



Pilgrims of hope

It is the theme chosen by Pope Francis for the 2025 jubilee year. We picked it as the theme for the year 2024, the year in which we prepare ourselves to celebrate the jubilee and to celebrate the 16th General Chapter. ***Pilgrims of hope*** is indeed the perennial condition of every person; and more so, it is the condition of every Christian and every migrant.

Journeying has always been a great metaphor of human life. Represented by art in a thousand forms, today especially in science fiction movies (space, the final frontier), it has perhaps received its highest expression in the adventures of Odysseus. Obsessed with returning home, Odysseus must first go through the transformation that takes place in a journey that is both a journey into the unknown and a journey within himself. Life is pilgrimage primarily because it is quest. Dante Alighieri takes up the same theme when he sets out on his journey after losing his way. He acknowledges that Odysseus understood what differentiates man from all other beings, namely, "*virtue to pursue and knowledge high,*" but the human quest without the guidance of faith remains a "*witless flight.*"

Wandering emerges constantly in Scripture, beginning with Abraham, who is called by God to be a blessing to the nations but as a stranger. He is in fact taken from his land and put in the condition of being landless in order to continually find himself in a situation of seeking. And even when the search is fulfilled by entering the promised land, the condition of wandering remains. Peter, in fact, writes to Christians scattered throughout Asia that they are not called to build cities of their own, but to be, in their pilgrimage, living stones of a spiritual edifice. From being foreigners and pilgrims, they have become God's people.

These are anthropological and theological aspects also taken up by St. John Paul II, when he wrote that "*Pilgrimage is a fundamental and foundational experience of the condition of the believer, 'homo viator,' a man on his way toward the Source of all good and toward its fulfillment. By placing his whole being on the journey, his body, his heart and his intelligence, man discovers himself to be a 'seeker of God and a pilgrim of the Eternal.' He uproots himself from himself to pass into God.*" Benedict XVI also takes up the theme of the journey and does it in his encyclical on hope. "*Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives.*"

Our voyage is taking place on the sea of modern-day history, and it is not a calm sea. However, we must resist the temptation to think that it was better in the past. In his pastoral letter on the jubilee at the beginning of the 20th century, so many years ago, Scalabrini described his time this way: "*The world groans under the weight of great misfortunes and deadly diseases undermine life and bronzes of war vomit death and the iniquities of men cry out ceaselessly to divine justice...*"

It sounds like he was talking about our days. But we must also resist the temptation to think that it will always be like this and thus allow ourselves to be caught up in indifference and close ourselves off in our own little private world.

Migrants expect it from us, migrants who more than anyone else experience the wandering from one country to another moved by hope. And it is not, as Pope Francis reminded us recently, “*a sweet wandering in communion; it is often a drama.*” This too is a temptation to resist, that of poeticizing migration with sweetened representations. At the same time, called by vocation to be by their side, it is our duty to listen to migrants, their aspirations, their sufferings, their consolations, and to help them account for the hope that is in them. It is easy to settle, even for migrants: to settle for having crossed a border, for having found a job, for having sent money home. But the hope that drove them remains hope for more, and we must be able to point to the more. Even migrants have the right to be “*seekers of God and pilgrims of the Eternal.*”

How to live the coming year as pilgrims of hope? The first indication comes to us from Pope Francis. “*In this time of preparation, I would greatly desire that we devote 2024, the year preceding the Jubilee event, to a great ‘symphony’ of prayer. Prayer, above all else, to renew our desire to be in the presence of the Lord, to listen to him and to adore him. Prayer, moreover, to thank God for the many gifts of his love for us... Prayer as the royal road to holiness, which enables us to be contemplative even in the midst of activity. In a word, may it be an intense year of prayer in which hearts are opened to receive the outpouring of God’s grace.*” The word symphony refers to the harmony of many instruments, voices, moments. Mission has put us in contexts where we can contribute to the symphony of prayer by giving breath to various traditions.

A second way of living as pilgrims of hope is to support the hope of migrants. We already do this in the various activities in which we are involved in our missions. But let us think of something specific and useful, such as articulating the theme of hope in initiatives concerning formation, catechesis, and celebration; intervening, including with lay people, in advocacy and support enterprises; promoting at the regional/provincial level the opening of a mission or activity that is particularly meaningful.

And then, let us commit ourselves to actively participate in the preparation of the General Chapter. This is an important moment for the Congregation, outlining the path for the coming years. It will be as effective as it expresses the vision emerging from below, the instances that are perceived there where the hope of migrants meets the faith of those who have come to know Christ, the hope of the nations. Should the doubt come that we are working in vain, that we are hoping in vain, let us remember that Scalabrini recommended, “*let us hope without growing weary.*”

Migrants set out because migration “*opens the flowery paths of hope.*” Unfortunately, many times, hope has given way to despair. We, who are like them on the road, should make the journey together, because hope becomes greater when it is shared, without taking other paths, certain, as St. John Paul II taught, that “*simple things are better learned in the experience of the journey than in books!*”

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