

We may have Pope Francis but

How the Catholic Church as a service provider to the migrant-refugee population is impacted by the social labelling of this population in its ability and willingness to extend its services to this populations.

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What is distinctive about Christians? It is that we believe in a person who gives life “a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Benedict XVI). For however it has become or appears, the Roman Catholic Church is primarily about offering those who believe in Jesus a way for living their belief and helping them in their lifelong mission. A Church institution is recognized as serving a necessary function of supporting its members in a world that is chaotic, a world that offers so many challenges to these followers of Jesus. Their chosen way of life holds up an ideal, a vision for this world. However, it is too simple to view the Catholic Church as just a “doing good, without blemish” worldwide organization. Only the most naïve or most idealistic would hold to such a view. Yes, it has its flaws and weaknesses. Yet it remains faithful in ever upholding an altruistic way for humanity and a vision for all humanity living together in harmony. This way and this vision remain ever needed in our world. In carrying out its mission, it has many layers but it remains the same Church. It deals with matters of religion and politics. It upholds high values that have repercussions for everyday reality. It acts for good in the midst of everyday, messy realities from which it is not divorced. It has its successes and its failures. It has its good stories and its scandals. It all makes the Church. The case presented here is that the Church, while upholding its high and good ethical values for the sake of humanity, is also a very human institution that fails to fully reach its goals. However, despite all, it ever continues striving to live out its vision and mission for humanity, a vision and mission entrusted to it by Jesus whom its members follow in faith.

An Historical Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church dates its history back 2,000 years to the time of Jesus in present day Israel or Palestine. Its present governing structures originate from the Roman Empire which was based on centralized power being applied directly at the local level where its leadership enjoyed autonomous authority, while simultaneously remaining accountable directly to the central power which gave it its authority. This results in a Church governing structure where power is applied from the top down, so allowing a high centralization of power at the centre. Over time, this basic hierarchical structure has stayed in place, despite periods of upheaval and even calamity.

Even when it has grappled with structural change in recent history, the Church’s power structures have remained basically intact due to strong internal forces of resistance. Retaining its known ways is a cautious stance as this does not encourage experimental and individual action which can respond more effectively to needs in the present, complex world. Without making a detailed historical assessment, one can see that radical institutional change has not been a priority on the Church’s agenda. Yet in contemporary experience, the Church following the Second Vatican Council has been attempting such radical change aimed at refounding an institution according to its originating vision and at placing it more firmly in the world of today. This was never to be an easy task.

Church's Founding Vision and Mission within Today's World

The Church's founding with its radical vision and mission originated from Jesus who entrusted his followers with a mission. Subsequent early followers of Jesus founded a church in order to carry on this mission. Looking back to its roots, the Church has a particular base - the life and message of Jesus. People came together because of whom they believed in and followed. From such beginnings, the Church evolved into a universal institution whose purpose is to allow the smooth continuance of the mission of the disciples of Jesus in the world. This purpose has included upholding and protecting all entrusted to the followers of Jesus. Over time, its pure beginning narrative became encrusted with agenda arising from history and politics. Its history has resulted in a somewhat defensive stance being consistently taken with Church tradition and authority being principles upheld in decision-making and administration. This has been supported by a continuing centralization of power and an authoritarian style of governing. Such an institutional way of Church life has acted against the Church creatively meeting the radical demands of Jesus' mission in contemporary history and against possible risk taking in responding to people in need or people oppressed.

Within an institutional setting, local Church leaders favor looking up the hierarchical ladder for guidance and rulings, and then applying policy and principles downwards within their local sphere of influence. This results in an institution having its governance and decision-making concentrated in the hands of a few selected leaders who act from the top in the name of the whole. This style of governance has its impact on how a church applies its resources and makes policy decisions when responding to social issues and human need at the local level. Any such response arises within the context of a founding, radical call to serve the poor and marginalized. So a church that may be quite conservative by nature may also remain determined to tackle social and development challenges before it, if for no other reason than it feels impelled to do so due to the very nature of its origins and divinely given mission. The vision does stay alive, even maybe despite the Church institution. One may posture – How can you argue with God, even if you disagree?

