Mygration Conference

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Mygration Conference

I am grateful for the opportunity to be here among you and to learn from you –and perhaps even to say something that may be helpful in your work and ministry on what is one of the most challenging issues of our time.

I am particularly grateful for the name of this conference: the "Mygration Christian Conference." I have not discussed that name with the organizers of the conference, some of whom are long standing friends. This I have done on purpose, because I hope it will allow me to make my initial comments out of my own personal reactions rather than out of what I would have been told by your movement and its organizers.

First of all, I like the title of the conference because, at a time when politicians and just about everybody else are discussing immigration your very title reminds us that immigration is actually one side of a single coin; and that if we were to talk about those two sides of the coin as "heads" and "tails," immigration should not be seen as the head, but rather as the tail of the coin. The people who are now being discussed in this country as immigrants, were emigrants

long before becoming immigrants. If today they become immigrants, quite likely a long time ago they began considering the painful possibility of becoming emigrants.

There are some important exceptions to this. We have among ourselves millions of people descending from immigrants who never decided to emigrate before they were trapped by the slave trade and brought here unwillingly. And there are others among us whose ancestors did not emigrate, but were pushed out of their own lands.

Back to the matter of immigrants first being emigrants: this is particularly important in today's context, in which “immigrants” have become a political football kicked around for political goals that really have little to do with them. Ill-informed –or perhaps willingly misinformed– politicians go on national TV to tell us that “these people, who do not even know English, are eating our pets cats and dogs,” and that they are the main cause of a crime wave that does not even exist.

So, let's put things in the proper order and begin thinking, not first of all of immigrants, but

rather of emigrants. For most people, the decision to emigrate involves a painful process. Conditions being equal, very few people would like to leave the land of their birth, their extended families, the language they learned while sitting on their mother's lap, the mountains or the plains, the landscapes, the cuisine, all that made them who they are, to try to settle in an unknown and probably unwelcoming land. They have decided to leave all this behind in order to live elsewhere. No matter how attractive that elsewhere may be, it is still elsewhere; it is not home; and it will not be home for a long time.

One of Perú's most famous poets expressed the painful longing of his own migrant experience when he said:

> Quien vive de prisa no vive de veras;
> Quien no echa raíces no puede dar fruto.
>
> Living on the move is not really living.
>
> Without roots you can bear no fruit.
>
> Ser río que corre, ser nube que pasa,
> sin dejar recuerdo ni rastro alguno,
> es triste; y más triste para quien se siente
> nube en lo elevado, río en lo profundo.
>
> Being a flowing river, being a passing cloud,
>
> Leaving nothing behind, is sad;

and even sadder if you are
a cloud soaring high,
a river running deep.
Quisiera ser árbol mejor que ser ave,
Quisiera ser leño mejor que ser humo.
I would be a tree rather than be a bird
I would be a log rather than smoke.

What this poet, José Santos Chocano, expresses is the feeling of many emigrants; with the added burden that most of us cannot carve beauty out of our pain, as a poet can. Deep down, this is the feeling, not only of the emigrant who from this side of things is called an immigrant, but also of many former immigrants who have lived most of their lives in a new land, and still long for the old.

We shall come back to that in a moment, but first I would like to return to the name of this conference: "*My*gration," with a Y. I am sure that this is not a misspelling or a typo. I am not sure what it meant to those who first gave it this name. But to me, it means that migration is never just someone else's problem or someone else's concern. Life is always moving, and therefore the very act of living always involves the pain and sorrow of the emigrant and the joy

and hope of the immigrant –the pain of leaving the past, and the joy of hope for the future. In this conference we are not discussing only the problem of "those people"; we are truly discussing the lives of "we the people" –we, the people of this nation, and we the people of God's world.

That we are all migrants is reflected in a universal and sometimes overwhelming nostalgia; in the case of a physical migrant, in a longing for a distant and idealized land; and in other cases, a longing for an equally idealized past. Quite often I long for a Cuba that never existed. When I get together with other Cubans, we often sign songs long forgotten in Cuba itself. But down deep I also know that the native land for which I long never existed. Still, in such settings I feel very close to the psalmist who wondered: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps 137.4).

