

**“GO FORTH!
I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS.”**

(MATTHEW 28:19-20)

Some aspects of our life as a Church of migrants



Pastoral Letter 2017

Bishop Paul Hinder O.F.M. Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia



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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Before coming to the topic of this pastoral letter, I wish to pay homage to my predecessor, Bishop Bernard Gremoli, who passed away in Florence on July 6, 2017 at the age of 91. He served the Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia as bishop for 29 years and shaped the Church in the Gulf in a lasting way. Most of the churches in the Gulf were built or rebuilt during his time. Many pastoral initiatives were undertaken during his mandate as bishop, in order to answer the growing needs and challenges caused by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of faithful who came to the region in search of work and income. Untiringly, he visited the communities in the six countries of the Vicariate every year, even under difficult circumstances such as those experienced in Yemen and in Saudi Arabia. His generosity towards the needy in the Vicariate and even abroad was proverbial. I too, am in his debt, as he was for me what the master is for an apprentice during the 14 months when I was his auxiliary bishop. I thank God who gave the Church in Arabia such a dedicated pastor. I recommend him to your prayers and to your grateful remembrance. In speaking about some aspects of our life as a Church of migrants, I wish to dedicate this letter to the late Bishop Bernard, whom I was asked to succeed as your bishop by Saint John Paul II in 2005.

Being migrants

1. Being a migrant always means leaving one's home and a familiar environment. The Bible is full of migrant stories. We could even say that being a believer in God and follower of Christ means to be a migrant. Think of Abraham whom God called away from his original family and home-place. Take the other patriarchs, who were wandering from one place to the other. The story of Israel is basically a migrant story: Jacob migrates with his sons to Egypt, and Moses leads the people out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. Recall how the people were forced into captivity in Babylon and finally returned again to the Holy Land.

2. Being a migrant means also being in touch with people of other traditions, faiths and cultures. The people of Israel permanently struggled with how to

keep their identity while being exposed to the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Babylonians and many others. This aspect of being-on-the-way, the permanent pilgrimage, shaped the mind of the people, who had to adapt to the different situations they faced without losing their faith in the true God who made heaven and earth, and who had chosen them as “his people”. We can even say that the Exodus, the Captivity and the return from Exile purified their faith and gave it the shape we find in the books of the Old Testament. However, the continuous challenge of how to keep the unity of the people of God amidst the variety of their environments and experiences remained. It was mainly the task of the prophets to call the people back to the Lord when they had given in to the temptation to follow Baal and other deities.

Jesus with us on the way

3. The story of Israel is reflected in Jesus as in a mirror. This is especially visible in the gospel according to Matthew. In fact, the Evangelist presents Jesus as the new Moses: Jesus too was exposed to the risk of being killed as a child. His parents saved him by fleeing to Egypt. From there he came back as the new Moses, who would lead the people to freedom in God by first passing 40 days in the desert, and then teaching them the new Law in the Sermon on the Mountain. Like the wandering patriarchs and prophets, Jesus walked through the country. The life of our Lord Jesus Christ is marked by movements from one place to the other. And he asked his disciples to do the same. *“Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, ‘Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”* (Matthew 10:5-7) They went through the towns and villages without security and provisions. Being powerless, they put their trust in the power of God. After his death and resurrection, Jesus sent his disciples forth by a word of commission, widening the horizon of their mission beyond the people of Israel to include the whole world: *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the time.”* (Matthew 28:19-20)

4. The promise “*I am with you always*” means that the Lord does not stay behind while the disciples go to the countries of this world. No, he is with them on the move. Keep this in mind for your own situation as migrants: wherever you are, the Lord is with you. We may sometimes feel homesick like the people of Israel in Babylon, and we may miss the full richness of our religious culture that we were used to enjoying “back home”. However, do not forget the Prophet Ezekiel, who saw in a vision that the Glory of God left the temple in Jerusalem towards the east, i.e. towards the captives in Babylon (Ezekiel 11:15-25). In the same way, the Lord remains with the migrants who put their belief and trust in him. Truly, we are never Lord-less. He is with us “*until the end of the time*”.

