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OF THE MIGRANT**

by **Rev. J. Van der Hoogte**



## RELIGIOUS PREPARATION OF THE MIGRANT

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It is a truism to say that a person who knows that a great change in his life is going to take place will prepare himself for that change if he is wise. He who in undertaking a long journey will take the necessary measures beforehand, he plans the route he is going to follow, he **chooses** his luggage, he settles his things.

If the change he expects means to him a new state of life, whether marriage, priesthood or monastic life, this preparation will even take years. Choosing a trade, taking up a new post require a serious and through preparation.

The greater the change in the new conditions of life, the heavier the responsibilities entailed by such a change, the more essential is a full and adequate preparation.

A plumber, an engineer, a physician cannot start his work without preparation; a nun or a young couple cannot enter upon new duties without having prepared themselves thoroughly. Neither can a migrant migrate without having prepared himself sufficiently. For we must realize that migration is a kind of complete revolution in a man's life, involving acceptance of entirely new conditions of life. Migration is often a decision for the future not only of one person, but of a whole family and its later generation.

Migration implies giving up one's native country, one's



own parish, one's relations, one's social surroundings, it means giving up **friends** who have the same character, the same cultural and historical background.

Migration more or less implies a radical uprooting from the old soil and a transplantation into an entirely new, strange soil. It is a change to a foreign country with a foreign language, a meeting with people having other ways of thinking and doing, having other manners and customs, with a history and a civilisation that differs in many respects.

Moreover, migration is always to a certain extent a leap in the dark, a plunge into the unknown. The question whether a migrant will take root in the new soil can never be answered with full certainty in advance. Climate, bad luck, sickness, economic conditions and even political events may wreck the migrant, for migration always implies a certain amount of risk. Besides, in most cases it is very difficult and sometimes even impossible for the migrant to return, because with the decisive step of migration he has "burnt his boats".

Every migration is attended by a psychological shock and this shock will be the greater and heavier as the migrant is thrown into these entirely new conditions unexpectedly and unprepared. A hasty migration, a sudden change, may mean complete ruin, utter failure.

Preparation is necessary in order to lessen this psychological shock as much as possible. The longer the migrant has tried to realize and visualize the new and



strange situation that awaits him in his new country, the less will be the shock to him. We must, however, realize that even the best preparation cannot wholly prevent that shock nor guarantee the migrant from great and often unpleasant surprises. It takes a long time, as a rule, before the migrant fits into the national pattern and way of life. The difficulty that every adviser on emigration countries meets is that he uses the same words for other ideas. During his life in his country the migrant has formed his store of ideas and notions from the experience in his own country and his own surroundings. A Dutchman, for instance, has Dutch ideas of climate, sports, housekeeping, furnishings, social life, etc., and, unaware of the one-sidedness of his ideas, he brings them to his new country, but after some time he will gradually discover that the ideas of the old and the new country do not correspond.

A migrant from that small country of Holland will soon experience in Canada or Australia that his idea of distance has to be changed completely, what he calls a very long distance in Holland is a very short distance in Canada or Australia.

For a Christian, the Doctrine of Christ and the practice of it form the basis of the whole of life. To a Catholic, his faith, with its religious truths, its



sacraments, its moral teaching, is not only the basis of a man's life but also rule of conduct. Religion is unique!

Nothing can take its place; religion is fundamental.

Religion does not give a prepared blueprint for each one of life's problems; it does not supply us with pat answers for everything we encounter, but it does tell us that those answers are to be found. It tells us how to make a blueprint. Religion gives us a place to begin.

A person's attitude in life is directed by his religion.

All the events of his life are judged from that point of view, his acts are ruled by the standard his religion prescribes for him.

As religion teaches man the meaning and value of life, with its sunny and dark days, it also teaches him the meaning of suffering and worry. Religion will remind him that all things will pass away. A living faith alone will help him to remain optimistic in the midst of troubles and worries.

Faith will save him from utter pessimism.

Besides, religion urges man to see his responsibility and to accept the necessary of living up to it. He will not make important decisions thoughtlessly, but will be guided by conscientious consideration of the pros and cons.

After having taken the decision, a religious man dares to trust in God for further help.

Especially for a migrant is religion important, for a migrant without any form of religion will easily lose his certainty about the end and purpose of his life. When in great difficulty, faith will help to tide him over this difficulty.