In this country, many who do not see themselves as migrants dream of a time in the mid-twentieth century that never existed. They build an imaginary nation of green lawns and picket fences, of stable families, a time with no corruption, no street gangs, no unemployment,

no inflation. And, oddly enough, in that fanciful picture, some whose parents were immigrants also imagine a time with no immigrants –or they propose a future time without immigrants.

Such imaginary lands, as well as such equally imaginary times, though they never existed, now have a significant impact on our dreams, on our longings, on our politics, and on our entire lives –an impact whose power is magnified by our inability recognize it (or rather by our unwillingness to recognize it).

A warning is necessary there. When we say that we are all mygrants, with a Y, we must be careful, lest this be used in order to minimize the pains, the perplexities, and the dangers of those who are forced into a physical migration from one place to another. But there is also the possibility that this realization will help us empathize with the migrant, see him or her as one of us, rather than as a symbol of a "them" who bear the responsibility for all our frustrations.

Finally, still on the title of this conference, it is necessary that we constantly remind ourselves that this is a "Mygration *Christian* Conference." This may have many different meanings. I will

not go into the possibilities that I considered when thinking about this event. I will simply say that my purpose now is to look at Scripture and try to underscore some of its guidance as we consider both the issue of migration –of migration with an i, and of mygration with a Y; of migration as a world-wide phenomenon, and of mygration as every person's and every community's existential experience.

Along these lines, the first thing to be said is that migration appears in Scripture from beginning to end. As a consequence of their sin, Adam and Eve, and all humanity, are expelled from Eden into a life of migration. Abraham and Sarah leave the lands of their ancestors in search of a promised land, and their migration leads them as far as Egypt and then back to their promised land. Joseph is sold into slavery and becomes an involuntary emigrant –just as right now in this land of freedom people are sold into slavery and forced to migrate as sex objects. Joseph himself later invites his family to emigrate from their own land and become immigrants in Egypt because of famine in their own land –and today there are people seeking to cross illegally under the bridge while the produce that has been harvested in the lands where their ancestors grew corn and beans crosses legally over the bridge. Back to ancient times in Egypt, political changes

in that nation suddenly turned people who had long lived in the land –people whose ancestor Joseph had saved Egypt from famine– to be considered immigrants with no rights and many obligations –as still happens today with people of Mexican ancestry in the Southwest. The people of Israel are repeatedly carried away into exile and slavery –from the times of the Babylonians to the times of the Romans, when they were finally expelled and prohibited to live in their own lands for five centuries, until the Muslims who had taken the land from the Byzantines allowed them to return –ah, the strange ironies of history!

In the New Testament, Mary and Joseph are forced to leave their home in Galilee and travel to Judea because in a land far away Emperor Augustus has decided to count everybody and everything, apparently in order to impose new taxes on the conquered peoples. The Son of Man does not have where to lay his head. A young man who thinks he is just going to Damascus to eradicate Christianity in that city is really setting out on a journey that will take him back to his native Tarsus, then to Antioch, then on a series of voyages, and finally to death by the Appian Road in the outskirts of Rome.

One could go on and on listing examples. But all of those examples are episodes of a long cosmic pilgrimage that is somehow leading God's creation from its birth in the book of Genesis to its consummation in the book of Revelation.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, in referring to Abraham's migrations, shows not only that there is a connection between migration and faith, but also that the life of faith is by definition a life of migration:

> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Heb 11.8-10)

After mentioning others, Hebrews reminds us that…

> All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11.13-16)

And then the text makes all of us heirs and partakers of this migration of faith and hope: "For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13.14).

This leads us to the crucial question that is so often entangled with today's political discourse regarding migration and immigration: the matter of citizenship.

