



THE FILIPINO INTERNATIONAL LABOR MIGRATION, THEIR FAMILIES AND THE PASTORAL CARE: ISSUES, CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

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Filipinos Working Overseas: The Triumphs, Wounds, Struggles & Challenges

Josh, an electrician in Kuwait; Rosalie, a domestic worker in Italy; Janet, a receptionist in Singapore, Rommel, a computer analyst in Dubai; in Saudi Arabia. Sheryl, a dancer in Japan. Liza, another domestic helper, working in Singapore. Mang Jun, a construction worker, also in Saudi Arabia. Remigio and Lorinda, a couple working in New York. Noel, an engineer turn to be gardener in Spain, Meldy, a caregiver in USA. Gina, a secretary in London. Noel, an engineer for a seafaring vessel based in Australia. They are the Filipino international labor migrants. They stay only for the duration of their job contracts and do not settle for good or become citizens in the host countries, but. Thus, they are referred to as temporary labor migrants or better known OFWs.

A phenomenal rise in the number of OFWs has been noted over the past decade. From 2.9 million in 1997, their number had grown to 3.8 million in 2006. The numbers are so large and the influence on the lives of Filipinos and the Philippine economy so pervasive that the phenomenon has become a major population and development concern. The so called economic measure to alleviate the labor issues in the past 3 decades becomes permanent and escalating social costs that are unthinkable.

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The profit. To the migrant workers families, the economic benefits are easy to see. The average total remittance for the year 2004, according to National Statistics Office (NSO) figures, was P72, 795 per OFW. This amount is a big help to the migrant workers' families. There are studies that have shown that with the increased income, OFWs' households spent more on basic needs like food, clothing, health care and children's schooling, as well as major consumer items like appliances, other durable items, land, and farm animals. These mean not only better standards of living, but also improved human resources.

The individual migrant worker gains personal, social and economic benefits. Their big salaries allow OFWs to live a more comfortable and adequately provided life. And with their big contribution to their household income, they have earned a stronger bargaining position in the family. This is a significant gain especially for the women, who, prior to their overseas employment, used to take a backseat in important family decisions.

The Costs. In spite of the seeming advantages of the international labor migration that help alleviate the economic situation of the families, still we cannot avoid to recognize do not come without costs. Stories abound – in the news or even just in the community neighborhood – of sad, and sometimes tragic, experiences of OFWs in foreign lands.

In the process of dialoguing and interacting with the families left behind, there are many stories and cases, I have encountered, the latest and the tedious one was the case of Marilou who is a teacher and turned to be domestic helper in Kuwait. After one year of working, she was accused of murder of her employer, jailed and sentenced to hung because of the Philippine Embassy negligence and non concerned officers in Kuwait. While the family languishes, they sought for social and legal intervention to reprieve the case, after serious and heated arbitration between the department of foreign affairs and other government agencies for the economic benefits and other possible assistance they can extend to the children left behind, education and other socio-economic intervention, Marilou's case was commuted to life imprisonment. And there are many other similar cases, some less tragic, but equally demeaning and damaging to the workers and their families. Trafficked women and undocumented migrants are most vulnerable, and often become victims of abuse, discrimination, violence and exploitation, as well as health and work-related hazards.

I have come across of the family members who have cases of family disruption, marital discord and broken families, and behavioral problems in children. Although altered relationships and family roles resulting from

overseas migration are not exactly harmful per se, often these give rise to conflicts affecting family unity and children's development.

It is also observed that often, the spouse left behind or the other members of the family no longer exert any effort to earn or find a job, relying completely now on the migrant worker's income to support the family.

Aside from the above concern, overseas works also reduce the reserve of skilled and experienced manpower for productive activities needed for economic growth. Also, overseas employment takes away a lot of qualified professionals to provide education, health care and key public services to Filipinos. If the trend persists, the quality of the health and education services that Filipinos receive may suffer, and consequently, the quality of the country's manpower resource. Besides, the country spent for the education and training of these Filipino workers, and now they go away and use their knowledge and skills in other countries.

The Struggles. All of these pose challenge to government, non-governmental organization, civil society and even to the Philippine Church concerned with migrant workers' welfare, and to the population and development program.

To counter brain drain, there is a call for government to boost efforts to improve the quality of human capital formation. There is a need to create jobs in the country and provide decent and reasonable wages for the people to live with dignity. Further, this temporary measure of alleviating the country's economic situation needs to be properly addressed.

For the protection of the migrants, there are things that we have to do. There is also a need to campaign for the ratification of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families by more countries, in particular, the countries receiving workers.

From the perspective of population, the challenge is to manage the factors that compel Filipinos to leave, while mitigating the negative impact of overseas employment on development processes and the welfare of Filipinos. One major challenge is to bring down fertility and population growth further so that there will be more productive members than dependents in the population, and so that more resources can be put into human development.

The increasing feminization of international labor migration has raised issues as to whether overseas employment, by raising women's economic productivity and self-reliance, has indeed empowered them. Or has it, by subjecting women to abuse, exploitation and health risks,

only added to their degradation and discrimination? The challenge to population and development is to increasingly build women's capabilities and create an enabling environment for them to fully exercise their rights, including reproductive rights.

Finally, it calls attention to the need for more comprehensive and harmonized data on migration, particularly on its demographic aspects. There are data gaps to be filled, among them the effect of overseas employment on fertility behavior, the direct links between parents' migration to children's development, the portion of remittances actually invested in health, education, and job-generating activities, and the impact of international migration on poverty reduction.

