

## An inter-parish, ecumenical and inter-religious network helping migrants in Brazil

# Serving and Listening

### Berluce Bely

*The experience of a parish in Curitiba (Brazil) that has opened itself up to welcoming Venezuelan migrants has created a network with other parishes, ecclesial movements, Christian Churches of various denominations, people of other religions and those with no religious affiliation. With the arrival of Covid-19, the network was intensified to meet the growing needs of migrants.*

The first groups of Venezuelans to arrive in Curitiba did so in September 2018 as part of the project Flight of Hope and this was organised through a partnership with the federal government, the International Organization for Migration and Caritas. The news that reached us through the national and local press touched our hearts: we now saw on our television screens people who had left their family, home, work, homeland, come close to us in search of survival.

Initially they were assisted for three months in a reception facility. On November 18 of that year, on the occasion of the World Day of the Poor launched by Pope Francis and in response to the appeal of the archdiocese, my parish - the shrine of Our Lady of La Salette - invited the first group of migrants to participate in a day together, to celebrate and share our table.

It was an opportunity to establish a relationship with several of them. So, when they left the facility, we began to visit them, learn their stories and help them with food, clothing and finding work to pay their rent.

### A "battalion" of people of good will

Naturally, we soon realized that the commitment of a parish was not enough; we needed a real "battalion" of people of good will willing to take on the challenge of accompanying these migrants, since the number of families to be helped was growing: from the initial 150 families, the number of migrants arriving in the city has now reached 3,000. The Focolare community of Curitiba was willing to collaborate, other parishes and groups got involved, and through the media we launched a campaign to sensitize the city's community.

This is how *Fraternity without Borders* was born, a network that in a short time, thanks to its personal contacts, has become inter-parochial, ecumenical and inter-religious, and today is a point of reference in assisting Venezuelans in Curitiba. We work in coordination with

Caritas and the Pastoral Care of Migrants and we have adopted the motto of Migrants' Week: *Welcome, protect, promote, integrate and celebrate.*

**Welcome.** In many cases we have been accompanying the migrants from the time they arrived at the airport. Since they are almost all homeless, we go out together in search of landlords who agree to rent houses without many requirements.

**Protect.** We cover the needs of food, blankets, clothes, medicine. We follow pregnancies and births, the sick and dying.

**Promote.** For every one that comes through the official program, five come through on their own; for these, our mission is critical. We forward documentation, prepare programs and refer them to social service opportunities and training.

**Integrate.** We identify where they live, the parish they belong to and act as a bridge for them by providing information about their address and family situation. We also have the joy of seeing many of them integrated into the Christian community.

**Celebrate.** Those who feel loved are supportive and refer us their friends who need help. Many ask us: "How did you know I existed and what I needed? Who are you? Why are you doing this?". And the common response: "Congratulations! Thank you for your witness."

### **God's Providence**

We are constantly surprised at the number of donations. Are we urgently looking for a stove? We receive several, ready to be assigned to other families. Does someone need a sink? The same day we receive five...

An anonymous person told us: "I will organize an event for those who need food. With the arrival of winter, a Brazilian family asked us for a list of children for whom they could offer clothes which would be suitable for the harsher weather.

Two families who could not pay their rent came to us for help. On the same day, we received an envelope containing the exact amount for that payment.

A chain reaction of solidarity was created in response to the help received. There are those who welcome another family into their home and those who, having learned that someone has been left without food, provide them from what they have...

### **Job search**

Another fundamental aspect of our action has been to try and find work for migrants so that everyone can be financially self-sufficient. We have developed a curriculum vitae model for migrants and created partnerships with recruitment companies in keeping with the guidelines of the *One Percent* project which is part of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) Businesses with Refugees Platform.

We are also part of a federal symposium for the training of those involved in the reception and integration of refugees and migrants in Brazil, organized by the Higher School of the Public Ministry of the Union. This has allowed us to participate in events at a local and national level and we ourselves have organized a few events to inform some businesses about the experience which the Venezuelans have. To those who knew these migrants simply as statistics, their stories have helped to change opinions.

### **Covid-19 - an increase in aid**

We thought that this year the situation of families would be more stable but the difficulties brought about by Covid-19 have caused a financial crisis. Many of our migrants are self-employed, unemployed or still trainees. Faced with all the restrictions regarding social interaction, though, we remembered that "nothing can stop us from loving".

And so our campaign gathered pace. One volunteer's house became a food warehouse and a storehouse for clothing, blankets and hygiene items. But since the delivery of aid was becoming more difficult to implement safely, we launched a proposal among community members to adopt a Venezuelan family through drop-off points. In this way, those who could help could do so safely and fewer people would be buying and distributing the various items.

Because of the network created with the different agencies, we have become one of the main groups for the orientation and registration of unemployed families in applying for the emergency allowance granted by the federal government.

### **The greatest reward**

In the middle of the Easter period, just as we were living the uncertainty of the pandemic, we were asked to help twelve Haitian families. In less than 24 hours we organized ourselves so that they could all receive food, clothing and blankets. We actually received more donations than what was need for the Haitians.

Our greatest reward? The gratitude of so many, but above all the witness of people returning to God: like the young man who has changed his way of thinking and feeling about the Church and others who have now asked to become part of it. Thanks to this welcoming experience, the community of Curitiba is experiencing a sense of solidarity and sharing never experienced before. More than anything else, though, there is a strong presence of God, a presence of the Father who makes us all brothers and sisters.