On this score, if we are to understand what the New Testament says about citizenship, we must begin by clarifying what citizenship meant at that time. Have you ever thought of the strange anomaly that, while the word “citizenship” is obviously connected to the word “city,” you can be a citizen of a country, but you cannot be a citizen of a city? If you live in Chicago, you may be a citizen of the United States; but not a citizen of Chicago. You may be able to vote in municipal elections; yet, this is not because you are a citizen of Chicago, but because you are a citizen of the United States residing in Chicago. In a word, there is no Chicagoan citizenship. If you live in the city of Boston, and perhaps also live in Boston, you are a Bostonian, and you may be a citizen of the United States; but your travel documents will say that you are a citizen of the United States. Neither the city of Boston, nor the city Chicago, have the power to make someone a “citizen,” or to grant rights of citizenship.

The reason for this is that when the Greeks spoke of a polis, a city, they meant both an urban

center and a state. This obviously comes from the time of what historians call “city-states.” Ancient Athens was a city, in the sense of being an urban center controlling the surrounding lands; and it was also a state, in the sense of having its own constitution, its own laws, and its own government. The ancient Romans had two different words for these two realities: urbs, from which we derive our word “urban,” and *civitas*, from which we derive our word “city” and “citizen.” This means that when St. Augustine, for instance, wrote *De civitate Dei*, *On the City of God*, and spoke of two cities grounded on two different loves, he was not thinking in terms of two urban centers, but rather of two entire societies, two systems of government, two undergirding systems of values, two states. And the same is true when the Revelation of John refers to “the city of God.” What John says that he saw coming down from heaven certainly involved an urban center, with walls, foundations and gates. But, much more than that, it was a new order, a new state, a new government, a new set of values.

One reason why this is important is that the eschatological imagery of the New Testament uses a double set of images.

On the one hand, primarily in the Gospels, eschatological hope is most often depicted with the metaphor of the Kingdom or the Reign of God –or the Kingdom of Heaven. We find that imagery in the parables of Jesus, where he repeatedly says: “the Kingdom of God is like…”

And then we have in Revelation the image of the city, the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21.2). “The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel” (Rev 21.18-19).

It is possible to find different emphases in these two sets of images; but they are actually closer than we usually think, for when the Book of Revelation speaks of a “heavenly city” it is not referring only to what today we would call a city, to an urban center, but also to what today we would call a state, and at that time was often called a polis, a city. This means that, no matter what the differences between the two sets of images and metaphors, what the Gospels call “the Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of heaven” is what Revelation and much of Christian

tradition call “the City of God.”

This casts an interesting light on what various New Testament authors and early Christians meant when they spoke of “the city of God.” Even though in the Book of Revelation the heavenly city descending from God is described in imagery that makes us think of an urban center, with walls, and all the rest, what characterizes that city is not so much the size of its walls, or streets paved with gold, or walls made of jasper, sapphire, and emeralds. Those are beautiful images. There are images that also point to the uniqueness of this city –for instance, when we are told that the gates to this walled city are never closed. But this is not what is most surprising. What is most surprising is who sits on the throne as ruler of this city.

Imagine for a moment that you are living in the town of Pergamum. It is the year 96 or 97. Pergamum is an important place, for it is the center of Roman administration for a wide surrounding area. It is therefore a rich and important place. The high hill at the center of the city, the acropolis, is adorned with beautiful temples to the gods, government buildings, and the luxurious mansions of the ruling class, mostly Romans. For you, Pergamum is not only a

beautiful place, but also a difficult place, for you are a slave and a Christian. The acropolis, even though it is right there, is also far away. To you it represents the unattainable, the forbidden. And even farther away, and far above the lofty acropolis of Pergamum, you have heard of the city of Rome, ruler of the world. There, in a high and distant palace, lives the lord of Rome, the Emperor, whose name is Domitian. You are gathered with other Christians, who have come together to break bread. Before the breaking of the bread, a lengthy letter is being read. It is from John, from whom you first heard the gospel, and who is now exiled in Patmos. You are fearful, thinking that perhaps you too will be in trouble with the government. Perhaps you are also tearful, because some fellow believers have been arrested and you fear they are being tortured and may be killed. You have no idea why this has happened; but you are fairly sure that it is the result of strange orders from that unattainable ruler who sits on a throne in the splendid city of Rome.

