



**TODAY'S REFUGEES  
AND THE  
WORLD OF  
COMMUNICATIONS**

by

**Silvano M. Tomasi, C. S.**

**CMS**

**Occasional Papers:  
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## I. THE WORTH OF THE REFUGEE AND THE MEDIA

**H**ow much are refugees worth in a society of mass communications? The dramatic image of swollen-belly babies with running noses, covered with flies in the merciless heat of the Somali desert; the picture of skeletal figures of men with aimless looks of despair in a Serbian-control refugee camp; the dead naked bodies of Haitian “boat people” washed ashore in Florida; handcuffed Vietnamese led to a plane for deportation from Hong Kong – all these stories make good copy on the screen and on the front page of newspapers and magazines. The news media paint a picture that tells their viewers and readers that we live in a messy world. They spark for a moment some emotions of empathy and anger and, hopefully, raise a doubt that the news has causes and consequences.

It has been pointed out that journalism is a quick and hurried activity, and because television and newspapers are profit-making enterprises that devote far more time and space to advertising than to news, the journalist lives always in the world of a Samuel Beckett play. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.

The number of columns, the sound bites and the minutes available to cover a huge, unruly and complicated world are limited. The consequences of superficiality and incompleteness limit the capacity to educate. But “the means of social communication have become so important,” notes John Paul II, “as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and society at large. . . . Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message. . . . It is also necessary to integrate that message in the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications.” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37, c)

When it comes to refugees’ understanding, Catholic media in particular have to fail better. The growing number of refugees and migrants displaced by hunger, violence, intolerance and abuse of their rights is worth the human dignity of everyone.

In the new Holy See document: *Refugees, a Challenge to Solidarity* (October, 1992), the Church calls on the media to break the silence of indifference and to overcome the temptation of sensationalism and support instead a new ethical vision for a just and accurate understanding of today’s massive

involuntary population movements. The just-released pastoral exhortation states: “Social communication media can help dissipate prejudice and arouse in public opinion an on-going concern for refugees. When they uphold policies based on solidarity and human understanding, they prevent refugees from becoming scapegoats for the ills of society. The presentation of a clear, positive image of refugees is particularly necessary in those countries where their presence is exploited to intentionally distract attention from other serious domestic or foreign problems. Indifference,” the document continues, “is a sin of omission. Solidarity helps to reverse the tendency to see the world solely from one’s own point of view. Acceptance of the global dimension of problems emphasizes the limits of every culture; it urges us towards a more sober lifestyle with a view to contributing to the common good; it makes it possible to provide an effective response to the just appeals of refugees and opens up paths of peace.” (n. 16).

In a nutshell, the interplay of refugees, social Catholic teaching and media is made evident and indicated as an effective way for a solution to what John Paul II has defined “perhaps the greatest tragedy of all the human tragedies of our time.”

The wall of indifference, however, that often meets the Church’s outreach is also a block for the effective influence of its media. A hard look at the suffering of refugees, at the natural and man-made causes of this tragedy and the risks that it entails, disturbs daily routine and cherished comforts. Catholic communicators must challenge their audience to overcome the temptation of shutting out the poor and the powerless. True, you can lead the horse to the water but you cannot force it to drink. With patient endurance, however, and with creativity even this wall can fall.

## II. THE URGENCY OF RESPONDING TO THE PLIGHT OF REFUGEES

**O**n the scale of world's priorities, the weight of refugees should count enough to attract the attention of more than the specialist and of an occasional shocking story. The first point to make about all refugees is that their wounded humanity, in fact, their inhuman situation, calls the Church and the whole society to fraternity and to restore "the human dignity of these people." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37, b) At issue is the primacy of the person. The refugees are the red light of alarm that in far too many countries and settings decisions are made against the human person. There is a crescendo of persons tossed in the whirlwind of world's events and relegated at the margins of consciousness and concern. The sad irony of 1992, that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had singled out as the year of repatriation, is that an all time high number of refugees and uprooted persons has been reached: 18 million people who meet the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol definition and as many internally displaced. The prospect for the future seems uglier. The war in the Balkans has produced roughly 2.5 million refugees and more than 400,000 of them have fled to countries outside the former Yugoslavia's borders while the others live precariously within the newly emerged countries. Ethnic conflicts are a source of refugees in Africa where 6 million people trek the desert and seek refuge in neighboring countries. The exodus at times stretches for 200 kilometers, accompanied only by the vultures' concentric flights. The echo of other ethnic wars creeps also into the news from Asia and the former Soviet Union. While wars related to East-West ideological rivalry are winding down, civil, secession and tribal wars persist. As the saying goes, "War makes rattling good history; but peace is poor reading." There is still plenty of rattling good history in the making and it seems contagious in poisoning human relations. The resulting refugees may have a different face and religion in Peru, Israel and Mozambique, in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, but they have the same scars of all the victims of broken brotherhood.