Exposed to the influence of other cultures

5. The story of the early Church is a story of migrants scattered in all directions by the mandate of the risen Lord and by the circumstances of persecution or economic need. Later, Roman legionaries, slaves and business people moving through the Roman Empire spread the Good News of Christ. The expansion, however, caused a lot of problems, which the early Church had to address. The conversion of pagans to Christianity in Antioch and in other places raised the question of the originally Jewish identity of the first community in Jerusalem. It soon became obvious that unity among the Christians was not rooted in a specific religious tradition shaped by a particular culture. It was the profession of faith in the crucified and risen Lord which kept them together, a profession that was constituted in baptism and celebrated in the Holy Eucharist: “*Do this in memory of me!*” The community in common faith proclaims: “*We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.*”

Being on trial

6. Most of us live in the Gulf countries for economic reasons. People came to these countries looking for a job and the associated income in order to establish a family, or to support a family back home. None of us can become

a citizen with full rights in the host country. Our residence visa has to be renewed periodically and if it is not done, we have to go back to our own country or find another host country. Very often, our families are torn apart. Husband and wife do not live together, with one partner staying behind in the home country, or working and living in another place. Those who can afford to live as a family here often struggle to get the necessary income for their house rent and the education of their children. As soon as one loses one's job, or gets a smaller salary, the whole family is at risk. Many do not have the courage to take the decision to go back to their country and thus fall into the creditors' trap. This is one of the reasons why I wrote in my previous pastoral letter: *"Too often people think that living in the Gulf States is like living in paradise. What may be true for some can turn into a nightmare for others. It should be part of our sober Christian mind that we face the reality with both prudence and confidence. People who have lost their jobs without getting new ones should avoid falling into debt and ending up sometimes in jail. It is surely more prudent to envisage a simpler life back home than to dream about a paradise here that does not exist. Confidence does not mean taking loans from people and banks which sooner or later will claim their rights, unless one has a sufficient guarantee that one is able to cover one's debts. Mercy does not mean covering up the lack of prudence or the stupidity of certain people, but confronting them honestly with the reality of their situation."* (Pastoral Letter 2016, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" n. 22)

7. Beside the economic challenges, many faithful are struggling morally in their life situation. Separation from one's husband or wife for a length of time can lead to situations of ambiguity, including adultery and divorce. Some compensate for their emotional deficit with surrogates like pornography, alcohol or drugs. Very often, it becomes a vicious circle, out of which many do not easily find the way. A careful reading of the letters of Saint Paul, especially the two letters to the Corinthians, shows us that similar problems existed from the beginning of Christianity. We should, therefore, not be surprised if we have to pass through the same challenges. The Church in Corinth was highly charismatic. But, at the same time, basic human problems continued to exist among them. Saint Paul had to address all the problems of improper relationships, cheating, going to the pagan court against fellow Christians, neglecting the poor, and so on. Furthermore, there were partitions within the community that risked splitting the Church and weakening the witness

of being the Body of Christ. Saint Paul was in a permanent battle against the creation of separate sects and churches within the same local Church.

Living the perfect in the imperfect

8. Despite the limitations, and the unresolved or only partly resolved problems within the Church in Corinth, Saint Paul addressed them with the following friendly words: *“I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you were enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge, as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* (1 Co 1:4-7) The positive approach did not hinder Saint Paul in immediately addressing afterwards the problematic aspects in the life of the young Church in Corinth. This is true also in his second letter to the Corinthians, of which a part is called the “letter of tears” because of the sufferings and grief the Apostle experienced regarding the community. Despite the painful realities within the Church, Saint Paul wrote at the beginning: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. For as Christ’s sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow. If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement, which enables you to endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is firm, for we know that as you share in the sufferings, you also share in the encouragement.”* (2 Co 1:3-7) After laying out very serious concerns regarding the community, as well as his advice on each point, he nevertheless concluded the letter on a conciliatory tone: *“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the holy ones greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you.”* (2 Co 13:11-13)

