

# JOHN PAUL II ON MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Edward J. O'Boyle PhD

Senior Research Associate

Mayo Research Institute

[www.mayoresearch.org](http://www.mayoresearch.org)

**The tragedy of these multitudes [of refugees] is reflected in the hopeless faces of men, women and children who can no longer find a home in a divided and inhospitable world.**

**(John Paul 1987, §24)**

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**From the very beginning of recorded history, nomadic tribes have been on the move looking for and hoping for a better place to graze their animals and thereby improve their chances of survival as a people.**

**Down through the centuries many others including refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons, gypsies, and tinkers have been on the move for various reasons: hope for a better life, safe haven for the oppressed, escape from the long arm of the law, hunger, ravages of war, smuggling, health, retirement, spying. Those problems have persisted across the ages most notably in last century's devastating wars. In recent years we have witnessed waves of migrants and refugees from North Africa and the Middle East to Italy, Spain, Great Britain, France, Germany, Hungary, along with other European countries, and waves from Mexico and Central America to the United States. Whatever the immediate reasons might be, ultimately migration is a "longing for a transcendent horizon of justice, freedom and peace" (John Paul 2000, §1).**

**Since 1914 the Church has taken a special interest in the issues facing migrants and refugees, and for years the popes have been making an effort to balance (1) the need of migrants and refugees to be *free* of oppressive conditions and (2) the need of host countries to be *free* to select some but not all migrants and refugees for entry. Accordingly, over the years the popes have set aside one day – the World Day of Migration – to address the issue of migrants and refugees.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1951, the International Catholic Migration Commission has been serving the needs of displaced persons and refugees without regard to faith, race, ethnicity, or nationality. (ICMC 2017). The work of the Commission was enthusiastically endorsed by John Paul on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its establishment (cf. John Paul 2001, §7).

**Our interest focuses on the statements made by John Paul II on that day during his many years as Holy Father. As a young man living in his native Poland he personally witnessed massive relocations of peoples fleeing war and later returning home or facing the reality that their homes had been destroyed or taken over by others. His messages on World Day of Migration for the years 1978 through 1995 are not available in English, not accessible to this author, and not included in this paper.**

**Some will read no further because the popes are addressing this problem strictly from the Scriptures and Catholic doctrine and therefore have nothing to say to persons who are not Catholic. We remind such readers that many across the world listened to and were inspired by the speeches and writings of Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, and others.**

**In the following, we have searched other messages by John Paul including social encyclicals on migrants and refugees that might instruct as to how we might reconcile the differences today between those peoples and host countries. We read and understand the Holy Father's message not through the lens of pastoral care but principally from the perspective of economics. We have organized and present John Paul's statements not by source document in chronological order but by topics of concern to economists. Our central concerns in the following are human rights, human needs, ability and willingness to welcome, ability and willingness to integrate.**

**Sadly the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, cf.§505) has only two paragraphs on this subject and only two sources: John Paul in 1990 and in 1999. Extended commentaries by Michael A. Blume SVD of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (cf. Blume no date; Blume 2002) are not included herein but may warrant the reader's attention.**

## **THE RIGHTS OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS**

**Religious freedom is not a question of the religion of the majority or the minority,  
but of an inalienable right of each and every human person.**

**(John Paul 2001, §9)**

**In his 2001 message on the 87<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migration John Paul set forth the seven rights of all human beings including migrants and refugees. The right ...**

**to have one's own country,  
to live freely in one's own country,  
to live together with one's family,  
to have access to the goods necessary for a dignified life,  
to preserve and develop one's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage,  
to publicly profess one's religion,**

to be recognized and treated in all circumstances according to one's dignity as a human being.

The right to assistance is a right that lasts "as long as *real* need continues to exist." (John Paul 2001, §4, emphasis added).

There are for sure other human rights. The seven enumerated by John Paul represent the subset of human rights that relate to the migrant and refugee issue today.