Implications for an Institution built on Lofty Ideals, Focused on Mission

As an institution, when the Church acts to live out its entrusted mission with a direct focus on helping others in need, no matter their location or identity in the world, there arise internal frictions and dilemmas. These may be defined by challenges arising such as:

- The Church and its leadership may not know, understand or identify with the situation of those they are helping. This reflects a leadership that may not be necessarily in touch with the poor helped. Within its top down approach to helping, a gap of understanding arises between those helped and those directing the help.
- They may not even feel comfortable helping those they help due to this gap or the differences existing.
- The Church may offer charity but not seek justice for these people, not wanting to make life uncomfortable for its institutional existence or its own community.
- Its leaders may not pursue the full consequences of helping those they help as these consequences may involve speaking out and change that may lead to internal conflict and to conflict with the ruling

establishment of a society, the very establishment that may support the institution financially and otherwise.

The mission of the Church is one based on the lofty ideal of universal love of one's neighbor, calling Christians to reach out to the most vulnerable. The Church acts by nature to help the poor, the excluded, the vulnerable and does so zealously. Such a mandate makes the migrant-refugee population an obvious beneficiary for the Church's pastoral attention. This mission to specific target groups is carried out under a broad mandate given to a universal institution under a universal authority that is then applied at the local level by human actors under the local Church leadership. One can identify tensions arising within this scenario as the Church reaches out in mission to vulnerable populations. Of interest here are two basic tensions:

- a) Idealism versus realism;
- b) Concerns of a Church institution with its favored place in society versus having those same concerns possibly compromised when helping those who are marginalized lack power and status in the same society – a Church struggling versus a Church socially comfortable.

Maybe this could be summarized by asking does the Church appreciate what it is doing and does it really want to do it?

It is these tensions that lead to challenges for the Church in its pro-active response to the specific, vulnerable migrant-refugee population. These tensions are internal and real, arising from internal and external fora within its sphere of influence. So one may ask:

-Is the Church willing to help this population all the way and not just stop at charity?

-Is it then willing to pay the ultimate price for helping this population beyond offerings of charity?

The Church is caught in a spider web of forces - political, cultural, social and theological. It may rightly claim for itself the status of being a divine institution but it is also a human institution with everyday concerns of survival and furthering its life in the world. So it operates as a very human organization, negotiating its way with government, other organizations, other churches and religions and society in general, doing so under the constraints of its own human limitations and politics.

Church Realities and Challenges Arising – Church Inside.

Need for Church Action but whose interests first? Or a conflict of interests?

The vision of the gospel on which the Church is based is ever challenging its community of the faithful to take up action for the good of humanity. This may take them to reaching out to parts of humanity that they would never choose to entertain. While this is a strength of Church, the big question is – do the faithful help such people with a true sense of altruism and willingness or do they so with more a sense of reluctance and discomfort, because it is their obligation? The faithful may be simply obeying Church leadership but the same question arises for their leaders – choice or obligation?

This world is not so directed by idealism and it is this world that needs another voice – a voice for fairness, justice and human dignity. An expected source for this voice is in NGOs, civil society and faith based organizations. The Catholic Church as a member of this grouping in the world has its voice to offer, joining in speaking out on behalf of those without a voice in a harsh world. Our world needs the

voice of a Church that fearlessly speaks out on behalf of the voiceless. This is rightfully part of the Church's agenda. In its handing out charity to the poor, a church comes in touch with the peoples it helps. It comes to know these peoples and as such their concerns. It befriends them and accompanies them in life. In this way, a church with its many faithful working face to face with the poor in offering their help becomes a natural voice, standing up for the marginalized of a society. But is this what happens? How can a Church fulfill its entrusted agenda when maybe it is fearful of losing influence or power or of becoming a pariah institution before the powerful of society?