Keeping unity within diversity

9. There is no doubt that, similar to the Church in Corinth, we are a Church with many committed faithful who are gifted with charisms to build the body of Christ. But as in Corinth, I notice that in some parishes in our Vicariate as well, very often a “group egotism” is not far away. It is true that for pastoral reasons we have to satisfy the legitimate requests of people coming from different traditions, languages and nations. Like my predecessor, Bishop Bernard Gremoli, I try to satisfy the growing need regarding priests of different rites, languages and nationalities. Masses are celebrated and retreats given in different languages, styles and for particular groups. However, there is also a risk. Many faithful - and sometimes even priests - are more or almost exclusively concerned about the people of the same language, rite or movement without taking much interest in what is going on at their right or left. In some cases, it is close to the sectarianism Saint Paul had to criticize and correct in Corinth. What in our Vicariate is meant to be a pastoral aid for the faithful with limited language skills, and those with legitimate expectations regarding their own Church tradition, can easily degenerate into a group egotism. Such people are not aware of or do not care about our fragile situation in the Gulf. One who left one's home country for a longer time (or even for good) cannot expect to find in the new environment what he or she has left behind. Ask Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; ask Moses, the later prophets and the people in exile - they could not take everything they liked with them. They had to adapt to the situation of migrants and make legitimate compromises. In this way their faith was shaped by God who guided them through the trials of their migrant situation.

10. It is undoubtedly true that our pastoral care has to keep in mind the diversity within the Church. But at the same time it is crucial that the unity of the body of Christ be not only on our lips but also in our behaviour. It is worth quoting Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who wrote to the Magnesians: *“Be all in conformity with God, and respect one another, and let no man judge his neighbour according to the flesh, but in everything love one another in Jesus Christ. Let there be nothing in you which can divide you, but be united with the bishop and with those who preside over you as an example and lesson of immortality.”* This requires a spirit of love, mutual respect and self-limitation – in a word, humility – from everyone. There are the physical limits regarding available spaces and times.

There is especially the understanding in the Catholic Church that a parish is not simply a collective of independent groups and “quasi-parishes”, with each one defending their own interests without considering the needs of others. We should never forget that we are primarily called to witness together our being “one in Christ”.

Overcoming group egotism

11. Let me take a simple example: Coming from different parts of the world with different cultural traditions, we often celebrate the feasts shaped by the respective traditions. However, feasts should not be considered as “exclusive property” of a particular group, although some traditions may be respected. Thus, Saint Thomas is an apostle of the whole Catholic Church and not only of the Syro-Malabar; Saint Francis Xavier is a saint of the universal Church and not only of the Goans; Saint Charbel is especially observed among the Lebanese but belongs to the whole Catholic Church; the Nativity of our Lady appears as feast in the General Calendar of the Church and not only in Mangalore; the Santo Niño is venerated not only by the Filipinos but is the Lord of the Universal Church, and so on! It is good to care for the traditions. However, they should always be open to the others, and be inclusive instead of exclusive.

12. I notice that in our Vicariate we have a lot of retreats and special events. There is no doubt that they reveal the spiritual hunger of many faithful which many others want to satisfy. I am happy if our faithful are growing in spirit and mind, and if all these activities lead to a more mature faith and a solid moral life. However, we have to be careful that what should lead to a spiritual deepening does not instead degenerate into spiritual inbreeding and further splits within our parish communities.

Committed to the Church without neglecting one’s own duties

13. We are grateful for all those in our parishes who commit their time to the different ministries and activities which keep our communities alive. It is

wonderful to see how many of the faithful care for the different needs on the church compound, as well as in the wider fields such as visiting the sick, the prisoners, the people in the labour camps and so on. Many men and women commit a substantial time of their lives to parish activities. However, this should never lead to a neglect of one's duties towards one's husband or wife, and especially one's own family. It can happen that religious activities serve as a pretext not to care for the own family. It is always good to remember the wise advice of Saint Francis de Sales to the lay people: *"I say that devotion must be practised in different ways..., adapted to the strength, to the occupation and to the duties of each one in particular. Tell me, please, my Philothea, whether it is proper ... for a working man to spend his whole day in church like a religious; or on the other hand for a religious to be constantly exposed like a bishop to all the events and circumstances that bear on the needs of our neighbour. Is not this sort of devotion ridiculous, unorganised and intolerable? Yet this absurd error occurs very frequently, but in no way does true devotion, my Philothea, destroy anything at all."* (Francis de Sales, Philothea)