Now you hear John speaking of a different city, of a different order, of a different way of living in community. The walls and palaces of Rome are covered with colorful marble from far-flung regions of the world; but the walls of this other city are covered with precious stones. The one

sitting on the throne in this heavenly city is joined there by the Lamb that was slain by the same Roman government that is now showing fear among Christians in Pergamum. But the Lamb that was slain has proven to be more powerful than the emperor of Rome; even more powerful than death itself, which by now has taken away all those who sat on the throne of Rome before Domitian.

If Emperor Domitian is high and lifted up, how much more so must be the Emperor of Heaven! You tremble and quake before such a vision. How can you, a mere slave, see this God and live?

But John speaks of a very different city and a very different ruler: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, «See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away»” (Rev 21.3-4). And you suddenly remember that you are a citizen of that coming order! Emperor Domitian and his representatives may cause you to weep right now; but the One who is far above every emperor and every state will wipe every tear from

your eyes. Emperor Domitian has the power to kill you today; but the Lamb that was slain and yet lives shares with you his own victory over death itself. You are a citizen of the heavenly and everlasting city!

Since in our present political environment any mention of migration rapidly moves to the matter of immigration and then to issues of citizenship, it may be well to look at the matter of citizenship in the ancient church. There's no better place to look for guidance on this point than the apostle Paul, who was himself a Roman citizen.

Roman citizenship was not a common thing. Even in the city of Rome, most inhabitants were not citizens. Traditionally, Roman citizens had all sorts of privileges above the rest of the population. According to Roman tradition, one of the earliest laws from the times of the Republic was that a Roman citizen could not be flogged. This is the background of the episode in Acts 16, when after being freed from prison in Philippi, and the magistrates of the city have decided to let them go …

> Paul replied, “They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in

> secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. (Acts 16.37-39)

And much later in the same book, when Paul's speech at the Temple causes an uproar and the Roman tribune, we are told that…

> …the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him. But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?" When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen." The tribune came and asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship." Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." Immediately those who were about to examine him drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. (Acts 22.24-29)

We know of the power of Roman citizenship from many other sources. In Egypt, for instance, at the very bottom layer of society were the original inhabitants of the land, known as "Copts." Above them were other immigrant groups, such as the Jews –although there were some very rich Jews in Alexandria. Then came the Greeks, who had ruled there since Alexander had conquered Egypt. Above them were the Latins and other Italians, who represented and managed Roman rule. And among that top echelon of society was a much smaller elite of Roman citizens. Further West along the coast of North Africa, in Carthage and its surroundings, there was a similar situation, although with a different set of ethnicities. Throughout the Roman

Empire Roman citizens held most positions of power and authority. And they had the widest panoply of rights and privileges.

Paul held this valuable and exclusive citizenship. Wherever he went he could claim rights and privileges that most others did not have –rights and privileges that were valid and even feared throughout the Empire. That is why the functionaries in Philippi acted as they did when they learned that both Paul and Silas were Roman citizens.

But some time later, when writing to Christians in that very city where he had appealed to his own Roman citizenship, Paul says:

> But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Phil 2.20-21)

In those few words, there are two significant points that are relevant to our discussion today. The first and most obvious one is that Paul, whose Roman citizenship was as coveted as an American diplomatic passport would be coveted today, claims to have an even higher citizenship, and speaks of a heavenly citizenship in contrast to and above all earthly citizenships.

Radical as this may sound, it is a rather common theme in Christian piety. In fact, it has often been used to avoid any participation or any responsibility in the affairs of the present order. It is then that we hear someone say: “That law is unjustly oppressive to some people. But I am not going to get involved in the matter, because my true citizenship is in heaven, and not here.” Or: “That system of taxation is unfair, because the poor end up paying much more than the extremely wealthy. I expect things to be different in heaven.” Or: “Senior citizens are being exploited in some retirement homes. Thank goodness that they will soon be in heaven!”