## HUMAN NEED <sup>2</sup>

For Christians, the migrant is not merely an individual to be respected in accordance with the norms established by law, but a person whose presence challenges them and whose needs become an obligation for their responsibility.  
(John Paul 1996, §5)

Two norms constitute the definition of need: material need and nonmaterial need. These two norms reflect the duality of human nature, the human body and the human spirit. In brief, then, a need is a requirement of the human body as in the case of food and clothing or the human spirit as with peace of mind and a sense of self worth. A need is not the same as a want which, simply put, is something desired. Need precedes want but does not displace it. In any right-ordered human being particularly one with dependents want is subordinate to need.

Need is not exactly the same for all humankind because every human being is unique. A diabetic, for instance, needs insulin produced by human hands which the nondiabetic does not need because the body produces insulin naturally. Many human beings find peace of mind through communal religious practice, others through private meditation, still others through inspirational readings. Thus, given differences across humankind, there always will be some disagreement in the way in which the concept of need is used and applied in specific instances. Pursuing a definition of need which in the end achieves *universal* social acceptance is a futile venture.

For our purposes, there are three dimensions to human need: consumption, work, and leisure. All humans including migrants and refugees have a right to have all three dimensions of need met at least at some basic level. Hereafter we abandon "leisure," which

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<sup>2</sup> This section on human need derives significantly from O'Boyle 2011.

is commonly used throughout economics, because it suggests something luxurious. We prefer instead “rest” which complies much better with the notion of a *basic human need*.

### *Consumption.*

Consumers are beings with a body and a spirit -- an embodied spirit -- and they meet the needs and satisfy the wants of the body and spirit through the goods and services they buy and consume in a decision-making process which is essentially active precisely because they are living, breathing, existential actualities, not passive utility-calculating machines. They are more than individuals. They are *persons of action*, and for better or worse the action undertaken often changes the person who acts. Routinely eating too much diminishes a person who in the extreme becomes a glutton. Regularly sharing lunch with another often makes for a lasting friendship.

John Paul sees two dangers in consumption. The first is the effect of excessive consumption on the person of the consumer. The other is the effective denial of the principle of the universal destination of the material goods of the world by the affluent and comfortable who do not respond adequately to the needs of the poor. As to the first danger, John Paul warns that

In singling out new needs and new means to meet them, one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of man which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones. (John Paul 1991, §36).

As to the second danger, the right of all “to have access to the goods necessary for a dignified life” re-affirms the principle of the universal destination of the earth’s goods which states that the material goods of this world are intended for the use of all humankind and are not governed and protected absolutely in their use by the right of private property..

It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. It is also necessary to help these needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources. (John Paul 1991, §34).

### *Work.*

Work has two effects on the working person. The objective side of work states that by producing goods and services work provides income to purchase the goods and services needed or desired. The subjective side asserts that work provides opportunities to associate with others in the workplace and develop a sense of belonging to a group with shared aims, and to apply and enhance creative talents and energies. The objective side demands a

human body. The subjective side responds to the needs of the human spirit but the spirit first must be embodied because without the body no work can be done and therefore no subjective effect can be brought forth.

John Paul's recognition of the need to belong is embedded in his assertions that the fundamental dimension of human existence is co-existence (John Paul 1994, p. 36), that a person grows through "increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community" (John Paul 1991, §41), and is implied in his call to "solidarity and common action" as a reaction against "*the degradation of man as the subject of work.*" (John Paul 1981, §8, emphasis in the original).

In *Laborem Exercens* John Paul explains what he means by "man as the subject of work."

Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the "image of God" he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. *As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.* (John Paul 1981, §6, emphasis in the original).

John Paul is unyielding in his argument that the subjective dimension of work is more important than the objective dimension.

... *the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject ... in the final analysis it is always man who is the purpose of the work ...* (John Paul 1981 §6, emphasis in the original).

It is with regard to the need for creative opportunities, however, that John Paul is most eloquent.

