

THE CHURCH AND IMMIGRATION

REFLECTIONS OF A PILGRIM PEOPLE

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Migration makes headlines in many newspapers around the world, but in multiple ways it is not a new issue. Since the dawn of humanity people have been on the move. However, the current scope, scale and magnitude of the issue are unprecedented. According to the International Organization for Migration,

approximately 214 million people today—or one out of every 33 people around the world—are living away from their homelands. Approximately 42 million are forcibly uprooted, including 16 million refugees and 26 million who are internally displaced.

In many respects migration is a sign of our times, so much so that some scholars refer to this point in history as “the age of migration.” Even though it is interwoven into our biological and spiritual origins, migration is still one of the most complex and controversial issues of our day.

Amidst the incendiary debates, the Church over the years has articulated a consistent position on immigration. The Church has something to say about migration because it goes to the core of her identity and what is most important to her. In this brief essay I would like to highlight some of the rationale behind this teaching and its connections to what we do in the Eucharist. My hope is that it will give us not only more information but also a new imagination about how we think about this issue and especially the people most affected by it.



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**Notre Dame students interview refugees waiting to receive their asylum papers in South Africa
Photo courtesy of the Center for Social Concerns**

Migration and Human Dignity

The starting point of the Church's position about migration is rooted in God's movement to us in the Incarnation and His journey into the sinful territory of our broken human existence. Jesus' life, Death and Resurrection in turn make possible our return migration to a homeland, a place where at last we will know what it means to be fully connected to God and reconciled to one another. This perspective takes for granted that this world is not our final destination but a way station that summons us to walk this road as pilgrims in a spirit of faith, hope, and love. Along this road we not only see darkly through a mirror but are also riddled by forces that constantly tear at the fabric that stitches together our human community.

As she grapples with the complex challenges posed by migration, the Church focuses first and foremost on the central human issues at stake. Though the economic costs related to migration need to be addressed, the primary concern is the human costs. When migrants are asked what they find most difficult about their situation, most of them—despite the grueling physical journeys they take—do not talk about the physical hardships but the deeper insults to their human worth. They may go without food as they stow away on trains and buses. They may gasp for air as they hide in cargo containers of ships. They may thirst for water as they cross the vast stretches of desert. They may suffer in the mountains amid cold and snow. But as difficult as these hardships are, many migrants often say that no physical suffering is worse than being treated as if you were a dog, as if you were not even a human being, as if you were no one to anyone. The reason why the Church cares so much about the issue of migration is because migrants are so frequently deprived of their God-given human dignity.

Consequently, the Church invests much of her energy trying to respond to the injustices migrants face. At the central office of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C., more than one hundred of their three hundred employees work on migration issues. The United States resettles more refugees than any other country in the world. Through various agencies like Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities, the Catholic Church resettles more refugees than any other organization in the United States, meaning that the American Catholic Church resettles more refugees than all other world organizations, as many as 20,000 per year.

In addition to resettling refugees, the Church also gives a great deal of attention to the plight of undocumented, economic migrants. In response to the challenge of immigration, the bishops from the United States and Mexico published a joint document in 2003 called "Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope," marking the first time that a Church document was jointly issued by two separate countries. This initiative flowed out of Pope John Paul II's vision of a "globalized solidarity" manifested through closer ties among the Americas, especially among those left out of the benefits of the current economic order.

The Church recognizes that human dignity is integrally related to work, so as she responds to the personal struggles of migrants, she addresses structural issues that impact their situation. The root causes of economic migration stem principally from underdevelopment and unemployment; thus, part of the Church's advocacy effort focuses on obtaining more work visas. But more visas are not enough. Because these workers also have families whose welfare depends on their employment status, the issue of migration takes on a social component in addition to the economic considerations, and the Church's efforts encompass both facets of this complicated issue.

This social consideration is what often drives migrants to leave their home country. Family members need food, clothing, shelter and medicine, and the problems of underdevelopment and unemployment keep workers from finding sufficient employment to make ends meet. Not uncommonly, a member of the family travels north to find work. When they are unable to obtain visas because they are unskilled laborers, they often resort to crossing the borders without official documentation. In the context of my own pastoral

work in rural Mexico, I was struck by the number of villages inhabited only by women and children. Most of the men were north, looking for work, while most of the women and children stayed behind. In these villages, migration causes the disintegration of families—the most basic cell of society. It is this social disintegration that greatly concerns the Church, because its costs to the human family are enormous.

Migration and the Incarnation

The Church cares about migration because the issue mirrors its own story. Migration is in our spiritual genes. From the call of Abraham to the Exodus, from Exile to Return, from the birth of Jesus to His Ascension, from Jesus' call to the disciples to “follow Him,” to His sending them out into all nations, the theme of movement and migration are interwoven into the fabric of our journey with and to God. In fact, the Second Vatican Council refers to the Church's own self-identity as that of “pilgrims in a strange land” (*Lumen Gentium*, §7). We come from God and we are called to return to God, and from beginning to end the Scriptures reveal to us a God who migrates to His people, eliciting a response in faith to a homeward journey.