Different Levels of Church

An institution like the Church is not one homogenous worldwide organization. There are internal tensions at play. One tension not already named is that between reform and maintaining the status quo. The former is about striving to be true to the founding vision in the present, applying its vision in new ways to the present day context. The latter is about being true to tradition and safeguarding the institution from error, respecting its authority and protecting its interests. This is a constant struggle within Church. Church is about going to the ends of the earth to seek the excluded, marginalized and vulnerable, embracing them and raising them up through giving them dignity and life. There are those in the Church absolutely committed to such a mission. Such altruistic action will cause ongoing struggle within any institution with its concerns for survival and self-perpetuation. Tensions do arise. Not everybody in Church shares an absolute commitment to the poor and excluded. Such altruistic endeavors can threaten good order, an essential ingredient in any institution. A way of looking at any internal struggle is to name Church as existing at two levels – the grassroots level and the institutional level.

Whether institutional or grassroots, Church due to its *raison d'être* reaches out to those suffering and in need. How any response is made will vary between the two levels, with those tensions named here being at play. It may be a simplistic line of argument but the grassroots Church will be more radical, taking more risks and be more likely to speak out on behalf of those helped, being more willing to accept the consequences of such action. At this level, the ideal is more readily alive with more people applying the ideals to reality. People here will see that they have less to lose while respecting Church. This is while the institution will be more cautious in any mission to help and be less willing to come under attack from within society for what help it offers. With the responsibilities for custodial care, management and decision-making, the institution will more readily make compromises, being more diplomatic and more accommodating to the demands of the world. Is this about idealism versus realism? Is this about one side having too much to lose and wanting to hold onto what it has – power, prestige, influence? Is it one side wanting to take the easy way and not be threatened through challenging powerful others in society?

Do we preserve power or use it for the benefit of the poor and vulnerable we serve?

For an institution entrusted with lofty ideals, one may expect it to be idealistic but that is not necessarily so for the forces of worldly power and business are at play. Yes, the poor, the suffering, the vulnerable are helped by the Church but that does not mean that the Church takes great risks to uphold or further their interests at the expense of more powerful interests in society. The Church helps, readily applies

the 'band aid', but it is less ready to address the root causes and make the powerful uncomfortable. Why is this so?

The Church is a powerful institution in society. It has property, investments, its own institutions, such as schools and hospitals, and other interests that it wants to protect and develop. It has a standing in society that it wants to maintain. So it will not act easily to threaten its own existence as a powerful institution within society. It is helping people who are labelled as suspect, threats, victims and even criminals in society. These labels do not mean that what they say is true about these targeted people but the labels stick, acting to exclude these people from society. The application of these labels makes anyone who associates with them to come under suspicion from the dominant forces of society. Of course, Church can be excused and help because of the Church's particular standing and mission in society but it cannot go too far in helping, speaking out or aligning itself with these populations or else it runs the risk of itself being questioned unfavorably by the institutions of powers within society. Such disfavor could bring unwanted consequences such as disapproval from within a society and disengagement between Church and state.

Help until it hurts? Are the comfortable willing to become uncomfortable?

A central principle that determines the Church's modus operandi is that of subsidiarity which basically means that you allow the local level its rightful autonomy and respect its right to act. The impetus to help those in need is universal in the Church. Its impetus is based on its lofty ideals and a vision for action to change the world and make it a better place for all. How this is applied is decided at the local level by local Church leaders and authorities.

The Catholic Church anywhere faces a tension when targeting the refugee-migrant population between helping as a humanitarian organization and helping as the agent of the gospel which calls for radical change on behalf of this population. Being an agent of the gospel, the Church is to challenge a system that dehumanizes this population and tears away at its dignity. It can easily offer help in the former way and it does so because of what the Church stands for. In offering material assistance and humanitarian aid, it will be applauded. Taking the next step and becoming a voice for this population speaking out on their behalf for better treatment and recognition of their equal rights in society is a different matter. Here Church faces the greatest challenge to being true to its mission in the world. In taking its mission along its natural course according to the call to act for and with a vulnerable population and its rights, thus upholding their dignity, the Church faces public criticism and derision. This is an unwanted outcome in some quarters of Church, but a seemingly necessary one if Church is to be true to itself.