Families under the conditions of migration

14. As I mentioned earlier, couples and families are nowadays exposed to a lot of challenges. However, it is important to stress first of all the beauty of an intact marriage life and a sane family community. I vividly recommend the study of the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis titled *Amoris Laetitia* or *The Joy of Love*. The Pope's Exhortation speaks explicitly about migration and the family. I quote here n. 46, which may sound familiar to your own experience: *"Migration is another sign of the times to be faced and understood in terms of its negative effects on family life. The recent Synod drew attention to this issue, noting that in various ways, migration affects whole populations in different parts of the world. The Church has exercised a major role in this area. Maintaining and expanding this witness to the Gospel (cf. Mt 25:35) is urgently needed today more than ever... Human mobility, which corresponds to the natural historical movement of peoples, can prove to be a genuine enrichment for both families that migrate and countries that welcome them. Furthermore, forced migration of families, resulting from situations of war, persecution, poverty and injustice, and marked by the vicissitudes of a journey that often puts lives*

at risk, traumatizes people and destabilizes families. In accompanying migrants, the Church needs a specific pastoral programme addressed not only to families that migrate but also to those family members who remain behind. This pastoral activity must be implemented with due respect for their cultures, for the human and religious formation from which they come and for the spiritual richness of their rites and traditions, even by means of a specific pastoral care..."

The beauty of the family amidst the challenges

15. We do not have the solution for all the problems connected to the situation described in the Pope's Exhortation. It is important to keep in mind the encouraging words in n. 57 of *Amoris Laetitia*: *"I thank God that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way. The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. In every situation that presents itself, the Church is conscious of the need to offer a word of truth and hope... The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence."*

16. Pope Francis offers in *Amoris Laetitia* a meditation on 1 Corinthians 13 with practical advice about *Our Daily Love* (nn. 89 – 119). The love Saint Paul speaks about makes fruitful not only the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children but also those with our fellow Christians and even with the people of other faiths. It is not helpful to only be fixed on the problems and to forget the beauty of life and love, the joys of family life and the pride in seeing children grow and in helping them find the right way. Only if the family is united in love, common prayer and mutual respect, can it contribute to the unity of a bigger community like a parish. It is an illusion to believe that people who live in a quarrelling family can contribute to peace and joy in an association or parish.

Fostering marriage and family life of migrants

17. We have many initiatives and associations which aim to foster marriage and family life. I start with the *Marriage Preparation Courses* which are not meant to spoil the time before marriage, but to deepen the understanding of marriage and family life and to help future spouses keep the sacramental aspect in mind. Marriage is more than a feeling of love and a partnership with important economic aspects. It is a sacrament that shows that marriage has to do with the relationship of Christ with humanity, or more accurately, with the Church. For Christians, it is therefore important to enter marriage and family life with the awareness that, right from the beginning, there is a third partner involved in the alliance: Jesus Christ. After marriage, it is very helpful to be engaged in one of the groups or movements like the *Family Ministry*, *Couples for Christ*, *Marriage Encounter*, *Equipos Notre Dame*, and others.. However, no movement or association can replace a climate of dialogue and prayer between husband and wife, parents and children.

Faith education for children and adults

18. Parents are the first catechists of their children. The example and the words of the parents form the basic teaching that is given to the child. It is from the lips of their mother and father that children learn (or should learn) the fundamental Christian prayers and the fundamental Christian truths. Catechism in the parish only completes and deepens what has been laid as a foundation in the family. One cannot expect the catechism in the church to make up for a lack of teaching by parents in the early childhood. As I mentioned previously, children have to see and to experience the practice of their parents. This will give them the courage and the joy to continue on the same way, even if later they may have to go through some struggles. I am aware that in many specific situations, parents may not have sufficient time and strength to fulfil all their duties. If they live in different places or are under extreme job-stress, the education of the children may suffer first.

19. Many parents feel sometimes unable to cope with the religious education

of the children because they were never taught Catholic teaching or have forgotten it. They find it difficult to use and read the Bible themselves, and consequently are not able to help their children in the right way. I think that beyond the care we are taking in our Vicariate for the catechism of the children, there is an urgent need for adult catechism, not only for those who prepare for baptism or want to join the Catholic Church but also for many long-standing faithful. Just as priests (and even bishops) have to continue their theological education and their pastoral training, every one of the faithful should do the same in his or her particular situation. Of course, those who go every week to Mass will receive a teaching in the homilies – assuming they are well prepared and really satisfying the spiritual (and intellectual) hunger of the faithful. Pope Francis has reminded us – the priests and bishops – of the responsibility we have in this regard, and I am well aware that many faithful in our Vicariate expect solid teaching in the homilies at Mass.