A second remark about the importance of confronting in earnest the plight of refugees is that they are the tip of the iceberg, the more obviously visible vanguard of increasing population movements from the poor to the industrialized countries. Political violence propels its victims into

other countries and blatantly makes them the responsibility of the receiving society and of the international community devising ever new strategies of expulsion, like “ethnic cleansing.” The receiving countries, on the other hand, are developing a new public vocabulary about newcomers and asylum seekers: invasion from the South and the East; skinheads and naziskin; xenophobia; fortress Europe; restrictionism; human flood; the Tijuana Wall. Refugees and immigrants are perceived as a combined threat to national identity and to economic security. The line is blurring between people forced to leave their homes because a bullet may end their life and those who risk dying because of starvation. A recent cartoon depicting Haitian boat people intercepted in the Caribbean Sea by the U.S. Coast Guard had a caption saying: “Are you drowning for economic or political reasons?” In the 1992 Message for Migration Day, the Holy Father puts it this way: “People used to emigrate in order to create better possibilities of life; today people emigrate from many countries merely to survive.” The economic gap between the rich countries and the poor ones has doubled in the last 30 years. Industrialized countries, with 23 percent of the world’s population, share 85 percent of the world profits. The billion people in the North of the world are 150 times richer than the poorest billion in the South. Thus, there is no surprise that some 100 million people have now taken the way of emigration and that projections for the future should anticipate the continuation of this phenomenon.

Peace and stability are linked to the will to create a really new social order. If a discussion of contemporary forced migrations, however, is circumscribed to the symptoms and the more immediate and explosive consequences of rejection and cultural diversity, without highlighting the root causes, it will not help finding the needed solutions.

The necessity to keep in mind the larger picture even for services directed to a very specific and focused audience leads to a third observation of why the Catholic-inspired media can find it interesting to report on the issue of forcibly displaced people. On the one hand, refugees are a worldwide problem of individuals and groups uprooted and alienated from their communities. On the other hand, the Church is a worldwide community with a vision of the dignity of every person and practical means to reach out in respect and love to all. In this match, it is possible to take a step beyond political and environmental reasons and show the pragmatic side of solidarity: disinterested emergency assistance, coordinated advocacy on behalf of the defeated of history, the witness of physical presence of priests and sisters, of lay volunteers, of bishops and even the Holy Father in camps and on the road of exile. This witness that rekindles hope, shares loneliness and pain, and uplifts the spirit means more than bread and shelter. It is a recognition that we are equal and “our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.” In fact, at a deeper level of understanding, it is the acknowledgement that our faith has been visualized by men and women marked by the experience of migration: Abraham and Sarah, Myriam and Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Mary and Joseph, the anonymous

first Jerusalem Christians. All have known flight and exile, life as foreigners, repatriation and new beginnings. The reporting of their stories makes the Old and the New Testament a document about refugees and exiles. These persons witness how faithful and near God is to everyone living uprooted in uncertainty and exile. Refugees become a concrete theological lesson in a fast-paced society where the sense of community is waning.

### **III. THE MEDIA'S WAYS OF SOLIDARITY WITH UPROOTED PEOPLE**

In a pop culture of short spurts of attention, how is the issue of refugees and population movements, important as it may be, going to keep an interest for more than a couple of minutes? Is the message going to disappear submerged by the power of the technology that transmits it? Jacques Ellul said that modernity can be described as “continuously improved means to carelessly defined ends.” Catholic media can reverse the trend and use information technology to empower and unite individuals at the deeper level needed to create an ethical vision that sustains welcome, the ability to live together in diversity, and a universal sense of social justice.

