



MIGRATION: THE CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING BORDERS WITHOUT FORGETTING THE DIGNITY OF THE PERSON

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Sometimes, a specific event forces us to look at a much broader reality, such as what happened in Ceuta at the end of July and the beginning of August. The massive influx of tens of thousands of people from Morocco, the city's overwhelmed reception capacities, and the many lives lost while attempting to cross the border constitute a tragedy that cannot be reduced to a question of territorial control. Ceuta presents us with a much deeper reality: the human, political, and moral dimensions of the migrations of our time.

What happened at that Spanish border is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a particularly tragic expression of a human movement sweeping the world. Millions of people are now moving within their own countries or crossing international borders in search of safety, work, freedom, or a dignified life. In many cases, however, we are no longer dealing with migration understood solely as a personal decision to improve economic conditions. We are seeing people who are fleeing wars, persecution, violence, political crises, extreme poverty, or situations in which remaining threatens their own lives and those of their families. UNHCR's latest global report put the number of people forcibly displaced at more than 120 million at the end of 2025. This figure alone should be enough to show that we are facing one of the great human challenges of our time.

The nature of the phenomenon has also grown more complex. Today's migrations are shaped by family and social networks, by technologies that enable the transmission of information across continents in minutes, by human trafficking and smuggling

organizations, and, in some cases, by political actors capable of instrumentalizing population movements. No longer are migratory routes mere paths traveled by individuals; they comprise transnational networks connecting countries of origin, transit, and destination. This does not mean that all mass migration is necessarily an organized operation or that we should attribute responsibility for what happens to a particular government without evidence. It means, rather, that today's migratory phenomenon demands a broader reading than that of a simple individual who decides to migrate in search of better opportunities.

The debate on migration and human rights has resurfaced amidst a responsibility that each State must face. Nations have the right to protect their borders, establish the conditions of entry and stay in their territory, and guarantee the security of their citizens. Sovereignty is not incompatible with human dignity. Every society has the right to establish rules and demand their compliance. It also has the right to combat criminal organizations that traffic in people and exploit their desperation. But another fundamental question also arises: how to legitimately exercise that power without allowing the person to disappear behind the border.

This is, in my opinion, where a Christian perspective can contribute to this contemporary debate. For the Church, human dignity is not something granted by the State, nor does it depend on a person's immigration status. The declaration *Dignitas infinita* reminds us that every person possesses a dignity grounded in their very being and that, for this reason, their fundamental rights must be respected in all circumstances. Referring specifically to migrants, the document warns that they may, in practice, be treated as if they were less important or less human, even if no one openly declares it. Precisely for this reason, the document insists that every migrant, by virtue of being a person, possesses fundamental and inalienable rights.

This statement has concrete political implications. A person may not have a legal right to remain in a country and yet retain their full dignity. A State may need to order their return and simultaneously ensure that the procedure is carried out while respecting their rights. It may be legitimate to prevent irregular entry and, at the same time, morally unacceptable to resort to unnecessary violence, humiliation, or any form of degrading

treatment. The legality of a decision and the dignity of those who are subject to it are not contradictory realities: precisely because there is a law, it must be applied fairly.

This is particularly important when we talk about returning. Sometimes, the migration debate ends when a person is returned to their country of origin, as if the State's moral responsibility had ended with the person's departure from its territory. From a Christian perspective, this cannot be. Returning the person may represent a legitimate step in an orderly migration policy. Still, the person never ceases to be a person during this transfer or when crossing the country again. Dignity does not have an administrative domicile. Returnees must also be treated with respect, safety, and humanity, in accordance with international law and the circumstances of their situation.

Nor does the Church's social doctrine propose naïvely eliminating borders. In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis expressly recognizes the need to create, in countries of origin, conditions that enable a dignified life and integral development, so that migration is not an obligation imposed by necessity. And, until these conditions exist, he proposes four attitudes toward migrants that should guide our response: welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating. It is not simply a matter of opening the doors without criteria, but of embarking on a path that reconciles the identity and security of communities with the dignity of those who arrive.

