

## **EDITORIAL**

The upsurge in economic migration (legal and illegal), the flood of refugees and asylum seekers from war-ravaged parts of the world, especially from Africa to Europe and America, may be unparalleled in modern history. Perhaps at no point in the history of the global community has there been so much wealth, so much advance in information technology that facilitate communication, raising hopes of successful commingling of cultures and peoples. Yet, paradoxically, at no point in the history of humanity has the world ever experienced so much poverty, inequity, discrimination and insecurity of life and property. Primary loyalties control the attitude of the wealthy and powerful West—it has turned its borders into fortresses. The impact of global transformations and urban migration in African countries not only leads to expanding numbers of people being squeezed into limited space, creating a situation of profound moral and cultural disorientation, but also fuels emigration from the continent.

The youth of Africa, sometimes described as “the lost generation”, confronted with a very bleak and uncertain future, either resort to violence or take the exit option by emigration. Fascinated by the myth of wealthy Europe and America, beamed onto their world of deprivation thanks to cable network and internet, they throw caution to the winds and take enormous risks to berth in the West. The new information revolution succeeds in creating and nourishing appetites that appear unrealisable in the homeland. Traditional African communalism and relationality, that normally help to absorb the shocks of rapid change, have been weakened; in their place, modern patterns of sociality, sponsored for example by Christian and Islamic groups, provide surrogate families and community ties to contain rapid global transformations.

The opposition mounted against immigrants by nationalist parties all over Europe contaminates like a virus almost every political organisation. The concerted effort to create a fortress against African migrants assumes dramatic and tragic proportions:

thousands perish crossing the Mediterranean into Italy; some risk electrocution to leap from Morocco into Spain; and from Mali and Senegal youths dare the Atlantic, challenge the “sting of death”, and board mere dugout canoes to reach the Canary Islands—destination Spain. Negative media portrayal of migrants (particularly those of African origin), the frequent cases of deportation of asylum seekers with children born in Europe, and the pathetic and insensitive breaking up of the families of young children to safeguard the administration of the immigration system, succeed in giving visibility to Africans and other unfortunate migrants. The dominant immigration policy in the West is to relegate all migrants to invisibility.

The paranoia that migration is producing in Europe and America can be illustrated in the fact that the American congress seriously contemplated erecting walls to stop Mexicans entering the USA. The Mexican Bishops’ commission for culture picked up the gauntlet by challenging this fortress mentality. The bishops lent support to the migrants, and proposed accompaniment for those Mexicans seeking better conditions of life elsewhere (USA). They insisted that no one nation can impose its solutions by force to resolve the issue of migration. The church has not only the obligation to cater for the highly vulnerable migrants but also must challenge the ruling or political class to create better conditions in the homelands to stem the tide of migration. Comparable declarations are yet to be made by Nigerian (or even any African) bishops’ conference.

The political, economic and social situation in African countries, influenced no doubt by global transformations, provides meagre alternatives to the youth. They put themselves to frightening danger in order to emigrate. Many perish in the process. Early this year Moroccan immigration and Nigerian embassy officials reported that close to ten thousand Nigerian migrants were stranded in Morocco. Some have been there for over nine years without realising their objective—destination Europe. A Nigerian official, adviser to the President on migration, made the shocking revelation that out of every ten Nigerians that set off on the suicidal

journey from Nigeria, only two may have survived.

The situation is no longer reducible to the attractions of the West. It is clear that the Nigerian government (and perhaps other African governments) has demonstrated gross inability to provide enabling environment for the self-development of the cream of the nation. The situation replays the deterioration, corruption and greed that nourished the transatlantic slavery. This time around the exodus of our youth, forced to move on by inhuman conditions in the homeland, is chosen slavery. Some of them fall prey to traffickers; many become objects of sexual and economic exploitation.

