

“...fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God”

Black and Migrant Christians in Europe.

Athens CWME May 2005

“...fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” that is the starting point for my reflection. This word is referring to foreigners, the strangers. Migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, are the strangers of today. Many of our societies, of our churches, each of us needs to be reconciled with these women and men who arrive in our countries and must find their place within our society.

We can look at these people as victims and assist them, which is certainly necessary, but we should also remember that they can only be reconciled and healed if they are fully recognised as active players in our societies and churches.

The Bible is presenting the stranger from these two aspects:

- the stranger, who must be protected and received as an important gift
- the stranger, the migrant, the exiled, the refugee as an active part of society.

The Bible is a story of migrants. It tells us of the protection of migrants but also of the migrant as an active and positive member of the hosting society: Abraham is founding a new community, creating economic and cultural wealth. Ruth is acting and certainly can not be considered a passive and weak woman. Jeremiah invites the deported people of Israel to get integrated into the society of Babylon and to “seek the welfare of any city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Lord for it; on its welfare your welfare will depend” Jeremiah 29.7.

Reconciling and healing need in the relationship between migrants or refugees and the host society: how can this happen? I would like to look at this issue from two points of view: from the point of view of the churches, which live this situation, and from a secular point of view. We will see that both perspectives must be taken into consideration by churches and each single believer, calling all of us to respond to our responsibility as brothers and sisters.

Migrants and refugees are living today in all countries and most societies and governments are reacting in a defensive way. Living in Europe, I feel ashamed that our rather rich countries are

promoting a policy, which is insisting on border control and “security”, forgetting Human Rights, solidarity and burden sharing. We need to question: for which kind of security?

Migrants are seen as a problem, a burden, a risk for our “security”, our labour market, our economy and our culture. We easily forget that these brothers and sisters wish to be active partners in our society and are very able to contribute to the economy and to the culture of the so-called hosting country. They are able to be actors in the life of our societies and most of them wish to be citizens like the local population.

Where are the churches in this situation? They are part of the society and have a role to play.

I. Migrants within our churches as Christian brothers and sisters:

Migrants are often Christians and therefore within our churches or have their own services using our structures. How do churches live with this presence?

I come from Italy and belong to the extremely small minority of Protestants in this mainly Roman Catholic country. Today more than two thirds of the Protestants in Italy are migrants. Our Italian churches can no longer overlook this challenge.

In nearly all our communities are worshipping migrants together with Italian Christians. So the issue of how to live together in a multicultural context is a question we have to face within our daily church life.

It is not only a question of social and legal assistance, neither an issue of renting our church buildings. We have to learn to become partners at equal level within our congregations. It is an ecclesiological issue how we receive these brothers and sisters in our churches. They are not guests but members with full rights. They are not only victims who need assistance but people who contribute actively to the life of the church, who wish to evangelise, to be part of decision making processes, to contribute with their theological, liturgical and musical knowledge to the church life of the Italian churches. The reconciling and healing process begins actually only here. Only if we overcome our attitude of assisting them as victims, if we give up our position of helpers and accept

to be at the same level with these brothers and sisters, a dialogue of healing and reconciling through mutual acceptance can begin.

Many European churches are helping generously migrant churches, but they remain helpers not partners at equal level. They did not open up to a process of mutual acceptance as equal members of the Universal Church. This led to a separate development of black and migrant churches in various countries. We find the black majority churches in Great Britain and the numerous migrant churches in the Netherlands, which have their own co-ordinating body SKIN. In most countries in Europe migrants are worshipping separately from the local Christians.

In the South of Europe the things developed in part differently. In the Protestant churches in Italy, in Spain, in Portugal you will find very often mixed congregations. Migrants often worship together with the local people. Others have their own services in the same building where the local people held their worship and have activities together. This does not happen because our churches had a better understanding of the ecclesiological importance with which migrant Christians are facing us. We had no other choice. Protestants are in these countries such a tiny minority that the presence of migrant brothers and sisters was understood as a gift for our church life. The number of migrant Protestants in Italy is far higher than the number of Italian Protestants. So we had no possibility to become the rich helper. Our churches are small, often divided, we have little resources, our theological thinking needs enrichment, our liturgy and our music is often poor. We receive so much from migrant Christians that today the issue how to share our congregational life with migrants became one of the major priorities of our churches. We call it "To Be Church Together/Uniting in Diversity". The Synod of the Waldensian Reformed Church declared in 2004 that the issue is a constitutive element of our being church. Nevertheless the situation is not this idyllic as you may hope. Many questions arise. We have to re-think the whole way of being church.

The presence of migrants is questioning us in all parts of church life:

- our liturgy
- the way how we interpret the Bible
- ethics
- language and languages
- church rules and articles
- education of lay people and pastors

- the composition of decision making bodies

This process is going on at both sides: not only the local churches have to reflect but also the migrants. On one side it seems important to work and to live together but there are also important reasons why migrants wish to have some space for separate activities: the need to speak the mother tongue when praying, to meet with co-nationals in order to feel a little at home. These are important arguments, which must be respected.

Nevertheless sharing and growing together offers many opportunities:

- both parts will be enriched
- misunderstanding and mistrust can more easily be overcome
- sharing is also an instrument for empowerment for migrants, who must have access to decision making and to teaching.
- In any case unity should be a priority for Christians also in from this point of view.

II. Looking at the issue from a secular point of view:

Churches are part of society. Christians are also citizens and co-responsible for the wellbeing and cohesion of the society. The correct integration of migrants is an important factor of this need. Most migrants do not carry with them economic wealth but they have cultural traditions and wish to maintain them and to contribute with them to the host society. The religious aspect is one of the most important values, migrants are bringing with them. Especially in the beginning when migrants still feel very little at home in the hosting society, religious links are important for them:

- migrants have a need to express their religious creed and this could become an instrument of stabilisation, avoiding marginalisation and the loss of values of migrants.
- Both the culture of the host society and that of the migrant could be enriched if they meet and accept each other in mutual openness.
- Religious marginalisation of migrants can lead to frustration and radicalisation and may put at risk the social cohesion.

- The integration of migrant Christians as equal partners into the churches of the host countries leads to empowerment of the migrant, if the process proceeds correctly. Migrants may get acquainted with decision making processes in the country and have a better chance to learn the language which is an instrument of empowerment.

It becomes clear that the churches of the hosting countries have a double responsibility to receive migrant brothers and sisters:

- As churches we are all part of the same body in Christ, and unity is an aim which we can never overlook.
- As churches we must be constructive and responsible actors within the society we are part of. That means that churches must contribute to the integration of migrants receiving them as equal partners in the churches if they wish so.

The process will be long and must be respectful of many different needs and situations. There is not only one model to work for this aim. Various forms of collaboration and exchange must be experienced. The fundamental principle is that all must be equal partners and all must be willing to co-operate. Different needs, different timing and different approaches must be respected.

The status of a migrant is the very status of a Christian who tries to follow Christ. We therefore need our migrant brothers and sisters also in order to remind us again and again of our mandate, which is a journey, a migration.

Christ himself accepted to migrate in an extreme way when “he made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on the cross.” (Philippians 2.7,8) Only he made it possible that reconciling and healing can happen.