20. However, beyond the ordinary spiritual nourishment during the Sunday Mass or in the prayer groups, it is good to join a program in the parish that helps one to deepen one's knowledge of the Bible as well as answer questions which non-Catholics may ask us, conveys the skills needed for the teaching of religion to the children, and – last but not least – gives us a deeper personal insight into our own Catholic faith. In most of our parishes there are Bible study groups and/or offers of adult catechism and similar training programs, not to forget the possibility we have nowadays through online learning. Our Office of Christian Formation can give you the necessary information and help.

Couples and families in stormy waters

21. We all know that things are not always ideal. Not only a Church as we have seen in Corinth, but also a family, can go through times of crisis. There are situations where people no longer have the strength to continue to struggle. Sometimes husband and wife do not have the courage to ask for help before it is too late, although there is no shame in asking for counselling in moments of crisis. The *Family Ministry* may be a place to find a kind of “first aid” assistance.

Speaking to a priest, deacon or to a psychological counsellor may be another helpful way. I know that many faithful prefer to speak to a priest, a deacon or a nun rather than to lay people. However, I would like to stress that we have a good number of trained and qualified lay persons who can help to overcome crises in marriages and families. In any case, the basis of such a process has to always be the readiness to forgive and to reconcile, and to admit one's own weaknesses, not simply see the faults of the other party.

22. However, what can be done when things fail, a marriage breaks down, and a family is torn? Pope Francis speaks in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* about the discernment of “irregular situations” and the pastoral approach in nn. 296 – 312. Some of the words of the Pope have provoked reactions even among bishops and cardinals who were afraid that the Church was about to betray the teaching of the Lord. There is no doubt that neither the Synod of the Bishops nor the Pope have given up the teaching of the indissolubility of a valid marriage between baptized Christians. The discussions at the Synod considered the question of whether, in every case, divorced and civilly remarried faithful should be excluded from receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist for the rest of their lives, even in the those situations where a return to the first marriage was felt to be physically and morally impossible. I cannot bring the whole text in this regard without making this letter too long. I only wish to quote Pope Francis with some of the important passages of the Exhortation in this regard, and to encourage people to approach a priest to find how best they can practice their faith in their difficult situation.

23. After having spoken extensively about the different aspects of marriage and family life, the Pope gives some guidelines how to deal with “irregular situations”, admitting that even the Synod was not able to say the last word in this very difficult issue: “*When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.*” (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 300)

Broken situations do not mean hopeless situations

24. The Holy Father then explains the rules of discernment, which the pastors have to follow: *“By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality.”* (Amoris Laetitia, n. 305) With Pope Francis, I wish to tell all those who experience the failure of their marriage and family life that they can still count on the closeness and the understanding of the Church. Even if it is not always possible to regularize so-called “irregular situations”, such faithful remain members of the Church and deserve our prayer and our pastoral care.

25. We do not live in a perfect world. Although we profess in the Creed our belief in *“the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”*, we know that we are still sinners on the way to sainthood. As migrants, we may realize more than others what it means to live the eternal in the provisional. It is good to keep in mind for ourselves what Saint Paul applies to his apostolic ministry when he speaks about God who *“has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of [Jesus] Christ. But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair.”* (2 Corinthians 4:6-8) Amidst an imperfect world, and amidst a Church caught up in the struggles of the present time, *“we are built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”* (Ephesians 2:22)

Our Lady walks with us

26. I wrote earlier that we are never Lord-less, because Christ has promised to be with us until the end of time. In a similar way, we are never Mother-less, because our Lady Mary, Mother of God, is with us on the way. Just as she travelled after the Annunciation to share the gift of her pregnancy with

Elisabeth, so also today she comes to us and walks with us, still sharing the same gift: our Saviour Jesus Christ, Son of God and son of Mary. Let us pray to her in the words of the Spanish pilgrimage song (Santa Maria del Camino):

*You are never alone in life,
Mary is with you on your journey,
Come with us, Mary, as we walk!*

*Even if someone tells you that nothing can change
Fight for a new world, fight for the truth,
Come with us, Mary, as we walk!*

*Even if others in the world don't recognize you,
Still, reach out to those who are with you.
Come with us, Mary, as we walk!*

*Even when it seems useless to keep going,
Stay the course, and others will follow you.
Come with us, Mary, as we walk!*

Bishop Paul Hinder O.F.M. Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Abu Dhabi, 15th August 2017 (Assumption of our Lady)

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