

Issues of Migration and the Filipino Migrants

AGAIN A POLITICAL ISSUE

It has become a political issue once again in Germany: foreigners coming to Germany and the ensuing fear of a probable abuse in the German social security system. At the start of the year, the first debate in Chancellor Merkel's big coalition erupted after Horst Seehofer, the leader of the conservative Bavarian party CSU, expressed his concern about the influx of poor migrants coming in from Rumania and Bulgaria.

The concerns reflected on this current political rambling are shared everywhere else within the European Union today. That is facing the challenges of growing migration within its borders. Despite multi-cultural openness being demonstrated in many European cities, multicultural tension is becoming more evident in the last few years. The topic of migration is increasingly becoming an emotional and a polarizing political issue in the old continent.

Migration in the context of Philippine socio-cultural reality is rather an issue of survival. Filipinos are leaving their country for economic reasons. They are working abroad in order to support their families back home and enjoy better living standards. It is estimated that about 9 to 11 million Filipinos are living outside their home country. These overseas Filipino workers (OFW) have to face growing xenophobia in many host countries where they work and live. According to a 2008 statistics, there are about 65,000 Filipinos living in Germany. 30,000 of them are naturalized or already German passport holders. Thousands are working in the health and maritime sectors. A number of Filipino women here are married to Germans. Filipinos are often seen to be well-integrated into the German society. They are viewed in their neighborhoods as hardworking, skillful and peaceful. They are usually active in church activities and various organizations. Although they are able to live peacefully in this European country of their choosing, Filipinos, just like any other foreigners, are still considered migrants with differing mentality and religious traditions. They join the growing number of minority foreigners who are settling here for good – not mere guest workers who will later return to their country of origin. Many of them have been already joined by their families from the Philippines. Others have already started a family life here. A lot of them would opt to stay permanently in Germany considering that many of them have already acquired the German citizenship. But becoming "German" is not that easy. Foreigners born here are still referred to as one with "migration background" and are still considered an "Ausländer" (foreigner).

MORE THAN AN ECONOMIC ISSUE

Migration is normally viewed from an economic perspective. Yet it is concomitantly a social problem. Trade disparities between rich and poor countries have resulted to neocolonialism. Some would prefer calling it more subtly by using the term "globalization" where capital and labor can freely move from one corner of the world to another. Mobility of people has subjected many to a new form of servitude. The so-called "economic migrants" are those who are getting "pulled-out" from their homeland and are attracted to a "better" paying job elsewhere in the world. They are treated like commodities in capitalistic economies. They are normally low-paid, dispensable and vulnerable to all means of work exploitation. Migrants play a decisive role in filling up labor shortages, especially in first world countries. Many businesses profit from the current system and welcome migrants with open arms. But these migrant workers are seen as competitors in the labor market by the local folks of host countries especially among unemployed.

There are Filipino migrants in Germany who have no residence permits and hence working without having to pay taxes. They are

the so-called "illegals". Undocumented workers whether in possession of a working visa or not, are referred to as "Schwarzarbeiter". Both do not necessarily mean the same, but are often seen as one. It is difficult to ascertain their number since there are no official records that keep track on them. Their lack of documentation makes them "criminals" in the eyes of the state. Often, Germans and even some fellow Filipinos are suspicious about the illegals and undocumented workers. As they can easily be reported to the police, many suffer exploitation and abuse from their employers.

Although most of them are doing menial jobs, like cleaners, house helpers, and nannies, they are still able to send money back to the Philippines to support their families. Their remittances enable them to build houses, send family members to school and pay for their parents medications. These OFW remittances, which amounted to more than 21 billion dollars in 2012, keep the Philippine economy afloat. The overseas Filipino workers are instrumental in alleviating poverty in the Philippines and are to be considered the modern day heroes.

ALSO A THEOLOGICAL ISSUE

The discussion regarding migration should not primarily center on the movement of people but rather on the personas that cause it. The issues on migration will most probably become more humane should we focus on the people themselves. Migrants are to be treated as persons with human dignity, rights and privileges, and not otherwise. They are not merely "human resources" valued according to their use and capacity. Their plight should not be used by demagogues to advance market-driven ideologies and politics. They should not be used as immediate scapegoats for criminality and other lingering social problems. They should be accorded respect regardless of their economic status and nationality.

The humane perspective of treating the least and disadvantaged in our society with human dignity cannot be argued from a purely political and economic standpoint. It has to go deeper and must be rooted into the basic nature of our humanity. This is where theology begins its discourse. Theology, which basically deals with Christian beliefs about God and the Church, has fundamental principles about its view on the human person. It advocates the belief that each person is created in the likeness of God. This religious belief is based on the Bible. In the book of Genesis, God created Adam according to his image. Every person possesses something divine in him and reflects God his Creator who gives spirit and life. The sacredness of being human lies on the values and respect we all deserve. Self-worth empowers every person. It is by seeing through this theological perspective that the term "migrant" will lose its derogatory connotations. The migrant as a person cannot be reduced to a mere economic value or machine, nor can he be made an instrument for political gains.

A PERSONAL ISSUE

Regardless whether the migrant is seen and judged in political, economic or theological terms, it is first and foremost a personal issue for many Filipinos living abroad. How do we feel as migrants living in a foreign land? How do we deal with the inner experience of being different culturally? How do we resolve the feeling of fragmentation and social isolation? Sometimes we forget our Filipino roots and suppress the uncomfortable aspects of our transnational identity. We Filipinos are challenged to think about our identity as migrants that goes beyond the cliques of nationalism and cultural integrity. How do we look and value ourselves? Our personal answer to this question will determine our happiness and fulfillment in life. Our personal attitude towards this issue will determine our future contribution to a peaceful and multicultural society in modern Germany.

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