The masses of people walking the world in search of refuge are real: have eyes that cry and a spirit anguished by the loss of family, land, and personal identity. If the world of communications is the first Aeropagus of the modern age, Catholic journalists have the responsibility to articulate in it a message that empowers rather than controls, that makes victims our neighbors with a unique human face and not images of the unreal. Meeting with communication leaders in California in 1987, the Holy Father said: “. . . you should ask yourselves. . . . How do the weakest and the most defenseless in society appear in your words and images: the most severely handicapped, the very old, foreigners and undocumented. . . . Whom do you depict as having, or not having human worth?” He affirmed: “In fulfilling your mission you must always be aware of how your activities affect the world community, how they serve the cause of universal solidarity.”

Refugees, displaced people, and many migrants are defenseless and marginal. To find practical steps that bring them into the awareness of society and, in fact, to participate in its life is the media contribution to human solidarity. At the risk of presumption and repetition, here are some indications:

- a) Refugees don't come from the sky. If Western powers flood the Horn of Africa with arms, the production of refugees, hundreds of thousands of them, is not too far behind. A thoughtful reporter contextualizes the international policies towards the 'hot spots' of the world producing refugees. The ethical jargon policymakers use to frame their decisions does not necessarily match the actual decisions.

- First, immigration and refugee acceptance policy is not isolated. It is instead linked to foreign policy, economic relations, colonial history, cultural objectives and national identity, all interests that normally take precedence over the advertised statements of generosity governments adopt to shape their image and justify the acceptance of foreigners.
- Second, there is an element of irrationality that is accepted in the media discussion of South-North and East-West population movements. An interesting new catchword in the current xenophobic controversies in Europe is "defensive racism." The concern is with survival because "the boat is full." On the other hand, the opposite fear is voiced at the same time. Aging, decadence, insufficient fertility are seen as threatening the disappearance of the native population, an adequate manpower to sustain the economy, and the pension system.
- Third, a collective amnesia seems to come over people debating and writing about national identity and claiming their country for themselves. Eighteen million Frenchmen have a recent foreign origin. From 1945 to 1950 twelve million people arrived in Germany from Eastern Europe. The countries of the Americas were built by immigration and are still being changed by it.

Correct information, then, is complete information. Catholic media can offer an alternative reading by presenting the news and its deeper context; the difficulties refugees and migrants face and not only the problems they cause the rich societies; by avoiding generalizations that flatten any serious discussion.

- b) Global and national mass media shape the market. Catholic media are at a disadvantage. They can, however, be the transmission belt for a big and neglected story in need of wider attention. There is a geographical and historical dimension to this story.

From the places of migrant expulsion in Northern Brazil to the refugee camps in Africa, from the resettlement neighborhoods in the United States or Germany to the newcomers' human rights defense associations in Japan, the Church is present. This experience of immediate contact and sharing in the struggles and aspirations of millions of people, regardless of their religious affiliation, is a factual and original source of information and a witness of human solidarity in action worth telling.

As a transnational organization, the Church has been historically first in the attention to people forced to move across countries and regions of the same country. It has inspired organizations and projects and developed an extensive teaching in this field. It continues to play a role of advocacy and conscientization Catholic media can make more effective and universal, for example, by highlighting the annual observance of Migration and Refugee Day and the papal message that is issued for the occasion. In fact, the ethical vision of global solidarity, inspired by the Church's faith, is the foundation of those international juridical instruments of protection and assistance of refugees and uprooted people that are a sign of our civilization.

