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My experience of forced migration

Every stranger who knocks at our door is an
opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who
identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age.
(Matthew 25: 35-43)

Migration to Kansas City

I have been asked to share with you my experience as a refugee. I would like to begin with my story of migration to Kansas City.

I migrated from Algeria, where I live in North Africa, to get to you. I traveled in relative safety, and my migration may be temporary. But I nevertheless left my country to be here for two months.

This migration is limited in time. But still, the road is long to come here. It takes a lot of will and courage to travel to your “developed” countries. Many people from Africa are afraid of rich countries like yours. Not only does it take willpower to travel here. It also requires money, a lot of money.

But I’m here to talk with you about my personal story, before I knew about Kansas City.

Fleeing war

Yes, I was a refugee.

And I have worked with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Having lived as a refugee helps me in my way of being with people who migrate, for whatever reasons.

When one flies war, one flees to shelter. In general, one flees in the opposite direction of gunshots or bombs.

In the case of my family in Chad, at first, we did not go far. We hoped things would calm down quickly so we could go back home. We went east from the capital city and crossed the river into Cameroon. The bridge is not impressive like it is today. Many people fled in canoes and did not survive the crossing.

After a week in Cameroon, my family returned home, but things did not stay calm for long. We found ways to live with constant bombings. Before long, though, there was danger all around, all the time. That is when families flee.

My family fled south this time, toward the Central African Republic, known as CAR. Looking back, I realize we were luckier than many others who were fleeing. My mother was a native of CAR, and my father had a house there because of his work as a tradesman. Even if we ran empty-handed, if we reached the border without being killed, we would not be on the street or in tents.

When one flees war though, one does not plan. We took things day by day and improvised along the way. Villagers we met soothed our feet, swollen from walking all day, by massaging them with salt and shea butter and buried them in the earth at night. By morning, the swelling had receded, and we could continue our journey through the forest.

At one point in our journey, we lost my mother. We were hungry, and so my mother followed some people to get some food for us. While she was away, we heard shooting getting closer and closer. People passing by told us not to stay there. We fled. In the evening, anxiety gripped us. We had no mother, no water, nothing to eat. We were tired, thirsty and hungry.

Days later, in a field, we saw a well and stopped for water. The man who guarded the field asked who we were. When he heard our names, he took us with him. He gave us food and shelter and looked after us. I learned much later that he knew my father, who had helped him one day.

From encampment to encampment we went, on this journey of exile. Fortunately, my mother caught up with us at some point.

Migrants perceived as threats

In Ivory Coast, in West Africa, people say that people who come seeking greener economic pastures are different from those who flee for their life. But today, people put economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the same bag. In affluent countries especially, they are perceived as threats, a problem for the host country.

Asking questions

I ask myself questions. Perhaps you will help me find answers.

Migrants and refugees are a problem for the United Nations, for countries of origin, and for host countries, for everyone. We are in a crisis, which has become global. We are trying to figure out what to do. In so doing, are we asking ourselves the reasons for the migrations? If people migrate, braving death, there are reasons.

What we were told about the war in Chad

We were told that the civil war in my country was a religious war. A war of power between Muslim northerners and Christian and animist southerners.

Today, I know some of the real causes for the war, beyond this simple story of religions. That is why I ask these questions today, about why people are migrating. I invite you to join me in asking these questions. And to dig below the surface to seek answers.

Refugees as things, not just people

In fleeing from the violence of the civil war in Chad, I sometimes felt like we didn't exist as people. We were hidden behind labels like "refugees" or "migrants." These were the words that came from the mouths of those who welcomed us. And the words stamped on the things given to us by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Once we were organized by the HCR into camps, we received canvasses, mosquito nets, bottles for water, cups to drink from, and so forth.

If you were part of a large family like we were, you could sell an item or two to buy food to vary and improve your diet. Precariousness makes people inventive and creative!

The local people who bought the items we sold called the things "refugees" or "UNHCR." So, refugees were both things and people.

