

Spiritual Message – January 2017
Called to a spirituality of welcome
. . . welcoming the immigrant and refugee



Last October, in the Spiritual Message, we focused on a spirituality of welcoming others and events by reflecting on our personal life experiences, the life of Mother Marie-Rose, and our tradition. In this message, we will reflect on welcoming immigrants and refugees.

In recent years, the media have shown us thousands and thousands of homeless people trekking along the roads of Europe as they flee disaster in their own countries. Millions of refugees are confined in makeshift shelters in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere. Various countries have been erecting fences and walls to prevent migrants from entering their territories. At the same time, life in our Quebec society is becoming more and more multiethnic, multicultural, and interreligious. Let us look at what our faith says about these events.

Learning from the life of the People of God

We remember the history of the Hebrew people during their slavery in Egypt where they were sorely oppressed. God could not bear to see the misery of His people. He knew their sufferings and came to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians. He asked Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex. 3: 7-10; 12: 37-42). Thus, responding to God's call, Moses placed himself at the head of his people who embarked on the journey through the desert and became migrants for forty years! They would know hunger, thirst, and a loss of meaning. Finally, they would find a country in which to settle, but not without encountering adversity!

When we think today about Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, where people are suffering from war and where civilians are being killed every day, do we not believe that God knows the misery of his people? Do we not believe that God is on their side as they set out, leaving their countries and coming to ours in order to find a great and beautiful land which is "overflowing with milk and honey", with peace and security?

The Book of Deuteronomy tells us that the Lord asks us to take care of the stranger, and it even says that the Lord loves the stranger! Our great God is not partial . . . and executes justice for orphans, widows, and strangers, providing them with food and clothing . . . Cursed be you who refuse to respect the rights of the stranger among you! (Deut. 10: 17-19; 27:19)

This Word of God challenges us. To truly love the stranger, we must move forward in stages, since what is different often frightens us. The Word of God asks that we first respect the rights of the stranger: the right to be clothed, to have enough food for survival, to have adequate housing, to know or learn the language of the country so as to become better integrated, to have a decent job that allows one to live a comfortable lifestyle, to socialize, and to develop self-esteem through participation in civic life.

Our society often hinders immigrants from meeting their needs because it imposes numerous constraints on them, including requisite skills, often leaving them feeling insecure about the future.

The experience of Talal Touchan, a 33-year-old Syrian who is single, testifies to this:

In Montreal, what he is most concerned about and even obsessed with, is finding a job in his line of work, electrical engineering. "It is almost as stressful as the anguish of dying," he said. For him, the future seems vague; his life, unstable. Although everything seems promising in Quebec, he continues to be filled with conflicting feelings. "Sometimes, I am optimistic; I tell myself that things will improve. Other times, no, I tell myself that I am going to die."¹

We can barely imagine the difficulties of integration for immigrants, but we can strive to get close to them and to become a loving presence, a reassuring presence for them, rather than a hostile or suspicious one.

Learning from the life of Jesus

Jesus forsakes his divine condition, becomes incarnated in our humanity, and becomes one of us:

"... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. (Phil. 2: 6-8)

Jesus' attitude of great humility encourages us to identify with him in our encounters with others. Though of Jewish descent, Jesus discovers, at the heart of his mission, the call to enter into dialogue with another culture, that of the Samaritans. We recall that "in fact, the Jews do not want anything in common with the Samaritans." (John 4: 9) In his long conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus is not afraid to reveal himself and to speak of his Father: "You shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23)

Jesus broke down many barriers: between Jews and Gentiles, between men and women, between slaves and free. Is this not a call for us to say no to all the barriers people want to erect against immigrants? Like Jesus, let us be welcoming, compassionate women and men. Let us open paths, let us tear down the walls of fear and insecurity regarding immigration. Is not intercultural living a new way of living our faith? This life of faith will help us to change our hearts so that they will be ready, with the strength of the love of Christ, to move from hostility to kindness, from suspicion to openness.

In this way, in fidelity to the spirit of our 2016 Chapter Acts, we will be able to welcome refugees and immigrants and to act in ways that will be meaningful and helpful to them. Among possible actions are: opposing racist comments, learning about another's culture, developing meaningful relationships with refugees or immigrants, diversifying our sources of news and information, knitting for an organization that supports immigrants, making a donation to new immigrants, giving time to an organization that helps immigrants, etc. Thus, we will overcome our misgivings and hesitations in welcoming the stranger as a daughter or son of God.

Sister Claudette Bastien

¹ Anne-Marie Luca, *L'Actualité*, October 13, 2016