Beyond political pragmatism and economic efficiency, the inspirations for the Church's teaching come from its awareness of the gratuity of God manifested in His migration to us in the Incarnation. Another way of saying this is the Church's position is guided by a different notion of the economy. The Church realizes that migration does not have to do principally with a monetary system but fundamentally with how the goods of the earth are arranged. The Greek word *oikonomia* does not refer principally to financial transactions but to how one arranges a household. Subsequently, the Church's concern is directed towards how the whole household of God is arranged. At the very least, this means that each human being within this planetary household should have the minimum necessary for living a dignified life. This also means that the economic systems of the world should be ordered to the good of all people and not just the benefit of a privileged few. There is much to think about in the current order of things

and its asymmetry with the designs of a loving Creator. At present, 19 percent of the world's people live on less than a dollar per day. 48 percent live on less than \$2 per day. 75 percent live on less than \$10 per day. 95 percent live on less than \$50 per day. The top 1 percent has as much wealth as the poorest 57 percent, and the three richest people have as much as the poorest 48 nations.¹ These disorders are rooted in unjust structures, but as the Second Vatican Council observed, they are also rooted in the disorders of the human heart (*Gaudium et Spes*, §10). Migration, rightly understood, is not a problem in itself but a symptom of much deeper imbalances.

Arguments about the economic, political and social implications of migration must first find a reference in the human face of the migrant, or else the core issues at stake become easily become distorted. If we cannot see the human face of the migrant, then nothing else will matter. To put it another way, the bishops have insisted that the economy be made for human beings and not human beings for the economy. The bishops recognize that one of the fundamental ways through which society must be ordered is according to economic justice, which measures the health of an economy not in terms of financial metrics like Gross National Product or stock prices, but in terms of how the economy affects the quality of life in the community as a whole (*Economic Justice for All*, §14).

One area of migration that people often find problematic is the issue of legality. Not uncommonly people say, "I have no problem with immigrants but just that they have come illegally." Underneath this objection is a valid concern for the rule of law. When we look at countries in other parts of the world where the judicial systems are corrupt, and violent social upheaval is great, we come to appreciate all the more the necessity of the rule of law. The lawlessness of cartels within Mexico is but one example of what happens when the binding role of a legal system loses its coherence. But when it comes to immigration, it is important to see there is more to the law than a civil ordinance that requires punishment when there is a transgression.

19%

OF THE WORLDS POPULATION
LIVE ON LESS THAN

\$1 /day

48%

OF THE WORLDS POPULATION
LIVE ON LESS THAN

\$2 /day

75%

OF THE WORLDS POPULATION
LIVE ON LESS THAN

\$10 /day

95%

OF THE WORLDS POPULATION
LIVE ON LESS THAN

\$50 /day

From a theological perspective, different laws are at work in the problem of immigration, and changing enforcement policies alone is not enough to achieve comprehensive immigration reform. Thomas Aquinas distinguished four kinds of laws: 1) natural laws, 2) civil laws, 3) divine laws, and 4) eternal laws. While the political debate deals mostly with civil laws, the Church is concerned with these other laws as well. While the Church has concern for the national common good of respective countries, she is also concerned with the universal common good of all of God's people. With regard to immigration, natural laws deal with parents needing to feed their families; civil laws pertain to ordinances utilized by society for the common good. Divine laws, known through Scripture, relate to the Gospel imperative to provide for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and estranged; eternal laws deal with how God keeps the universe in motion. When these laws interrelate in such a way that one form of law connects to the other, justice flourishes. However, when civil laws exist that exclude the poor without any regard for issues of natural law like underdevelopment, injustice abounds. In some cases, injustice can become legalized when the structures of society enrich the privileged few and exclude the needy. To clarify, the Church does not argue for open borders. The social teaching recognizes that there is a need and a duty to protect national borders, but it does not see this as an absolute right. The Church recognizes that the needs of distributive justice must be taken into account as a government formulates its border policies and enacts its laws.

Because we confuse illegality with criminality, we end up wasting the efforts of enforcement officials on those who are looking for work, and prosecuting those whose only crime at its core has to do with providing for their families. It is striking that some who are scandalized by migrants breaking civil laws are not proportionally more scandalized by the living and working conditions in which migrants find themselves. Very often our perspectives about immigration have more to say about us than about migrants.

To be clear, there is a need for enforcement at the border, especially among the cartel violence that has skyrocketed in the last few years. But the tragedy of the border now is that many of our resources are directed toward chasing down those who are simply looking for work. The Church teaches that the ideal arrangement is for migrants to stay in their homeland, but when there are not sufficient conditions for a dignified life, the Church argues that migrants have a right to look for work, even if this search entails crossing borders without official documentation.