All this implies the absolute necessity of preparing the migrant from the religious standpoint for the entirely new conditions of life he is going to meet in the new country.

The Church and Catholic organizations that take charge of the preparation of the migrant will find a highly important task in the religious preparation of the migrant. They must help him in deepening and refreshing his faith for, unless any creed has a definite and genuine meaning, unless it expresses real and concrete truth, unless it conveys positive and practical information to a person's mind, it will never be a living force in his life. That is precisely what a religious creed is meant to be - a creed to live by! A man's creed usually influences his whole life. In the light of his creed he knows God, he knows himself, he knows the world in which he dwells, and as he believes so he lives! Only then will he realize the moral support that faith can give in any circumstance of life.

This religious preparation should especially be focussed on the following truths:

God's Providence. Every migrant should be deeply convinced<sup>n</sup> that God is a loving father who cares for his children and provides for them. He must know that the ways of God often differ entirely from the ways of men.

God's grace is absolutely necessary, for - "Without Me you can do nothing". At the same time the migrant must realize that God's grace will not work without our cooperation, for, as St. Augustine says, "he who made us without our concurrence will not save us without our concurrence."



In receiving the sacraments the emigrant must firmly believe that every sacrament is a real meeting with Christ.

Only then will he experience the power and the happiness of Holy Communion and the joy of a good confession.

It must be a living truth that through prayer we come into real contact with, God, Who is the ultimate end of man's life.

Finally, the migrant should be told that though he is not a priest he can and must be an apostle. Confirmation has made him competent to spread the faith, defend the Church, be a soldier of Christ. In his new country he will certainly meet people who are looking for the truth, and it is astonishing how much good can be done by a layman through good example and also through supplying true information that will correct misinformation and remove prejudice.

In addition to these general reasons for religious preparation, there are some other special, concrete reasons that render this preparation highly necessary.

1. God remains the same in whatever country you are, but mostly man comes to Him through the living Church. That living Church has its ministers who are needed for administration of the sacraments and for the instruction of the people; as Christ has ordained it. To come into contact with these ministers the knowledge of their language is absolutely necessary. Too often we see that migrants do not feel at home in their new country and not even in their churches, because they do not understand the language the sermon is given in, they cannot speak to the priests, they cannot say their confession, and in consequence they are estranged from the Church.

Though we constantly try to send out priest speaking the emigrant's



own language to surmount the difficulties of the beginning period in a receiving country, we must take account of the fact that, as a rule, the number of these priests will be absolutely insufficient. We must avert the danger that the emigrant, while he is waiting for a priest of his own nationality, will slacken his faith and even lose the practice of it. Study of the language should form a great part of the religious preparation as a means of coming as soon as possible into contact with the living Church of the new country.

2. The migrant rightly expects the Catholic Church to be the same in every country the world over. But it should be part of the preparation to point out to the migrant that the ministers of that Church are not the same everywhere.

He will find priests who are children of another nation, having the same faith and the same sacraments, but at the same time having quite another character, another mentality, another way of thinking and doing, even on parochial lines, than ways that were customary in the old country. History and local circumstances may account a great deal for all those differences, but it is essential that the emigrant should be prepared to face these differences. Preparation will save him from many false ideas, from unreasonable offences, and may



guard him against lapsing from the faith.

3. It is impossible for countries with a short historical past to have in their churches the same liturgical splendor as the countries with a long historical and cultural past. Especially when a migrant's practice of his faith is based more upon the outward, liturgical form than on inner conviction may such a lack of liturgical splendor lead him to miss Mass easily, to neglect the sacraments, and eventually to lose all practice of religion. Pointing out the possibility and the probability of finding less liturgical splendor in the new country should be an essential part of the religious preparation.

4. The season of the year often accounts for the nature, the intimacy or the solemnity of the various feasts of the Church. These feasts are often unduly influenced by the seasons.

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This natural element may course play a predominant role in the celebration of various feasts, but the lack of that natural factor should not be a reasons for not keeping feasts any longer. A person living in the northern hemisphere and accustomed to a more or less white Christmas with all the intimacy of the winter night, will be greatly disappointed by a plain Christmas during the summer holidays in the southern hemisphere. He who has been prepared for that difference will not be shocked by it. He may even be helped to enter more deeply into the real meaning of the feast.