- c) The attention of Catholic media to forced population movements becomes an invitation to Christians to better grasp the complex issue they are involved with. not to make them feel guilty. On the other hand, there are clear options to be followed.
- There is a positive side to the story of ancient and modern migrations. The spread of ideas and the interaction of cultures has often come about through the movement of peoples. Einstein was a refugee. The less famous masses of refugees and migrants have regularly injected a dynamic force in the local economies once they have been made part of them. The human endurance and spiritual resourcefulness of people in trying conditions like all uprooted people are an invaluable witness to the higher values of life: freedom, religious practice, the preeminence of conscience and personal dignity. From a faith perspective, the missionary task should be pointed out of people compelled to escape oppression and to move elsewhere for work who, in the process, formed new ecclesial communities where none existed.
  - In Catholic media, refugees should be able to feel their point of view is represented fairly and not lost in the high discussion of state reasons and of reactions to their presence. Refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people too have a right to communicate. They cannot exercise this right in many circumstances, and Catholic media should step in and become their voice. Such a function will succeed if Catholic journalists let themselves be touched by the plight of refugees, keep regularly in contact with them and the organizations in their midst in a partnership of information that becomes critical in cases of emergency and there is no possibility of direct verification. Besides, journalists may be aware of impending crises; their courage and their skillful and accurate reporting can provide early warnings that may prevent a forced exodus.
  - Television has no memory and even printed media don't have much of a recalling power. The images and news of dramatic refugee stories and biblical exoduses faint away quickly from public attention. While the problems persist, Catholic media have to keep up the pressure. They are more than the electronic pulpit; their role deals with the global interpretation of life in the public arena where more powerful forces compete for a homogenized world's view that often cares little for the poor and the powerless. The insistence on keeping the refugee story alive will hopefully create an attitude of concern and more effectively drive the refugee debate beyond the simple sense of disturbance of the native population and the fairly ad hoc approach about reporting on them. It may also be a healthy stimulus for governments always sensitive about negative publicity and quick to take notice of criticism in this area of acceptance and rejection of migrants and the preparation of laws affecting their entry and integration. In this way, Catholic communicators can reverse a trend that sees refugees and migrants as invisible persons, bearers only of needs and not of rights.
  - Another important way through which the media can contribute to promoting the human rights of uprooted and displaced people is support for their right to receive regular information in their language about the country left behind and the one that hosts them, the development of their situation, the prospects for their future. There is almost an underground network of daily newspapers,

magazines, radio and television programs developed by expatriate communities, many of them Catholic, that remain invisible to the mainstream receiving Church and its associations. For example, in Canada there are some 260 ethnic periodic publications, 55 radio stations and 7 television networks transmitting ethnic programs. Their incorporation into the Catholic media network as well as providing direct access to refugees and immigrants themselves to tell their own story would benefit intrachurch dialogue and enrich both sides in understanding the requirements of integration and of welcome, the claims to self-identity and repatriation, and the legitimacy of a multicultural society.

- In general, the media both reflects and influences public opinion. An editor may be tempted to choose a story simply because it will run or to beat the competition or he may not be familiar with the crucial implications of population movements. In fact, there has also been the case of an editor assigning a story on asylum seekers to the mental health section of the newspaper. A Catholic journalist, like the leaven in his professional environment, can contribute a vision and sensibility about uprooted people that deepen the service of the media. A specific and unavoidable responsibility today for both Catholic media and journalists deals with the issue of racism and xenophobia, a destructive virus that kills the ability to live together in peace and mutual respect. Words are twisted to the point that they lose their connection with the truth and are used for the emotional charge they evoke. Of course, neither an exclusively paranoid perception of foreigners nor an exclusively humanitarian one conveys a correct portrait of their reality. A truthful image reflects the ordinary influences and expressions of life, the memories and practices, the aspirations and the dark sides of our common humanity.

#### **IV. COMMUNICATING THE REASON OF OUR HOPE**

**T**he extraordinary events of 1989 seemed for a while the dawn of a new world order. But among the ruins, the old poisonous plants of nationalism, religious and racial intolerance, economic dominance grow again. As a consequence, the question of refugees and forced migrations continues. At its roots and in its evolution it is a human rights question; it is a symptom of a tragically disordered world; it is directly linked to issues of peaceful and sustainable development and coexistence. Dostoevski wrote that beauty is the battlefield where God and the devil compete for the heart of man. Catholic communicators too are in a battlefield where two types of society confront each other, one of racism and the instinct of oppression of the weaker and rejection of the different and the other a community of coexistence, mutual welcome, and enrichment. The new City the Christian envisions is the fulfillment of solidarity, and the way to it is the truth about the human person and the whole human family. The world of modern communications is a critical arena where, as the First Letter of Peter states, we are called today with courtesy, respect and a clear conscience to explain the reason of our hope. (1Pt 3,15)



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