

Human Migration: Bird Watching or Encounter **Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.**

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A friend called me with excitement in her voice. “I found the perfect Saturday outing. It’s a bike-ride/bird-watch!” As avid cyclists, this seemed a clever twist, so two days later we donned our helmets, and with binoculars hanging from our necks, joined twenty bird enthusiasts on a bike path in rural Maryland. The moment we had we found a rolling rhythm I heard someone in the group cry out, “woodpecker!” We all came to a screeching halt and reached for our binoculars to see a red-bellied woodpecker.

At the halfway mark, we found ourselves in a clearing munching on granola, when our leader opened her bird field guide and asked in a serious voice, “What birds did you spy today?” The answers came quickly and with equal seriousness. One said, “blue jay”, another declared “finch”, while two simultaneously clarified “purple finches”.

After about twenty minutes of naming what was natural, the leader looked the group over and focused in on us, the only two whose sole participation had been an occasional giggle. With finger pointed she asked, “What bird did you two see?” Feeling an under the table kick from my friend, I pointed back to the leader and exclaimed, “a Baltimore Oriole!”

In a flash, the group became an angry parliament of owls diving at us unsuspecting city pigeons. With their sharp talons of words cutting into us, they yelled, “No way, impossible, never at this time of the year. You know nothing!” I then pointed my finger toward the leader and said, “Look at your shirt, on the front is a Baltimore Oriole,” the mascot of the local baseball team. While struggling to stifle our laughs we found ourselves instantly exiled from the flock.

Many react to human migration with the same intensity of the biking-bird-watchers. It is considered a serious issue, best understood through the use of an overly simplistic field guide shown on cable news, where identification of the species of a given bird immediately labels it as native or invasive. As people-watchers, they view immigration at a distance, through the restricted binoculars of prejudiced internet sites that fail to acknowledge neither the complexity of a migrant’s identity nor the arduous journey undertaken. While claiming to be expert observers of the issue, they reveal themselves as better likened to a nationalistic murder of crows.

With the example of Saint Francis, often depicted preaching to the birds, we find an example of a bird-engager rather than a bird-watcher. Wherever he went, Francis created a culture of encounter, naturally reaching out to his feathered friends, whom he called his sisters and brothers. At a deeper level, the art and stories of his preaching to the birds are meant to serve as a metaphor for preaching to the peoples of all nations, representative of the



various flocks of birds gathered around him.¹ Using his field guide of the Gospel, Francis' message to those who would listen was a consistent and intentional call to family, community, and participation.²

Like Francis, we are to preach and live a global vision of family and interdependence that protects, supports, and encourages the well-being of everyone.³ The challenge is to embrace a culture of encounter as Francis did, switching from the field guide of partisan politics to that of the social Gospel. In this way we move from stereotypical bird-watching at a distance, to the actual engagement of people who are different from us, through genuine encounter. This would include poor doves, majestic falcons, and Baltimore Orioles!

This Franciscan culture of encounter lands us in our contemporary political arena, as virtuous Christians. Pope Francis reminds us that, "People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens, not as a mob swayed by the powers that be. Let us not forget that 'responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation.'"⁴ Such virtue requires of us a knowledge of the facts, as opposed to perpetuating the myths or emotional rhetoric geared toward fear.⁵

Groups like Caritas, steeped in the social Gospel, can help us better understand the truth of migration in light of the Gospel. "Migration now is also bringing suffering – restrictive laws, separated families, inflamed political rhetoric, walls between us, as brothers and sisters. Migrants are sometimes demonized for stealing jobs from locals, for taking excessive welfare benefits, for being foreign – the 'other'. Research and statistics often show that widely-held negative perceptions around migration are off the mark."⁶ We therefore must move to counter such misinformation by encountering our migrating sisters and brothers. Like so many in the scriptures, they migrated in the hope of finding work, safely, food, and loved ones. Ours is the Christian call to love the migrant as ourselves.⁷

The Bishops of Mexico and the United States united their voices in a pastoral letter on migration, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. This letter is a human migration field guide of encounter, that details the many different players in the ongoing migration phenomenon—as pastors, parishioners, and social service providers who give support to migrants, as public officials

¹ Franciscan Media, *Saint Francis and the Birds*. Jack Wintz, OFM. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-francis-and-the-birds/> (accessed January 28, 2019).

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/call-to-family-community-and-participation.cfm> (accessed January 28, 2019).

³ *A Concise Guide to Catholic Social Teaching*. McKenna, Kevin E., 2013, p. 27.

⁴ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* [Evangelii Gaudium], no. 220, quoting United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, Nov. 2007, no. 13 (accessed January 28, 2019).

⁵ Share the Journey. <http://journey.caritas.org/myths/> (accessed January 28, 2019).

⁶ Share the Journey. <http://journey.caritas.org/migration-today/> (accessed January 28, 2019).

⁷ America – The Jesuit Review, *Bishop Stowe: Heed the biblical admonition to love the migrant as yourself*, August 7, 2018, John Stowe. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/08/07/bishop-stowe-heed-biblical-admonition-love-migrant-yourself> (accessed January 28, 2019).

and law enforcement personnel who enforce the civil law; and as migrants themselves.⁸ Conventual Franciscan Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky often brings the heart of this document to life in his preaching the Gospel, like Saint Francis did in his time.⁹

Just last year Bishop John ordained two friars to the diaconate, in rural Maryland, not far from the bird-watch bike path. He began the liturgy reminding everyone that we were gathered on the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, a fitting day for an ordination in the USA, of two friars (a Mexican and a Venezuelan) who belong to an international community and would be ordained to minister in a universal church; for we friars know no borders. As Francis once preached to his sisters the Umbrian doves and to his brothers the Egyptian falcons (more particularly to the poor and outcast lepers of Umbria and the Sultan of Egypt), may we too share the social Gospel with those who have already alighted in our lands.

⁸ *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope – A Pastoral Letter on Migration*. Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, January 2003, #7. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm> (accessed January 28, 2019).

⁹ *Address by Most Rev. John Stowe, OFM Conv., Bishop of Lexington*, July 2018. <http://cmsny.org/publications/stowe-cincinnati2018/> (accessed January 28, 2019).