INTRODUCTION

Migration has always been part of the fabric of humanity’s story. People have moved from one place to another since ancient times for much of the same reasons that encourage or compel people to move today, namely economics, politics, or religio-cultural conflicts. The current phase of migration, however, is profound and distinct in that it is more massive, its “pull factors” more attractive, and its “push factors” more repulsive. Moreover, its ripple effects are more comprehensive. No individual, family, community, or society is left untouched by it.

Indeed, when one puts contemporary migration under closer scrutiny one can see that its current density, velocity, and multi-directionality present complexities. The United Nation’s 2006 International Migration Report, for instance, says that the number of people living outside their country of origin increased from 155 million in 1990 to more than 191 million in 2005. Worldwide, migrants now account for approximately 3% of the world population and that if they were to constitute a country, theirs would be the world’s sixth most populous. Not surprisingly more than 60% of them are in developed countries. In fact about 75% of all migrants live only in 28 countries.1

With its concomitant misery migration is clearly emerging as one of the critical components of what is laid out in Gaudium et Spes as the “grief and anguish of people of our time” (GS,1).2 But there’s more that we can learn from migration from a theological perspective aside from the tragic for it is, ultimately, a pilgrimage in the wilderness.

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2 Carmem Lussi explicitly points this out in “Human Mobility as a Theological Consideration” in Migration in a Global World, ed., Solange Lefebvre and Luis Carlos Susin, Concilium 2008/5 (London: SCM Press, 2008): 50. One could speak of migration, in other words, as a “signs of the times” or those events of history through which God continues to speak to us and summon us to respond for the sake of the reign of God’s love and justice throughout the whole of creation. Richard P. McBrien, Catholicism (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 95.
The journeys that migrants undertake are, indeed, more than a trip. It is more than an adventure, more than a vacation or a sojourn. As a people who travel across deserts and seas in search of “greener pastures” and of their own “promised land” migrants’ journeys are like a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage unites the seeker and the traveler and insofar as migrants’ journeys force them to struggle to survive and, to a certain extent, thrive in strange places their journeys are a pilgrimage in the wilderness. They are also a pilgrimage in the wilderness in that they are journeys of hope rooted in courage which is nurtured by a strong and creative will to resist and empowered by a steadfast faith.

“Wilderness,” as concept, has a negative (as wildland or a place that is beyond the control of humans) and a positive meaning (as a place that nurtures the human spirit). This puts the former as a place to be conquered and the latter as a place to be preserved. Whatever the case may be the idea of the wilderness arguably carries a spiritual and, consequently, theological value. Using the experience of struggle and hope by the Israelites in the wilderness as heuristic lens, for instance, Rev. Chad Rimmer contends: “In the wilderness, nations are recreated, people are renamed, sacrifices are made, callings are discerned, spiritual acumen is honed, God’s grace is revealed, and God’s people are renewed.”

Jesus himself was led and entered into the wilderness where he struggled physically, psychologically, and spiritually. There he was tempted and wrestled with himself after which he began to proclaim about the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 4:1–17). Whatever and which-

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3 David Backes, “The Land Beyond the Rim: Sigurd Olson’s Wilderness Theology,” <http://www4.uwm.edu/letsci/research/sigurd_olson/theology.htm> accessed October 18, 2009 traces the historical roots of these meanings in American discourse. Peter N. Carroll, Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier, 1629–1700 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) meanwhile illustrates more clearly the historical interrelatedness of these contrasting interpretation by exploring the Puritans’ experience of the wilderness as “a sorrowful estate”, “a place of safety” and as the “pleasant gardens of Christ.” Carroll argues that while it has its “sad storms” and “wearisome days” this wilderness, that is, the “new world” for the Puritans is still a “good land” which, at the same time, needs further improvement.


5 All biblical quotations from hereon are taken from the Christian Community Bible 27th ed. (Quezon City, Phils.: Claretian Publications, 1999).