



Hundreds of thousands of immigrants and allies walk from the south side of Dallas into downtown as part of the nationwide boycott known as "A Day Without an Immigrant." Immigrants miss work or school, and many lose their jobs as a result. A young man approaches the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where the Bishops of Dallas and Fort Worth welcome demonstrators in solidarity, amid the complex intersection of faith and life, Church and State, brown and white, South and North, corporate America and working people. Here, the Cross reigns above all, and Our Lady welcomes pilgrims and patriots walking for justice.

Photo and description by Nicole Bernal Ruiz (May 1, 2006).

ECHOES OF CHURCH LIFE

BY NICOLE BERNAL RUIZ

# ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO DUST

IMMIGRATION, EVANGELIZATION AND TRANSFORMATION

---

Every year, over a billion Catholics around the world remember Jesus' 40 days in the desert by observing Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we piously march to the local parish, often for the first time in a long time, to be reminded that we are but dust. For many, this is a needed reality check, reminding us that we are not, after all, gods. Although *Siri* can instantly satisfy our curiosity in today's Eden, referring us to the hippest, nearest sushi bar, she cannot ultimately stave off that inevitable human reality of mortality. Yet for millions in our midst, no reminder is needed. Death is no stranger in the desert. No sooner do survivors shake the borderland desert dust from their sandals than they take up their next cross as unauthorized immigrants in one of the wealthiest nations in the world.

While an undergrad at Notre Dame, I had the privilege of taking a course from world-renowned theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez which changed the way I understood discipleship, inspiring me to pursue ministry with immigrants. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutierrez writes that “being part of the life of our people, sharing their sufferings and joys, their concerns and their struggles, as well as the faith and hope that they live as a Christian community—all this is not a formality required if one is to do theology; it is a requirement for being a Christian.”<sup>21</sup> The God of life, the subject of all evangelization, is found in community when we share each other’s struggles and hopes. It was in such a community that I came to know Maria.

Maria came to the U.S. 22 years ago after her husband left her with four small daughters so he could find work in the North; instead, he found another woman and started a new family, never again to concern himself with the survival of his first family. On Saturdays, Maria prepares second graders for First Holy Communion at her parish church. After much prodding, she finally accepted the pastor’s invitation to serve as an Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist, but she still doesn’t feel worthy of this role. Between Saturdays, she does laundry and cleaning for a wealthy family whose head of household is a university administrator. She has been helping to raise their daughters since the youngest was but an infant. Maria left behind her own infant daughter in the care of her parents and sisters two decades ago. She had no choice but to come north to feed the four hungry mouths depending on her at home on the family ranch. Although

she has endured humiliation and suffering, she rarely speaks of it; nor does she mention her journey in the desert.

But now her employers are through with her. They know each other well, like family, and find each other’s habits annoying. They resent the decent wages they must pay her. Her hours are cut, then her days. Now the aging woman is back to barely getting by. There are no promotions in this line of work, no seniority and no pensions to be had. Only tired bones and a spirit weary with effort remain after so much toil. But her daughters are raised now, and they are mothers themselves. Each has a U.S.-born child. Their family immigration status is mixed. Under one roof live Maria’s mother—a permanent resident, an undocumented daughter, a U.S. citizen grandson, her youngest daughter—a so-called ‘dreamer’ with deferred action, a U.S. citizen granddaughter, and Maria—still undocumented and ‘waiting in line’

for her visa to become available. If it does become available (which is unlikely at the current rate), she still will be unable to regularize her legal situation unless she can prove to the government that her absence would cause ‘extreme hardship’ to her legal family members. Although her absence would cause them extreme hardship, their circumstances would not qualify as such in the eyes of USCIS, and she would likely be barred from the country for at least ten years. So she continues to toil, weekday after weekday, trying to keep a low profile, with no hope for legalization under current law. But on Saturdays she teaches children about the gratuitous outpouring of God’s self-giving love made flesh first in the Incarnation, then in the Crucifixion, and now in the Eucharist. And on Sundays she shares the Bread of Life with others exiled, like her, to a lifetime of struggle.

As more Marias have become visible in our Church and society, the issue of immigration has become a divisive topic among American Catholics. Despite consistent support from our bishops through their Justice for Immigrants<sup>2</sup> campaign, the message has too often fallen on deaf ears among the faithful. Earlier this spring, a delegation from the USCCB Committee on Migration toured the border and celebrated Mass with bishops from the region to commemorate the 6,000 migrant deaths in the U.S. desert since 1998.<sup>3</sup> Our Pontiff and our President have spoken on the issue as well. Nevertheless, many do not see how immigration relates to the mission of the Church and her work of evangelization.

But evangelization is precisely about the intersection of faith and life. The *National Directory for Catechesis* quotes *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in saying, “Evangelization aims at both the interior change of individuals and the external change of societies. It is the totality of the Church’s efforts to bring ‘the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.’”<sup>4</sup> Evangelization is not confined to catechesis or sacraments; rather, it encompasses our entire reality, both visible and invisible. It is essentially about relationships: our relationship with the triune God and our relationships with others. We encounter the living Christ in others, in community (*koinonia*) and in communion. We strive to transform our societies and are thus transformed in the process.