5. A great part of religious instruction is left to the Catholic schools. Though the migrants should be told that



it is their sacred duty to send their children to Catholic schools, this will not always be possible for them as there are not always Catholic schools in the neighborhood.

So the parents among the migrants should be prepared to take over that part of religious instruction that is customarily given in Catholic schools. They must know how to give religious instruction, they must know the outlines of the Scriptures and elementary Church history.

Their attention should be drawn to the publications that may be useful for that purpose, and they should be told that such books ought to form part of their luggage.

6. Though in almost every country the migrant will find a parish church or at least a chapel within reach, a long distance will often make it impossible to go to church as frequently as at home. In order to keep faithfully great stress should be laid on the practice of religion at home. Corporate prayer keeps a religious atmosphere in the home. "A family that prays together together". Clinging to the religious customs and practices of the old country is another means that should not be under-estimated. If these things are not pointed out to the emigrants beforehand, the lack of religious practice at home plus the manifold material worries may prove to be fatal for the whole family and even for later generations.



7. Migrants from Catholic countries or Catholic districts will undoubtedly be confronted in their new country with various other forms of religion and sects and even with modern heathens. If this happens without warning and preparation it may sometimes cause kind of religious confusion and even lead to religious indifferentism. It is highly advisable, therefore, to give future emigrants a short explanation of the principal non-Catholic religious and sects they are going to meet in the new country.

Needless to say, this explanation can only be superficial, but still it may prevent confusion and doubt.

8. The atmosphere, the social environment in which the migrant lived in his former country, could often mean for him a great religious protection. The ties that bound him with his family, his par<sup>i</sup>sh, his priests and friends often kept him in the sphere of Catholic life. The lack of this protecting environment may often cause a lapse from the faith, especially when a migrant's practice of his faith was based more upon outward form than on inner religious conviction. Forewarned is forearmed!

Sad experience teaches us that this is often the case with single young men and women. As these young persons are not bound by family ties, they readily move to look for better social conditions. This prevents them from maintaining regular contacts with their own priests or with the par<sup>i</sup>sh clergy. To emigrate without sufficient



religious preparations is in general unwarranted for any person, but for single boys and girls it can only be religious suicide!

9. It should also be part of the religious preparation to point out to the migrant his duty to support the church, the priests and the schools. This is especially necessary for migrants coming from countries where the schools are subsidized by the State and who consequently are not accustomed to contribute to the support of the schools. It is a fact that the Catholics of these countries give a magnificent example of generosity with regard to their church and their schools and the migrants should be urged to follow this example according to their means.

They should be told not to try to shirk this financial obligation by referring to their own wants and needs.

The spirit of sacrifice is a Christian virtue, obligatory on all, even on the migrant.

10. Finally, religious preparation should include an enumeration of the religious organizations that exist in the new country to promote and to stimulate the religious life of the Catholics. In addition to the moral support of the priests speaking their own language and the contact with new parish clergy and the maintenance of religious customs of the former country, the contact with the Catholic laity of the <sup>new</sup> country will be of great spiritual advantage in the life of the migrants. And the Catholic organizations are by far the best means of establishing this contact.



Through these organizations the newcomers are easily and quickly incorporated into the parish life of their new country.

### Summary

Migration is only justified for a Catholic after a thorough religious preparation.

This preparation is essential, as it bears upon the basis of the whole of life. From this foundation life derives its primary importance. This preparation should have as its object to deepen the migrant's knowledge of faith, to strengthen his inner conviction and to bring him to a more personal practice of faith. By means of retreats, books and courses, the result of this religious preparation will be that the migrant will find a great support in his religion, that the risk he runs of losing his faith will not be so great, and that the psychological shock caused by the tremendous change will be absorbed in advance. The duty of this religious preparation rests first of all on the migrant himself. In carrying out this duty he must be helped by the Church and by the organizations that are charged with emigration matters.

Religious preparation should arise from the solicitude expressed by the Holy Father in his letter to the Australian bishops: "to ensure that the Catholics amongst those (migrants) should not lack religious assistance or, as has so often happened as a result of spiritual neglect, be lost to the faith". (Osservatore Romano, April 28, 1951).