The point is that if you claim that your heavenly citizenship is higher than your earthly citizenship, you better prove it by using your earthly citizenship in service of the heavenly. Or, in other words: If you truly believe that God’s coming order is better than the present order, you better start behaving in the present order as those who really believe in the coming of the future heavenly order.

I said earlier that there are two significant points in Paul’s words to the Philippians regarding heavenly citizenship. The second point, (the one I find really earthshaking) is that Paul, writing

to a variety of people in Philippi –perhaps some of them well-to-do, like Lydia, but probably most of them servants, slaves, day-laborers– declares himself a participant of their strange, somewhat hidden citizenship. He does not tell them "your citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that you are expecting a Savior." What he says is "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior." He does not just tell them that they have a higher, heavenly citizenship. He tells them that this is a common citizenship, a citizenship that he shares with rich and poor, with slaves and free, with men and women, with Jews and Gentiles. He knows that, from the point of view of the earthly city, their heavenly citizenship is less than worthless. This is why he refers to "the body of our humiliation," which will be "conformed to the body of his glory." It is because of this transformation of humiliation into glory that citizenship in the heavenly city, citizenship in the Reign of God, is more desirable than the citizenship people in his time most covet and admire. And then comes the ultimate reason for his confidence: that all this will happen because of "the power that also enables him [Christ] to make all things subject to himself." In conclusion, the heavenly citizenship is more desirable, not because those who hold it are better than the rest, or because they wield a Bible, or because they go to church, or because they hold to a particular doctrine, but because far above the high throne of the Emperor in Rome, far above the Oval Office in the White House, far above the

Kremlin in Moskow, far above any other power we may imagine, higher than any fence we might build, is the power, and the glory, and the grace of the One before whose name “every knee shall bend, in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” (Phil 2.10).

Please don’t get me wrong. I do not mean that our heavenly citizenship should keep us from active participation in the struggles of the earthly city. I mean that our ultimate citizenship liberates us from an unconditional submission to the values and authorities of the earthly city. I mean that Christians must be involved in advocacy for the values of the Kingdom, and must use earthly political means to pursue those values. But this means also that the Christian who bows before the gods of the earthly city has fallen into idolatry. There is no doubt that Christians should be patriotic in loving their nation –be it the one into which we were born, or a nation that has adopted us as its children. But I also believe that, strictly speaking, Christian Nationalism –any Christian Nationalism, no matter where it is American, Brazilian, Italian, German, or British– is tantamount to Christian idolatry, and is therefore not just a heresy, but also an oxymoron. It is like saying that one believes in “Christian atheism.”

Over against this, I invite you to consider the manner in which an unknown disciple in the mid-second century tried to describe to Emperor Hadrian what it means to be a Christian:

> Christians are no different from other people in their nationalities, or in their language, or in their uses. They do not live in their own cities, nor do they speak in a particular way, or lead a strange life. … They live in Greek cities and in Barbarian cities, according to each one's lot. They dress as the natives do, eat what they do, and do what they do. But they also show a strikingly admirable behavior, which many others find surprising. They live in their own lands, but as foreigners. Every foreign land is their homeland; and in every homeland they are foreigners. … They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the laws, but their conduct surpasses the laws. They love all, and all persecute them. (To Diognetus, 5)

In other words, all Christians, no matter how settled or unsettled, no matter how long we have lived where we now live, no matter what kind of papers we have or don't have, no matter whether we live in a mansion or under a bridge, are migrants. The pain, the tragedy, the injustice of so many who today find themselves uprooted, used for political purposes, exploited, dying of thirst in the dessert, is not just migration out there, or immigration over there, at the border, a social phenomenon to be discussed by means of statistics, and thus kept at arm's length. It is, as the title of this conference declares, mygration, with a Y. It is my problem. It is your problem. It is our problem. And it is my hope, your hope, our hope. Because we too are migrants. Because, no matter whether or not our earthly nation calls us citizens, our true citizenship goes far beyond all human borders, and to the very gates of heaven, where our

documentation is sealed by the victory of the Lamb. So be it!