Throughout the past decade, I have experienced personal conversion through relationships with immigrants, with people like Maria. I have been transformed by the real-life thirsting of my brothers and sisters as they risk all for a chance at safety and survival. While serving as Director of Hispanic Ministry, I was struck by the popular piety of the immigrant Church during Lent. The faithful (often barely ‘practicing’ Catholics) would don costumes and swords to depict the most painful last moments of Jesus’ human experience. Perhaps many recall parallel moments in their own lives, having walked alone toward imminent suffering and possible death, pierced by thirst and thorns, persecuted by military authorities, surrounded by criminals and violence, and scorned by the people with the political power to save them. Another of my former professors, Fr. Daniel Groody, C.S.C. sums it up beautifully in his article, “Jesus and the Undocumented: A Spiritual Geography of a Crucified Peoples”:

The reality of the journey of the immigrant today can be interpreted precisely as a way of the cross. In the process of leaving Mexico, crossing the border, and entering the United States, undocumented Mexican immigrants experience nothing short of a walk across a border of death. Even when they do not die physically, they undergo a death culturally, psychologically, socially, and emotionally. Their journey involves an economic sentencing, whereby

they have to shoulder the difficult responsibilities of leaving family, home, and culture for an unknown future in the United States and the search for a job with meager wages. The Mexican immigrant experiences an agonizing movement from belonging to nonbelonging, from relational connectedness to family separation, from being to nonbeing, from life to death.<sup>5</sup>

## Yet our Gospel preaches life, not death. So where is God present amidst such desperation?

As many before me have said, Jesus left us the project of building up the Kingdom of God on earth. The Kingdom of God was one of Jesus' favorite subjects, so it must have meant something to him. It seems that the work of the Church and her faithful is to be agents of life for those walking in darkness. Interpreting the Beatitudes, Gutiérrez writes that if "the Kingdom of God necessarily implies the reestablishment of justice in this world, then we must believe that Christ says that the poor are blessed because the kingdom of God has begun.... They are blessed because the coming of the Kingdom will put an end to their poverty by creating a world of fellowship."<sup>6</sup>

In my experience, ministering with immigrants is a transformative experience. The transformation is twofold: first, I am transformed, called out of myself and into relationship with *the other*; then, reality is transformed as we work together to alleviate some suffering. The Kingdom of God is made manifest when justice reigns. Our faith was not intended to be a private means of salvation for the privileged few, but a life-changing force that transforms reality for all, especially for the poor. Catechesis is empty unless it draws us into relationship with Christ, and thus, with others.

Evangelization includes catechizing children for First Eucharist, as Maria does, and re-catechizing adults about the healing power of Reconciliation. It includes sharing basic faith with a generation who does not know Christ and providing migrants with pastoral services during harvest. But it *also* includes marching against injustice, testifying before legislators, collecting postcards, hosting prayer vigils, providing direct services, fighting against human trafficking, and advocating for Comprehensive Immigration Reform. The ecclesial actions spill over into social actions. In solidarity with the suffering, we encounter the living Christ, and others encounter him in us. *Our* salvation is tied up with the destiny of others. Insofar as we work to alleviate suffering and create community, we build up the Kingdom on earth.

Finally, we remember the Patroness of the Americas, Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Mother of God chose Saint Juan Diego, a humble man of a defeated people in occupied territory, to carry a message of love and dignity for the oppressed to the ecclesial leaders of his time. So, too, can immigrants in the U.S. evangelize our U.S. Church through transformation and renewal. In the words of Cesar Chavez, if we unite in the struggle, “*Si se puede*,” (yes we can) build the Kingdom of God on earth.



*Nicole Bernal Ruiz is the Program Director a non-profit dedicated to immigrant leadership development, migrant outreach, and advocacy. She is also Faith Formation Director for Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church in Grand Junction, Colorado.*

## NOTES

1 Gustavo Gutiérrez. “Introduction to the New Edition: Expanding the View” in *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxiii.

2 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. <<http://Justiceforimmigrants.org>> Accessed 26 March 2014.

3 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. “Bishops on the Border: Mission for Migrants.” <<http://www.usccb.org/about/migration-policy/mass-on-the-border.cfm>> Accessed 27 March 2014.

4 Paul VI. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, §18. See also *National Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2005), 49.

5 Daniel G. Groody, C.S.C. “Jesus and the Undocumented: A Spiritual Geography of a Crucified Peoples” in *Theological Studies, The Galilean Jesus* vol. 70, no. 2 (June, 2009), 311. Available online at <<http://www3.nd.edu/~dgroody/Published%20Works/Journal%20Articles/files/Groody%20Article%20Jesus%20Undocumented.pdf>> Accessed 27 March 2014.

6 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 171.