An expanded and continually upgraded knowledge base will allow a deeper analysis of the population and development dimensions of overseas employment, and provide concrete bases for policies and programs that would help reinforce the gains, and reduce the costs, of international labor migration.

The Church Concern: Bridging the Reality towards concrete Action.

The assessment of the local migration reality is the first step which we have started the pastoral care for the families left behind. Social and Pastoral Analysis as a tool to read the sign of the time is used. There is then assessment of the social and objectively analyze the reality in the context. With the use of such as survey, consultations, focus group discussion among the Church workers, families and those who are stakeholders are done. Knowing and identifying the problems is the basic tool to address the issue. The issue is overwhelming, complex and not an easy one, knowledge to different fields are deem important to do such incredible demand in the field of migration.

Some pastoral strategies that I try to employ and become one of the best tools in the building support groups among the parishes are the Inculturation. Integration (needs assessment); Social Investigation (needs assessment, scouting for leaders etc...) Identifying local contacts Meeting (organizing local core group), Common formation of leaders are also utilized. I do believe that inculturation begins by listening, which means getting to know the ones we want to proclaim the gospel to. Listening and getting to know them make us better able to judge the values and defects of their culture in the light of the paschal mystery of death and life. Tolerance is not enough, what is needed is sympathy that is respect as far as possible for the cultural identity of those we are talking to. To recognize and appreciate their positive aspects, which prepare them to accept the

gospel, is a necessary prelude to a successful proclamation of the gospel. This is the only way to create dialogue, understanding and trust.¹

Another two best things, I make every effort to facilitate in the participation of the Overseas Workers family left behind, who serve as the action team and the conscience in the elaboration of the pastoral programs we have. Further, the involvement of the laity associations and movements, with all the miscellany of their charismas and types of ministry, are solicited so that each one can bear Christian witness and be in the service of migrants too. We have in mind in particular pastoral assistants and catechists, animators of youth groups or adult groups, persons engaged in the world of labor, in social services and in charitable works.

Other possible and more specific tasks for the laity are commitment in trade unions and in the world of labor, advising and working on the elaboration of laws aimed at facilitating the reunion of migrant families and providing them with equal rights and opportunities. This means giving them access to essential goods, work and wages, home and school and enabling them to participate in the life of civil society (its elections, associations, recreational activities etc.).²

A Missionary Task. Being a Missionary Sister of St. Charles, I look back and asked myself “Why do such things?” I found some reasons; this is the fulfillment of the Gospel values that I try to follow, aside from being MSCS alone. This task of serving the people on the move is truly a missionary one. The imbibed missionary spirit that flows from our Founder originates from Jesus the fountain of mission and the very reason of doing the mission. Such, I try to work based on dialogue with the people I serve. I do believe that in this way I am fulfilling the “mandate” of the Gospel, “I was stranger and you welcome me” (Mt 25: 35). The spirituality of welcoming is being enfolded and makes fully alive in doing the task of being a part of the mystical Body with my brothers and sisters migrants. Further, it is the realization of the threefold function of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King in me. I can say that, we have therefore to build and strengthen the Church in the migrants and with the migrants, so that together we can rediscover and reveal Christian values and form a true sacramental community of faith, worship, love and hope. To believe that there are ways we can stop the unjust labor treatment, the illegal recruitment that sucks the blood of the OFW who are victims of the vulture-like agencies, the traffic women who landed in the prostitution den, the maltreated and abuse domestic workers, the family left behind who suffers loneliness, oppression and

¹ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, n. 36.

² *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, n. 89.

other psychological and emotional difficulties. To fight for their rights and for justice through advocacy and policy lobbying so that hope of tomorrow might “smile” to them. It takes courage faith and hope to do it.

In Communion with the Migrants. As *Gaudium et Spes* states that the Church is the community of men and women “who, united in Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the Kingdom of God and bearers of a message of salvation intended to all men.” Hence, the mission I try to do is the fulfillment of the vows I have professed, “to follow Christ unreservedly” and thus being called and commission to do so I am fully participating toward the building of community of faith rooted in Christ and immersed in the life of the people, a servant of Christ in solidarity with the migrants and those of the needy and concerns. The act of communion with them is done through conscientization. Some pastoral program such building communities of OFW families in the parishes is promoted, advocacy and promotion of migrants rights, Legal and Paralegal services for the effective delivery and immediate effects of the slow judiciary or legal processes, Workshops, Training and building the capacity of the OFW Families through reintegration program. Also, addressing the issues on Solo Parenting while the partner is out of our country. Such actions are all towards integral development of the OFWs left behind.

Towards Renewed Integral Evangelization. It is with the vision that my participation in this missionary task is towards “the proclamation, above all, of Salvation, the liberation from everything oppressive to man; the development of man in all his dimensions, personal and communitarian; and, ultimately, the renewal of society in all strata through the interplay of the gospel truths and man’s concrete total life.”³ The liberation of the Migrants in the unjust structure oppresses them towards the fullness of life. The journey would be too hard and stiff but with the faith that moves, hope that guides and compassion that acts. I believe God is the Reason for Being and Doing the task of evangelization towards authentic development.

As I journey with the brothers and sisters migrants in the context of the family left behind, I trust in the divine providence that He will be always the reason to do the mission. My constant listening (obeying) to God, through the ordinaries of life be in solidarity with them is a sort of strength to go on with vigilant expectation of the coming of the Lord, with a willing availability to the Spirit. As I always say ... “Sympathize with the shortcomings of all; love everyone, everyone without exceptions! Love the migrants with them God is present!”.

³ PAUL VI. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 9, p. 29.