our doubts and fears of the other. Pope Francis says that it is wrong to let our doubts and fears condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even – without realizing it – racist. In this way, fear deprives us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other, the person different from myself; it deprives me of an opportunity to encounter the Lord (Homily at Mass for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 14 January 2018).

We are one Church, one home, one family when we work together to erase bias against migrants and refugees. Biases mar our shared and graced humanity. God's action in the world summons us to be receptive to and caring of and for one another. Opening our hearts will help us to eradicate our fearful biases and let our charity blossom. Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan states that a bias is "a distortion to intellectual development." People are fixed in immovable categories because of biases. The latter may result from "unconscious motivation," rooted in the way people have been brought up to look down upon others. Biases can further be rooted in "individual egoism, and there is the more powerful and blinder bias of group egoism." Egoism seeks personal or group or ethnic advantage at the expense of others. Additionally, there is "the general bias of common sense, which is a specialization of intelligence in the particular and concrete, but usually considers itself omni-competent." While blind spots and biases often form some part of the psyche, the "way" of Jesus, which must be the way of the one family called Church, includes the rich and the poor, the persecuted and the despised, the elite and the low class. The "way" of Jesus allows no credibility to biases. In His meeting with sinners, lepers, and with the woman at the well in Samaria (Jn 4:1-42), Jesus affirms that the "way" His teaching accords no significance to a person's race or ethnicity or culture or country of origin. The "way" Jesus teaches announces God's exclusive power and desire to create and name us all as His own sons and daughters.

Becoming a human person involves more than conception and birth. Being is entrusted to us as summons, a mission. We are called to love the humanity entrusted to us. This

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love is concretely manifested in the care of the least among us (cf. Mt 25:31-46). This love is not some emotional feeling. It is an act of willing the good of the other and doing something concrete about it. God did not reject or stay aloof from us, but decided to pitch a tent among us in Jesus Christ (Jn 1:14). As God has treated all of us with self-sacrificing love, our relationship with God is thus decided in our encounter with the other. As Johann Baptist Metz notes, one of the non-canonical saying of Jesus is: "A person who 'sees' his brother [and sister] sees his God." Love of neighbor "is not something different from love of God, it is merely the earthly side of the same coin."

As I conclude, let me take you back again to the healing of Bartimaeus. Recall the question that Jesus put to Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:51) is the same question he put to James and John, the sons of Zebedee: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:36). It is the same question that Saint Ignatius of Loyola—whose five hundredth anniversary of his conversion the Church celebrates this year—asks a person who enters into prayer: "what grace do you desire?" Unlike the sons of Zebedee who wanted places of honor, calculating what was in it for them as they followed Jesus, Bartimaeus had a simple desire: "Master, that I may see." And what happens when he sees? He follows Jesus on his way, unlike the disciples who had difficulty in following Jesus on his way. We were told how they were afraid (Mk 10: 32). Unlike them, the blind beggar becomes a model of discipleship and faith. With "open eyes of faith" like his we are all invited to accompany Jesus, to form a community where no one is repressed, a home where faith can grow and where people can breathe fresh air because we care for "our common home," and a family where those who flee persecutions and wars can teach us again what it means to be human.

Let us ask God to heal our moral blindness, the moral vision we call conscience, which helps us to see right and wrong, in order to care for the least among us. Let us ask God to heal the blindness of unbelief. Faith gives us vision to see beyond the senses, beyond the world around us, to realize that we are more than our DNA or IQ. We have a soul, a purpose and a shared destiny: union with God. Let us pray to receive the gift of sight and insight, and resolve to take care of and to share the gifts we have received. There is a Rwandan adage that says, *Iso ntakwanga akwita nabi*, and it means "tell me your name, and I will tell you who you are." Bartimaeus means Son of Timaeus and Timaeus means "honor." May we all become sons and daughters who honor God by the way we honor migrants and refugees. In so doing, we will be witnesses of one Church, one home, one family.

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