As Pope Francis reminds the Church, it is not called to be an NGO but to be church, the bearer of the gospel, working to bring peoples and societies together. So what Church does in helping migrants and refugees is not to be reduced to seeking funds and giving out material assistance. Church is about much more. It is about breaking down the divides and creating a world that is all of us together, encountering each other as people. In its mission, the Church has access to a wide level of support from many different quarters throughout the world. This support is not purely financial but more importantly

personnel, with access to a large, dedicated corps of committed people who are willing to help refugees and migrants and any marginalized population in the world. Within all its efforts, Church is about raising the marginalized and poor up and reminding them of their dignity. This has real consequences for practice, and even scary consequences, as it is about standing up for those whom no one else may even consider of any worth. This is a lofty ideal but it is the ideal that it is to be grasped by Church, and at times by a reluctant Church.

Church in Society and Challenges Arising – Church External.

Identity issues

Thailand is the country in which I minister. Here, 95% of the population is Buddhist and only 0.5% belongs to the Catholic Church. To be Thai is to be Buddhist. In contradiction to the Thai norm, the small Thai Catholic population is mostly from a mixed background. Depending on the region, Thai Catholics have a Chinese heritage, belong to an ethnic tribal group or are from a Vietnamese background. Like other countries in the “colonized, non-western world”, Christianity is identified as a western religion, as the religion of the colonizers rather than as a universal religion. Here, it is widely identified as an outside religion. This is not how the Catholic Church sees itself or how it would wish to present itself but one can understand this outsider stance when looking at western colonialism and its history of uninvited dominance. It is an easy assumption for locals to say that Christianity is of the west.

Religion is a component of what makes up any people’s identity. In Thailand, one can observe the heightened importance given by its people to culture and how that intrinsically makes them who they are. Religion, and namely Buddhism, is a key part of this. So what happens when you are Thai and Christian? You may feel threatened and so not want to attract any unwanted attention. You may act to look the perfect member of society. Now just think what effect this has on the Church’s effectiveness when acting for and helping those on the edge of society or excluded from its workings in any way, those who are not Thai. Will this Church speak out to help migrants and refugees, standing up as a fearless voice for the voiceless who are in the eyes of Thai society outsiders? One would suspect that it would at least act circumspectly.

With the dominant culture

Acknowledging this mindset within the Thai population, a question is raised - why help non-Thais? This question is not specifically Thai but here is a case scenario. Basically, it is a human question of doubt that is voiced by local populations as – “You are helping them. Why are you not helping us?” Church faces this dilemma in any society. It is the question of “why help the other?” This same question is shared by Thai Catholics which leads to a misconception that runs counter to Christian values for at the centre of a Christian ethic is that we help the other, no matter who they are. Why do we help them? Christians help simply because these others are fellow human beings needing help. At the core of this ethic is that all human beings share in the same human dignity, a dignity not based on race, class, religion or status.

So the question is raised within Church – why would we help refugees and migrants as they are outsiders? The simple answer is that they are human beings in need of help and what we do as

Christians help people in need. So Church challenges any dominant cultural value that does not uphold the universality of humanity. In so challenging, the Church is being counter-cultural. This is a natural consequence of following the gospel which is itself counter-cultural. This stance is one of a Church that proclaims universal love, shown by its calling its members to help others just because they are here and need our help. The question does stand is whether and how Church is willing to be the counter-cultural sign and challenge in a society where it holds minority status.