The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that *man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator* and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation. (John Paul 1981, §25, emphasis in the original).

*Rest.* Stockhausen' comments are especially useful for our purposes. Rest is ...

... time and activity that is not driven by duty, accomplishment, or productivity, time and activity that celebrate being human rather than having and consuming material things. (Stockhausen 1998, p. 1673).

**Disordered work or alienation threatens integral human development.**

**Alienation is ... found in work when it is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labor, grows or diminishes as a person, either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement in which he is considered only a means and not an end. (John Paul 1991, §41).**

**Stereotypically disordered work takes the form of the workaholic. To the workaholic, work is everything. He/she neither understands nor values rest. The workaholic is like a canvas that a deranged artist has slashed with a knife, a grotesque caricature of what was meant to be. *Filling that void, repairing that torn canvas, is the purpose of rest.* In this regard, John Paul compares human work and rest to the six days of God's own work in creating the universe and His one day of rest. (John Paul 1981, §25).**

**A well-ordered human person is one who knows the difference between the needs of the body and the needs of the spirit, and understands that the means which meet the one do not also meet the other. Rest is absolutely necessary to acquiring that knowledge and understanding. The challenge is to value humans accordingly, to appreciate the full range of their needs, and to recognize that they are more than instruments of efficiency and profits. Humans are most especially ends in themselves, living works of art in progress who require rest to become what they were meant to be: "near to divine." (John Paul 1995, §84).**

#### **ABILITY AND WILLINGNESS TO WELCOME**

**What are needed are ... everyday gestures, done with simplicity and constancy, that are capable of producing an authentic change in interpersonal relationships.**

**(John Paul 2002, §1)**

**Some advocates of open borders appear to demand that there should be no limit to the number of migrants and refugees allowed into a host country. They advance two arguments in support of that position. One is economic, the other is moral. Open borders, they argue, would make the world a richer place because the migrants and refugees would have access to better-paying jobs in advanced manufacturing systems and the service sectors of host countries. As to the moral argument, they assert that rich countries have no right to exclude persons from poor countries or compel them to remain in poor countries. (L.S. and E.H. 2018, cf. website).**

**With regard to their first argument, open borders more likely would lead to a re-distribution of wealth than an increase, at least in the short run. *An increase in the supply***

*of labor in host countries does not create its own demand.* In the short run, migrants and refugees willing to accept low wages may displace higher-paid host-country workers. In the long run, migrants and refugees very well may acquire the higher-level skills necessary to fill positions that are open due to a shortage of workers with those skills. Over time, migrants and refugees may open their own small businesses that depend on family members to supply the necessary labor. However, if migrants and refugees do not acquire those skills or do not take on the risk of running a family business, the wealth increase in the first generation likely will be negligible. Furthermore, to the extent migrants and refugees require public services, host-country taxpayers have to shoulder any additional taxes needed to supply those services, thereby contributing not to an increase in wealth but a re-distribution.

As to the moral argument, John Paul II would agree. As already noted (John Paul 2001, §3), all human beings including migrants and refugees have a right “to have access to the goods necessary for a dignified life.” *But this right is not without a limit.*

The Church recognizes [the right to emigrate] in every person. ... Certainly, the free exercise of such a right is to be regulated, because *practicing it indiscriminately may do more harm and be detrimental to the common good of community that receives the migrant.* Before the manifold interests that are interwoven side by side with the laws of the individual countries, it is necessary to have international norms that are capable of regulating everyone’s rights, so as to prevent unilateral decisions that are harmful to the weakest. (John Paul 2001, §3, emphasis added).

The common good is a normative concept whose precise definition depends on the person who uses it. The Church’s proclamation *Gaudium Et Spes* states that the common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access for their own fulfillment...” (Paul VI 1965, §26). The Jesuit social economist Bernard Dempsey provides a similar formulation. The common good is the fulfillment of the needs of human beings which arise from their living together, as in the case of public health and safety, rather than each one living alone. (Dempsey 1958, pp. 272-273).