Furthermore, the elite and professionals, doctors, nurses, university professors, have also adopted the exit option in search for a better life in the West. Sometimes the wealthy West goes hunting for talents with seductive propositions—the “hunt for brains”. But the more common scenario is that the professionals do the hunting for jobs in the West. These economic migrants knocking at the doors of Fortress Europe are often the most talented among the African populations. Despite their being highly qualified, they suffer discrimination in the West; while on the other hand the African continent is being drained (“brain drain”) of its generative and creative personnel. Some claim that these highly qualified professionals are good African ambassadors outside the shores of invisible Africa. Instead of a “brain drain” they constitute a “brain gain”. Their hearts are in the homeland, they could not survive in the homeland, the homeland gains by their emigration. Humour is never in short supply in the continent! One wonders where to find the personnel for reconstructing the continent. If there were more transparent, accountable, and predictable state institutions, these talented people and the energetic, enthusiastic but jobless youths have all it takes to make a difference. The corruption riddled government of the ‘big men’, foreign and local, criminally vandalise the treasury, cause our youth and professionals to emigrate, and fuel the erosion of traditional community values of trust, safety and communion; these are commonly replaced today with suspicion, danger, fear and accusations of witchcraft and

sorcery.

The opinion expressed in certain sectors of the Nigerian media that Nigerians have lost faith in the capacity of government to create enabling environment for productive activities and self-advancement may not be far from the truth. It may not be an exaggeration to observe that the exodus of youths and professionals is not only a vote of no confidence in the Nigerian state and government but also a protest against poor leadership. Islands of good governance and positive developments in Africa like Benin Republic, Senegal and Ghana, Tanzania and South Africa, only confirm the tragic situation of bad government in Nigeria and other African countries. No doubt there are ongoing economic reforms in Nigeria. But economic reforms that are anchored on neo-liberalism are more in tune with the prescriptions of the IMF, World Bank and other Western finance houses, than with the needs of the people. The desperation of the youth and professionals confirms negative perceptions of the reforms; or at least the ambiguity of such reforms. For example, the rhetoric on privatisation ensures that Nigeria's corporate interests are sold out to a handful of people, local and international. If the economic policies are succeeding, why do so many Nigerians want to flee the country?

This issue of *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* draws attention to the humane virtues and values that are being endangered in the modern experience of internal and external migration – especially hospitality, communality, and relationality. It directs attention particularly to the great contribution migration always made and is actually making to homelands and receiving countries. Migration, as part of the dynamic of an ever-changing world, creatively redefines the host country as it redefines the immigrants. Discrimination against immigrants and the concerted effort to render them invisible (the *Bulletin* focuses on Africans) are robbing the world of a golden opportunity to improve quality living conditions. Diversity and multiculturalism are a key to quality of human life.

The Jewish and Christian Scriptures, as well as many church documents on migration, view and project migration as a great

advantage; it is a Great Pentecost that enables and realises the assembly of the manifold components of the human family into an ever vaster and more varied society. The preoccupation of the Bible with “hospitality to the stranger”, hospitality by visitation and not merely hospitality by invitation, should help overcome the tendency to see migrants as a threat to the comfort, institutions, culture, and life styles of the host countries. The gain of migration is that peoples, ethnicities embrace one another in an ecclesial fraternity. Indeed migration as lived by African immigrants in Europe today is challenging Christians to greater commitment in constructing the Church as “Family of God”—the theme of the 1994 African Synod.

A great responsibility lies on governments of the homelands and host communities to cater humanely for all citizens and immigrants. The Church in Western countries must continue to challenge the State to assure the same humane living conditions to immigrant families that it guarantees to its own citizens. The Church in countries of Africa must maintain the prophetic pressure on the nation-states and the ruling class to respect the dignity of the human person. This involves creating enabling social, economic and political environment for the human development of our youth. This will not only stem the tide of emigration, but will also release the human, spiritual and material resources for the integral wellbeing of our peoples and all peoples.

Elochukwu Uzukwu c.s.sp.  
Milltown Institute, Dublin.