With the government

For such a small Catholic population within a Buddhist country, there are issues surrounding how the majority population views and understands the Catholic Church and Christianity generally. There is a lack of understanding concerning the Church among the general population. This then raises the question of how Buddhism, the majority religion, and then Buddhists as citizens relate with a minority religion in the same society. This has implications at the level of government where many in authority just do not understand the Catholic Church or its situation. So in terms of Church engaging with government on issues around migrants and refugees, one would have to ask how aware government is of the Catholic Church and what it stands for? Would there be basic questioning on the part of the government or some quarters within government about the Church's motivation and why it does what it does? With a lack of basic understanding, one can readily see the possibility of difficulties and misunderstandings arising when and if Church approaches government on more sensitive issues, like migrant and refugee issues in the country. Can Church support outsiders, ones who may be named by the government as being unwanted or outside the law, and still be patriotic Thais?

Both sides of the equation know and likely identify with the negative perceptions surrounding these populations, even when serving these peoples formally or informally. Catholic Church authorities know the position held by Church on helping and including excluded, marginal peoples. They know Church is about embracing the marginalized and helping, and even empowering, these people to access their rights in society. This leads to empowering outsiders to deal with government and other authorities so as to be treated as equals with the same rights.

Here Church is entering into possible dealings with government whose concern is its own people and security and into possible areas of misunderstanding and even conflict. Within the public domain – government and community - one can see or sense the negative or mixed messages concerning the other. These messages imply, if even subtly, that

-“these people are not like us”;

-“they are not as good as us”;

-“they do bad things”.

Thai Immigration assigns the label “aliens” to foreigners which is not helpful to producing a positive image. Then if any ‘alien’ is here undocumented, the refugee or migrant is an “illegal alien”. So then the question facing Church at any level is this:

Should we be helping people who are “illegal aliens”? This becomes:

Should we help them at all as they have broken the law and we do not wish, as Thai citizens, to be going against Thai law and Thai government authorities? But remember – “No person is illegal”.

The challenges are clearly put before the Thai Church. As they are put before the Thai Church, so they are faced in different ways by Church elsewhere. The same questions and challenges arise anywhere. Do we help outsiders? How far do we go in helping them? Will we go as far as, if needed, to place our own standing in society in jeopardy? This could even have more basic ramifications when facing a vulnerable refugee-migrant population in the midst of the community. Will we be simply driven by the basic fact that they are fellow human beings needing our help? Or will we be held back by dominantly held views in society that put this population in question or under suspicion? Then lastly, why would we put ourselves and our Church at risk for a population that is not perceived as of equal standing within our culture and society? Bluntly, would we risk our position for them?

A basic response to be made by a Church facing such challenges could be to tackle these misconceptions held within its society, through helping the community to come to know the other whom they do not know and may even see as a threat. This is committing to the long term task of tackling ill-informed cultural norms and falsely held beliefs that give rise to falsely based fears within both its own community and its society, serving to cause discrimination and ultimately harm against the very people the Church is called to embrace, help and empower. This is the commitment to the long term task of community building which is a key role of church. Of course, if the Church leadership shares these same misperceptions of the wider community, how can it engage in any strategy to change them?

Conclusion

Yes, Pope Francis is leading the way in spreading the message that the world needs to build bridges and not walls. When in Cairo (April, 2017), he strongly stated that “Those who are different ... should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travelers in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all”. Many applaud his lead but this does not mean total acquiescence from within the Church with what he preaches. His fellow leaders in the Church and fellow Catholics may find some difficulty, being held back by their local culture or situation which may raise some basic questions or even fear in undertaking the mission to help others, others who are identified as outsiders. So there may arise some resistance or opposition, there may be some blindness to helping a migrant-refugee population. Or it may be we will help as required by conscience or by outside ruling or guidance from within the ranks of the Church but we will do so with caution.

I share from my experience as a foreign missionary of the Catholic Church, working within the Thai Church. It is not my role alone to solve these issues facing the Thai Church or any Church. I do however have challenging questions and an insight for which I have an obligation to share so as to help build up Church and further good action by Church on behalf of vulnerable populations that deserve its attention. The picture is complex. I share the challenges that I see. I do not give the answers. That is a task for Church standing together and holding together its vision and ideals.