Two characteristics set these needs off. First, they are common to all. Second, they can be met only through the united efforts of all members of the community acting together. The fulfillment of these common needs depends critically on each person contributing to the community because the community by itself has nothing to contribute to its members apart from what its various members contribute to it (Dempsey 1958, pp. 219-220). Thus the common good is dependent on contributive justice which asserts that insofar as a person

belongs to a group that person has a duty to maintain and support the group. The common good is threatened by those who take from the group but do not support it.

Arriving at a specific limit to the right to access the goods necessary for a dignified life depends on the circumstances of the moment for migrants, refugees, and host countries. For any given country, it likely changes from time to time, especially if the host country is experiencing major changes in economic conditions. In addition, the limit will vary from country to country depending on differences in the ability and willingness to welcome migrants and refugees. Working out the specifics of that limit is the business of the governing authorities.

No doubt, one economic metric relating to that limit is the scope and nature of employment opportunities. Another is the availability of the resources to meet basic consumption needs at the moment. A third is the ability of the host country to transition migrants and refugees to permanent housing. In addition, there is the limit that reflects the host country's willingness to accept large numbers of strangers in waves (consider the flow of migrants and refugees over the years from northern Africa to Italy), an unknown number of whom might be threats to personal safety and security while others may be terrorists.

Taking note of what he said on the occasion of World Migration Day in 1993, John Paul insisted that

... the criterion for determining the level [of support] that can be sustained cannot be based solely on protecting [the prosperity of highly developed countries], while failing to take into consideration the needs of persons who are tragically forced to ask for hospitality. (John Paul 2001, §3)

In 2003 John Paul called attention to the fact that migration involves disproportionately large numbers of women and children and the crime of human trafficking. He urged host countries to find ways to replace egoism with altruism, fear with openness, and rejection with solidarity. (John Paul 2003, §§1, 4; John Paul 2004, §4). Those responsible for pastoral care must take into account mobility that is chosen freely and mobility caused by ideological, political or economic conditions. (John Paul 2001, §1).<sup>3</sup> They must be able to distinguish between persons and families driven by hope who seek *freedom to* live in a place where they can thrive and those driven by fear who seek *freedom from* oppression so they can live in a place where they are able to survive.

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<sup>3</sup> For more from John Paul on the missionary activity of the Church at a time of mass migration and a flood of refugees, cf. John Paul 1990.



## ABILITY AND WILLINGNESS TO INTEGRATE

**The migrant thirsts for some gesture that will make him feel welcome, recognised, and acknowledged as a person.**

**(Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People 2004, §96) <sup>4</sup>**

**In his World Migration Day message of 1996, which is the first of his messages available in English, John Paul deals expressly with undocumented migrants in terms of their legal status. First, without adding any qualifiers and most assuredly not condoning open borders, John Paul asserts that “illegal migration should be prevented.” Second, he recognizes the exploitation of “illegal immigrants” and condemns it out of hand. He does, however, urge host countries to assist undocumented migrants in preparing the necessary paperwork to qualify for legal residency. (John Paul 1996, §§2, 3).**

**Due to the uprooting that is associated with their mobility, migrants and refugees may experience marked solitude, reject the environment in their host country, and ultimately become culturally and socially alienated. (John Paul 2001, §§1, 2). With these concerns in mind, John Paul’s messages express a growing concern for the integration of migrants and refugees into their host country.**

**In his 1997 message in observance of World Migration Day, John Paul called attention at that time to the current trend in the flow of migrants and refugees who increasingly were non-Christians entering Christian countries looking for work and better living conditions.<sup>5</sup> He observed that many were “illegal,” and pointed specifically to the Good Samaritan as a role model for welcoming these strangers (John Paul 1997, §2). Two years later he again cited the Good Samaritan as a model of “gratuitous and unlimited love.” (John Paul 1999, §5).**

**In his message the following year, John Paul warned Catholic migrants and refugees not to turn inward and isolate themselves from the Church in their host country. Further, he advised clergy and the faithful in host countries not to attempt to assimilate migrants and refugees because assimilation “destroys their particular characteristics.” Whenever a host country attempts to assimilate migrants and refugees, the danger is that those migrants and refugees may have their own cultural identity suppressed. Rather than assimilation, he calls for their “gradual integration” into “an authentic family of believers.” (John Paul**

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<sup>4</sup> Or to employ John Paul own words (1995, §84), “near to divine.”