Symbolic violence

All of this is part of the violence. It all contributes to the wounds that later must be healed. We had to welcome and traverse and transcend all of that. Because we had fled not for death but for life.

Today I deplore such objectification of people, such stigmatization and denigration. It makes us less human – when we should strive at every opportunity to be more and more human.

I see some of this in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, where I work now. I see it in myself, and in the local people and in people working for international organizations or local associations.

It is true that a migrant from sub-Saharan Africa, upon arriving in Algeria, is happy to find people attentive, available, and generous. It is heartwarming when people put themselves at their service. It puts a little humanity back into the road of exile. And we need that.

But after a while, refugees and migrants recover somewhat from the shock and the fatigue. More than anything else in the world, they aspire to regain a more or less normal life, even in the midst of the abnormality of their situation.

The reciprocity of giving

A gift is an act of reciprocity. But often, what happens? People who come to us do not want to receive our services in return. They do not want to get in touch with us. It is as if the label of migrant or refugee makes people incapable of relationship, of reciprocity.

Organizations want people to talk about their lives. It is emotional and perhaps makes people feel generous when they are able to listen. People relieve their consciousness by giving food or material goods. But we must keep the migrants at a distance, not mix with them. We must receive nothing from them.

If allowed to work, it is often degrading tasks that are relegated to them. (I've too much to say about this.) If they dare to put forward their know-how, jealousies, prejudices, and unjust accusations arise. (Prisons in North Africa are full of sub-Saharan Africans, and I hear you have problems with imprisonment here too.)

Learning to listen and allowing for impotence

What helps someone to rebuild themselves and to start believing in life again is feeling useful. Participation in community and in society is intrinsic to human dignity.

To begin to sum up (afraid of being long), I would like to say that migrants or refugees, no matter their cultures or languages, are people seeking a place to live in peace and security. The best way to help them is to transform our fears and emotions into involvement.

That is what the Sisters of Saint Joseph try to do in our peace and justice work today. Giving is good. But giving of self is the way to help another become more and more themselves. It takes time. It involves loads of listening, of encountering self and other. Sometimes it involves impotence, because one does not know what to do to help.

Every person needs help to get by. Each migrant or refugee must also walk their own path to peace and security. Really helping people means ensuring the conditions for them to use their capacities to realize themselves.

*The way to peace:
welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees*

Pope Francis talks about welcoming, protecting, promoting and integrating migrants and refugees¹.

Welcoming means offering migrants and refugees broader options for safe and legal entry into host countries.

Because true charity is based on justice, *protecting* means defending the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, independent of their legal status.

Promoting means ensuring that migrants and refugees, and people in the communities that welcome them, are **empowered to achieve their potential as human beings**, in all dimensions of their humanity (including family, education, work, leisure).

Integrating means **discovering each other** and giving each other opportunities for **intercultural enrichment**. It is by learning from one another that prejudices and fear dissipate. This lengthy process shapes societies and cultures.

Vivre ensemble

Voilà! There is a saying that Your happiness cannot be made without you.

When a host country makes it possible for people to become themselves, the host country is enriched with and through newcomers.

¹ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html

It is a real challenge, that goes beyond national policies. And a risk that every person who loves their country, and our common humanity, must take. It is the way to peace!

As says Fatou Diome² – a writer from Senegal and France –, there is much talk about the problems of migration and not enough about its benefits.

You and your country have a lot to teach the world about the successes and benefits of migration, because you are the fruits of migration. The histories of migrations may be painful, but they have forged you and your great nation.

If I dare say, I think the current debates are an opportunity for you, to show your diversity proudly and propose it to the world. Without that diversity, where would your country be economically, materially, financially? You have the true wealth and values of living together. *Vivre ensemble*.

We know the painful history of racism in your country. Certainly. Those who will meet this challenge and heal forever these pains of your past and present, I hope, are the youth of this country!

[translated from the original in French by Kathryn Toure, for the First Year Seminar at Avila University]

² “Fatou DIOME tacle Le Pen, Fillon, ‘Marianne porte plainte !’”
www.youtube.com/watch?v=1yJoofYMaT4&feature=youtu.be