

POLEMIC

Pope and migrants, best intentions but incorrect judgements

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It is impossible not to be struck by the **unscheduled catechesis** delivered by Pope Francis at last Wednesday's audience in Saint Peter's Square. 'Sea and desert' was the title of the Vatican communication and obviously the theme was migrants, their sufferings, their

aspirations, their broken lives: "And when I say "sea', in the context of migrations,' said Pope Francis, 'I also mean ocean, lake, river, all the insidious bodies of water that so many brothers and sisters all over the world are forced to cross to reach their destination. And 'desert' is not only that of sand and dunes, or rocks, but they are also all those inaccessible and dangerous territories, such as forests, jungles, steppes where migrants walk alone, left to their own devices'.

It is a speech that will probably turn out to be one of the most important of his pontificate, the synthesis of his arguments around his main theme. One grasps the sincere participation in the drama that involves at least 400 million people around the world; a profound and heartfelt appeal to our humanity too often engaged in ideological judgments that mask a real indifference to the pain of others. But the comments in the major newspapers with which this speech was received show how ideological even those who fill their mouths with welcome are, concerned to read the Pope's speech simply as an attack on Italy's Meloni government as well as on those European leaders attempting to resolve a politically charged issue by restricting numbers.

Returning to the pope's speech, it is certainly important that the personal stories of suffering, violence and death evoked pierce the armour of ready answers on this world emergency. Yet there are aspects in this discourse, the conclusions the pope draws, that are out of tune and reduce everything to a political and moralistic horizon that cannot be shared in the slightest.

First of all, the phenomenon of migration itself, which is complex and is instead reduced to illegal migrants who, it is understood, should all be welcomed without ifs and buts regardless of any other consideration. Yet the data tell us that the idea that these people are fleeing 'wars, violence, persecution and many calamities' is misleading. Were this the case, they would all be entitled to refugee status or in any case to international protection, and they would not even need to engage in very long and uncertain journeys, risking their lives, to reach Europe. In reality, if we look at the data we see that most of them migrate from countries that are neither at war nor victims of persecution or violence. **Data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior**, updated as of yesterday and referring to landings of irregular immigrants, tell us that from 1 January 2024 to date, out of 41,181 people who have landed in Italy, only about 20% come from countries at war or where there is a ruthless dictatorship. Among the top six countries by nationality of immigrants, as many as five (Bangladesh, Tunisia, Egypt, Guinea and Pakistan), which account for 50 per cent of total arrivals, have no situation to justify claiming refugee status.

Many other observations would have to be made in order to understand the phenomenon of migration, but this simple observation is enough to introduce the second aspect: how unfair is the statement that those who want to reject migrants - 'when it is done with conscience and responsibility' - commit 'a grave sin'. Here, too, we are lumping everyone together and saying that anyone who questions indiscriminate reception is in itself responsible for the deaths that occur at sea (or in deserts). Or, worse, that anyone who is against indiscriminate reception wishes for the death of migrants because of it. This is a very serious statement, also from a moral point of view, since people's intentions are being judged (which, on the other hand, on other matters, could even contradict Church doctrine) and 'dogmas' are being affirmed when in view of a single objective different paths can legitimately be taken.

Precisely because the phenomenon is complex and irregular immigration violates international laws, it is more than justified that we question ourselves on how to avoid these dramas and do justice to all. Indiscriminate reception is not the only solution, indeed not at all. It is serious, for example, that the **Pope continues to sponsor the activities of NGO's boats** like Luca Casarini and his Mediterranea, and takes no account whatsoever of the opinion and **appeals of the African bishops**, who have intervened so many times to discourage the flight of young people from their own countries, denouncing the international traffickers of human beings who beguile people by pushing them towards an illusory bright future in Europe.

Appeals that also lead us to the third aspect, the claim that the only solution to the problem is to expand 'safe and legal access routes for migrants'. That is to say, humanitarian corridors - along the lines outlined by the Community of Sant'Egidio - to take migrants home. Therefore condemnation without appeal for 'more restrictive laws, (...) militarisation of borders, (...) rejections'. In this way, Pope Francis thinks, it will be possible to remove migrants from those 'seas and deserts' that smell of death and defeat human traffickers.

Once again, unfortunately, the Pope, all best intentions aside, spreads incorrect information. A couple of considerations suffice, given that **this project in Italy has already been active since 2016** and has so far brought 7,226 people to our country: first, the corridors are aimed at those who are entitled to refugee status. But, as we have seen, only a fraction of those trying to arrive in Italy can aspire to this status, so they would continue to cross seas and deserts as they do now. Secondly, they are selected and gathered in refugee camps under UN control, so they are already safe outside their own countries.

Therefore, assuming (without any proof) that these corridors are useful for resettling a certain number of refugees, they have very little to do with solving the problem of irregular migrants.