<sup>5</sup> Repeated in his message four years later, cf. John Paul 2001, §6.

1998, §3; John Paul 2005, §1, 2). In 2000 John Paul directed attention to Pope Paul VI's 1971 encyclical *Octogesima Adveniens* that called for the integration of emigrant workers (John Paul 2000, §6).

John Paul expounded on what he meant by integration in his message of 2005, the very last one in his long tenure as pope. In that message, dated November 24, 2004, he explicitly rejected two models. One assimilates by transforming migrants and refugees into copies of the long-term residents of the host country. The other marginalizes immigrants by fostering attitudes that in the extreme can lead to “the choice of *apartheid*.” (John Paul 2005, §2, emphasis in the original).<sup>6</sup>

Migrants and refugees are expected to take “the necessary steps toward social inclusion, such as learning the national language and complying with the laws and requirements at work ...”. A “civic reasonableness” on the part of the host country and migrants and refugees that reaches beyond tolerance to embrace sympathy will bring about a “friendly and serene coexistence,” a “friendly coexistence of differences.” (John Paul 2005, §§1, 3; John Paul 2004, §5).

In his very last message on World Migration Day, John Paul leaves us with this insight: “social peace and the freedom of citizens” depends on host countries and new arrivals recognizing in a lawful and orderly manner “the legitimate plurality of cultures present in [those countries].” (John Paul 2005, §2).

#### FINAL REMARKS

Our examination of the issue of migration based on the writings of John Paul II may be summarized in the following statements and advisories.

- Migrants and refugees are human persons who are very nearly divine.
- Religious freedom is an inalienable right of each and every human person.
- All human beings have a right to live freely in their own country and a right to emigrate.
- Given their fundamental dignity as human beings, migrants and refugees have a right to the goods and services that meet their basic material needs while they are transitioning into their host country. As they become more integrated they need work so that they can provide for their own material needs.

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<sup>6</sup> The Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (2004, §78) uses the expression “cultural ghetto.” John Paul (2004, §5) urged gradual integration in order to prevent the establishment of “ghettoes.”

- **Migrants and refugees need a day of rest in order to worship freely according to their own beliefs and customs.**
- **Host countries are well advised to avoid trying to assimilate migrants and refugees who may ultimately lose their cultural identity because assimilation means rendering them copies of the citizens of those countries. Rather, their efforts ought to be directed toward the gradual integration of the new arrivals.**
- **Open borders -- the right to emigrate indiscriminately – is ill-advised whenever it is detrimental to the common good of the community that receives the migrants or refugees.**
- **Host countries need look no further for a role model than the Good Samaritan.**
- **Host countries are acting appropriately when they resist illegal migration and when they condemn the exploitation of illegal immigrants by unscrupulous persons in their countries. However, host countries are expected to assist undocumented migrants in the preparation of the necessary paperwork to qualify for legal residency.**
- **Migrants and refugees are expected to take whatever steps are necessary to achieve social inclusion, such as learning the national language and complying with the laws and requirements at work.**
- **Host countries and new arrivals are duty bound to recognize the legitimate plurality of cultures present in their countries in a lawful and orderly manner.**
- **Host countries, along with migrants and refugees, are urged to reach beyond tolerance and embrace sympathy in order to bring about a “friendly coexistence of differences.”**
- **Host countries are encouraged to find ways to replace egoism with altruism, fear with openness, and rejection with solidarity.**
- **All human existence is coexistence.**

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