



Presentation by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva
at the 2014 International Dialogue on Migration
of the International Organization for Migration: Migration and Families
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Mr. Chairman,

The migrant family is a critical component of the growing phenomenon of migration in our globalized world. Thus, the Delegation of the Holy See finds it most opportune to have chosen this topic for reflection at the 2014 International Dialogue on Migration (IDM).

Migrants very often move out of concern for the needs of their families; at times, they even risk their lives on flimsy boats or in dangerous deserts in the hope of ensuring their families a decent life as the IOM Report documents. Through their work, the taxes they pay, the new businesses they start and a variety of services they provide, most migrants offer a positive economic and social contribution to the receiving societies. Women domestic workers, for example, leave their children behind in the home country in order to become caregivers for children, disabled and elderly persons abroad. While migrants are a positive presence in their host societies, they face the risk that their own children and relatives remain in the shadow and deprived of their affection at home. The remittances sent home focus the debate on the financial benefits generated by migrants. While this money is important to improve health and education for the family members left behind, it does not quite compensate for other needs: human affection, a necessary presence to educate in values and integrity, a reference model for responsible behaviour, especially for young people. The human emptiness felt when a father or mother emigrates becomes a reminder of the ambivalence of emigration and of the fundamental right to be able to stay at home in dignity. Especially when mothers emigrate, other negative consequences emerge: children's school attendance declines, early marriages of adolescent girls increase, and there is a heightened risk of drug abuse. As Pope Francis recently stated, "it is necessary to respond to the globalization of migration with the globalization of charity and cooperation, in such a way as to make the conditions of migrants more humane. At the same time, greater efforts are needed to guarantee the easing of conditions, often brought about by war or famine, which compel whole peoples to leave their native countries."¹

Children, therefore, as well as elderly persons and spouses left behind, must become a high priority in any migration policy and debate: they are particularly vulnerable, and hence should receive special protection. Policy and program development should aim at maximizing the benefits of remittances, limiting the negative effects of migration and emphasizing family ties as a primary concern in the management of immigration by States. Policy formulation often treats family and labor migration as two distinct realms, "social" and "economic." In reality, the two concepts are

¹ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 2015 World Day of Migrants and Refugees
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20140903_world-migrants-day-2015.html

closely intertwined.² In the planning by the international community and in discussions focused on the post-2015 Development Agenda, migration must have a proper place, not only as functional to development and demography, but as a major human rights commitment aimed at safeguarding the dignity of every human person and the centrality of the family.

Indeed, an urgently needed immigration reform involves the formulation of a legal framework that helps keep families together. The life and dignity of every human person is lived within the family. All children need their parents. Parents have the responsibility to protect and nurture their children, and yet deported parents are prevented from living out this fundamental vocation. Too many families are now torn apart. By allowing children to emigrate unaccompanied further problems arise as they are exposed to lawlessness and despair. The family structure, however, should be the place where hope, compassion, justice and mercy are taught most effectively. Family is the basic unit of coexistence, its foundation, and the ultimate remedy against social fragmentation.³

Finally, achievable measures could be implemented in a realistic and sensitive manner. Migrants, who are restricted or prevented from traveling home in order to provide personal care for elderly parents or affection to their kin, should be entitled to occasional leaves and should benefit from special prices for their trip home. Interest fees for the transfer of remittances must be lowered. The process to obtain a visa for a spouse or close family members (which in certain countries takes several years) needs to be speeded up. Ad hoc “family counselors” to serve in regions with a very high rate of migrants should be engaged in order to provide assistance and advice to members of the family “left behind” and to facilitate timely reunification of the family. In fact, when return migrants revert to day-to-day interaction with their societies of origin, they experience a “reverse culture shock.”⁴ The changes in family dynamics that result from migration do not end when the migrant returns to the society of origin; in fact, migrants generally return to a family situation that is very different from that before departure. Family members can become “strangers” since they have been absent from each other’s lives and since relations between them are largely based on the sending of money and goods or sporadically maintained by new forms of Internet communications.

In conclusion, it is mandatory to avoid treating the “left behind” population merely as passive recipients of the effects of migration. In this context, family migration, needs to be reconceived using frameworks of trans-nationalism that grant more flexibility to the movement of people, especially in countries where the presence of the family of the migrant workers is legally impeded. Healthy interaction and personal relations among family members are obstructed by borders. States and civil society are prompted by their own future to give priority to the family and thus make migrations a more positive experience for all.

² Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Cheng Yi En, *Family Migration*, p.2

³ Family Beyond Borders, an open letter from the Bishops of the Border region of Mexico, Texas and New Mexico

⁴ http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S1665-89062013000100001&script=sci_arttext