Return, in fact, should occupy a much more important place in our reflection. We often talk about expulsions and deportations from the perspective of the state: who can stay and who must leave. But we should also ask ourselves what happens to those who return. In what condition do they return? What happens to their children? What risks do they face? What guarantees do they have? The obligation to respect human dignity does not end when a person leaves our territory. The border cannot become the point where our moral responsibility disappears.

This question takes on a special dimension when we examine the United States and the reality of the Latin American presence. Millions of Latin Americans have built their lives here, formed families, and contributed deeply to the country's economic, cultural, and social development. At the same time, the United States faces the legitimate challenge of controlling a border under enormous migratory pressure and develops

detention and deportation policies that generate intense debate. This is not a question of turning this issue into a partisan dispute. What is happening in the United States raises the same question that we must ask ourselves in the rest of the world: how can a state effectively exercise its authority without turning the migrant into a different human category?

Nor can the Christian response ignore the existence of smuggling and trafficking networks. These organizations must be firmly combated because they transform human vulnerability into a business. But we must also ask ourselves why they find such favorable terrain. When a person who needs protection or finds themselves in an extreme situation does not find legal and safe ways to move around, they are much more vulnerable to those who control clandestine routes. Combating human trafficking therefore requires not only prosecuting those who enrich themselves through suffering, but also working to reduce the conditions that make this market possible.

There is also a specifically Christian reason to view differently someone we do not know. The Gospel presents them not simply as someone whose rights we must respect, but as someone whose life matters to us. The Good Samaritan does not begin by asking who the wounded man is or where he comes from. He sees a person in need and reaches out. And for Christians, there is an even deeper memory: the Holy Family itself experienced fleeing their land to seek refuge in Egypt. The migrant is not, therefore, a reality completely alien to our faith. In the face of those who flee, Christians are called upon to recognize a human face that challenges their own sense of responsibility.

This does not mean idealizing migration or ignoring the difficulties it can create. It also does not mean denying a State's right to set limits. It means something more demanding: **not allowing the legitimate defense of a border to make us lose the ability to recognize the human being standing in front of it.**

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers of our time is the dehumanization that begins with figures. The terms we use are technical, numerical. We discuss flows, waves, entries, contingents, returns, and deportations. These categories are necessary to govern and analyze the phenomenon, but they are insufficient to understand it. Behind each figure there is a face, a story, a family, and many times, deep suffering. We can legitimately discuss different migration policies. What we should not discuss is whether the person in front of us deserves to be treated as a person.

That is why we need to move beyond a false dichotomy. We do not have to choose between security and humanity, sovereignty and fraternity, borders and solidarity. The real challenge is to build policies that can hold these realities together. States need secure borders and orderly migration policies. We need effective procedures, international cooperation, decisive actions against criminal networks, and return mechanisms where

appropriate. But we also need legal and safe channels, protection for those who have the right to it and, above all, a political culture that does not turn the migrant into an enemy.

The question we must ask ourselves is not only how many people can enter or how many must return. We must also ask ourselves **what principles we want to govern our decisions when these people arrive at our borders.** As Christians, we cannot respond by forgetting human dignity, fraternity, and the common good.

There is a legitimate need to protect our borders. We need compliance with laws. The security of societies must be guaranteed. But none of these responsibilities requires abandoning our humanity.

This may be our most pressing task: to build a firm migration policy without being cruel, orderly without dehumanizing, and sovereign without forgetting fraternity. A border should protect a territory, but it should never become the place where we suspend the recognition of the dignity of those on the other side.

Because, in the end, before being a migrant, a foreigner, an asylum seeker, a deportee, or a citizen, there is a person. And for those who look at the world through faith in Christ, that person is not someone we must simply deal with or bear as a burden, but someone whose dignity calls us to respond, whose life challenges us to serve them. The mission has always been this: to see Christ in others and treat them with the respect they deserve.