Migration and Conversion

When I was about eight years old, I came across a provocatively-titled pamphlet from a Church community. It read: “Did you know that you could miss heaven by eighteen inches?” It went on to say that the distance between the head and the heart of most people is only eighteen inches. The point of the pamphlet was that, more than just a mental concept, God is a mystery who invites us to encounter Him in the depths of our souls as well as our intellect. In a similar way, Native American elders hold that the long journey of life is the one from the head to the heart and back to the head again. I would add that the borders and barriers we erect along the inner road of the heart are more obstinate and difficult than any of those along the borders of nation states. The deeper challenges of the migration issue are rooted not simply in political issues but spiritual ones as well. Since spirituality has to do with what we most value, migration—seen from a spiritual perspective—means moving into a new kind of life and a new way of being in the world, which is the goal of every Christian and the hope of all who believe.

Nothing is more needed in immigration than a new imagination about who we are before God and before the injustices of the modern world. When John the Baptist opened the way for Christ in the desert, he called people to repent because the Kingdom of God is at hand. The word repentance has such heavy overtones today that it is not always easy to grasp its significance. But at its core it calls not only for a change of heart but

also a change of thinking, taking on a new vision of life and allowing one’s whole imagination take shape not according to the logic of political pragmatism or economic utilitarianism but according to God’s grace. We might say that repentance means migrating in a new direction with one’s life. Learning to see as God sees and to move over into His way of thinking is one of the most central ways of participating in the life of God and human transformation.

The Church cares about immigration because immigration is central to her own identity. One only need to visit the National Shrine of the Basilica of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception—the Mother Church for U.S. Catholics—to see how much immigration has shaped the Church’s development in the United States and in turn how migrants have shaped the spiritual, devotional, and apostolic life of American Catholics. The Shrine has side altars dedicated to many of the ethnic groups that left their homelands and came to the United States looking for new opportunities.

In the end, the Church’s concern about migrants aims at promoting a Eucharistic community that fosters human solidarity. Since so much of the debate around immigration stems from fear, the Church challenges people not to let themselves be governed by fear, especially fear of those perceived as “the other.” The movement of divine life into a human body is the ultimate migration into the space of “otherness” and one that undergirds many reflections on migration from a theological perspective.

Conclusion: Migration and Christian Solidarity

Thomas Aquinas speaks of *exitus et reditus*, the notion that we come from God and are called to return to God. We believe that in the face of the sinful human condition that road-blocked our return migration, God, in Jesus, so loved the world that He migrated into the far and distant territory of our broken world so that we, in turn, could migrate back to our homeland. This means that migration is not about “us” citizens and “those” foreigners but about all of “us,” who are pilgrims in this world. As St. Paul described it: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). Paul urges Christians not to limit their sense of citizenship to the political realm of this world but to see the land that lies beyond us at the end of our earthly migration. Augustine would reiterate that our earthly life is one of “resident aliens” and that we are just passing through this world in route to our true homeland.

Even so, not a few people remain walled in constrictive notions about migration, and it remains one of the fundamental tasks of the Church’s mission to break down the walls that divide, alienate, exclude, discriminate and dehumanize. Some seek to break down these barriers in creative ways along the border. One community decided to have a volleyball game with respective teams on both sides. Another held a picnic and shared food between the holes in the fence. And in various communities, some hold Eucharistic liturgies where the congregation joins the altar together from both sides of the border wall. This Eucharist is not simply a political statement but an eschatological and a social one, stating not only that these walls will come down when Christ comes again but also that we are already united because of who we are as the Body of Christ.

Migration is not simply a social, political and economic matter but a theological and spiritual issue as well. According to professor Bill Ong Hing, we deport something of our souls when we fail to welcome the stranger (see *Hing’s Departing Our Souls: Values, Morality and Immigration Policy*). Not only do the walls of self-security not keep us truly safe, but in the process of erecting those walls, we lose touch with our own vulnerability in this earthly sojourn and most of all our interconnectedness with the Body of Christ. Our fundamental identity rests not on the creed of a nation but on who we are before God.

The presence of a new wave of immigrants brings new challenges. As a birth process it inevitably brings pain but also it brings new life as well. For example, as Latino immigrants to the United States bring the riches of their culture, they also bring a strong tradition of devotion, faithfulness and family-centeredness that transforms and enriches the Church. In their ability to believe in God despite the unbelievable trials they endure, immigrants hold an important key not only to a nation’s strength but also to the Church’s renewal.



¹ For more on these statistics and their sources, see Daniel G. Groody, “Globalization, Spirituality and Justice: Navigating a Path to Peace,” Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 3-10.