

Crossing Borders: A Moral and Legal Challenge

By Most. Rev. Ricardo Ramirez, C.S.B. On December 3, 2014 In American Politics,Culture,Society and Politics,Uncategorized

At the annual border Mass this year at Sunland Park, New Mexico, and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Yoryet Lara age 12, and her 10 year-old sister, Jocelyn, were able to greet their mother but only with the palms of their hands pressed against the border fence that separated them. Their mother, Trinidad, once lived illegally in the United States in El Paso, Texas. She was employed, paid her bills, and never got in trouble, until she was stopped seven years ago for running a stop sign. She was later deported.

As they met at the fence the mother sobbed, "Don't cry, my queens, don't cry. I love you all very much my daughters."

"Mommy, I miss you! Ay Mommy!" said Jocelyn.

This sad incident is but one example of the plight of immigrants, not just in the United States, but around the globe. In 2013 the United Nations reported there were 232 million immigrants world-wide. Pope Francis, in his recent address to the VII World Congress of the Pastoral Care of Migrants, referred to the pain felt by migrants when they leave their countries of origin: "We find the effects on infants and young people who grow up without one or both parents, and the risk of marriages failing due to prolonged absences."

When U.S. President Obama announced deportation relief for four million immigrants, he was reminded by immigration advocates that during his administration two million have been deported. His executive action will protect parents, as well as those who came to the U.S. as children and others with long-standing ties to the country, from being forced out of their homes.

The executive action is not a permanent solution to the immigration problem, since the next president could issue an order to abolish the Obama plan. A permanent solution would be for Congress to pass legislation to fix the immigration situation.

The crisis in the Middle East has exacerbated the refugee numbers in the region. The November 2014 report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) shows that there are now 3,247,530 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and North Africa. In Lebanon alone refugees are one fourth of the country's population. With 6.5 million displaced persons within Syria itself, the total number who have left their home in Syria total over 9 million. Tens of thousands are seeking asylum in Europe, where some nations have pledged to receive refugees.

THE IMMIGRANT

The typical immigrant who enters the U.S. from its southern border is usually Latin American, mostly from Mexico and Central America. Immigrants are very special people. Those who migrate are courageous, intelligent and are willing to sacrifice the comfort of their homeland, their native language and human support system and uproot themselves in search of a better life for themselves and their children. They are highly motivated, their family bonds and work ethic are exceptionally strong.

These newcomers bring with them faith-driven values and will find in churches something of which they left behind. The Catholic Church often serves as a refuge as they encounter new, strange and bewildering surroundings. They are generally anxious to be invited to be part of a community to which they wish to

contribute. Many have been active lay leaders back home and they bring their experiences as evangelizers, catechists, musicians and youth ministers.

THE LAW

Current immigration law, most agree, is in desperate need of reform. Unfortunately, reform means different things to different people. For some, immigration reform means tightening up the border, practically closing the border, and others, such as Church advocates, favor a more benevolent approach. The law, as it stands now, allows relatively few immigrants to enter the country legally. Many of those who enter illegally do so after they have attempted to enter through legal channels.

The fact is that the requirements are so stiff and so few visas are available that those who desperately need to enter our country do so without proper documentation. Our system contains only 5,000 permanent visas for unskilled laborers to come to the United States, but the demand for their work is much higher, since as many as 300,000 undocumented people each year are absorbed into the U.S. workforce. An estimated 30% of those counted among the undocumented entered the country legally — with tourist or visitor visas — but have overstayed their presence. Many of these are from Europe and other parts of the world.

The biggest tragedy of our current system is that families are separated: husbands from wives and parents from children. Even when immediate family members are citizens and are able to bring in their spouses or children, the wait is as long as eight or nine years.

Proponents of a closed border immigration policy claim that undocumented immigrants are draining our social services. Most studies show that, although at an early age immigrants consume more than they contribute, over a lifetime they are net contributors to our economy through the taxes they pay, the goods they produce and consume, and their labor. Moreover, legal immigrants do not qualify for welfare or health care for the first five years of their residency in the United States, while undocumented immigrants never qualify for such benefits. Yet undocumented immigrants pay billions in income taxes each year and at least \$7 billion in Social Security taxes, helping to sustain Social Security for the baby-boomer generation.

Economic factors also drive opposition to immigration reform. Employers are required to contribute to Social Security and Medicare based on an employee's wage and many employers who hire undocumented workers do not pay these taxes. They would also be required to pay the minimum wage, and be subject to fair labor and employee safety requirements.

POPE FRANCIS AND IMMIGRATION

Pope Francis, in his address to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on November 25, 2014, said, "...the contemporary world offers a number of challenges requiring careful study and a common commitment, beginning with the welcoming of migrants, who immediately require the essentials of subsistence, but more importantly a recognition of their dignity as persons."

Speaking to the European Parliament, he gave ample attention to the issue of immigration: "...there needs to be a united response to the question of migration. We cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a vast cemetery! The boats landing daily on the shores of Europe are filled with men and women who need acceptance and assistance...Only if Europe is capable of adopting fair, courageous and realistic policies which can assist the countries of origin in their own social and political development and in their efforts to resolve internal conflicts, will it be able to confront the problems associated with immigration...We need to take action against the causes and not only the effect."

The Pope reveals high emotion when it comes to the pain of immigrants. On July 8, 2013, he travelled to the small island of Lampedusa off the coast of Italy, to commemorate the thousands of migrants who have died crossing the sea from North Africa.

The choice of Lampedusa for his first official trip outside Rome was highly symbolic for the pontiff, who said news reports of the deaths of desperate people trying to reach a better life that had been like “a thorn in the heart.” He referred to a selfish society that has slid into “the globalization of indifference.”

“We have become used to other people’s suffering, it doesn’t concern us, it doesn’t interest us, it’s none of our business!” he said during his homily from an altar built from an old fishing boat.

He also had harsh words for human traffickers who he said profited from the misery of others and asked pardon for “those, whose decisions at a global level have created the conditions which have led us to this drama.”

U.S. BISHOPS’ TEACHING ON IMMIGRATION

The U.S. bishops have been long time and consistent advocates for immigration reform and have followed the tradition of welcoming the stranger. In 2003 the U.S. and the Mexican bishops issued a joint statement, Strangers No Longer – Together on the Journey of Hope. Together we said that persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland. In other words, they have the right not to migrate. Further, we stated that persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families, while sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. However, the Church, along with other members of our democratic society, has the right to call for change in laws, some of which violate basic human dignity imbued by the Creator.

The U.S. bishops hold that the broken U.S. immigration system contributes to the exploitation of migrant workers in the workplace; their abuse by ruthless smugglers; and their deaths in the desert as they seek to find work to support their families.

Comprehensive immigration reform would eliminate a chaotic system and protect the basic dignity, and lives, of our brothers and sisters. It would require those who have broken the law to pay fines and taxes, learn English and take their places in the long line to have a chance to become U. S. citizens. This is not “amnesty,” which is generally defined as granting a benefit without anything in return. This “path to citizenship” is in the best interests of migrants, who are able to become full members of their communities, and our nation, which will continue to benefit from their contributions without sacrificing our long-held values as a nation of immigrants: freedom, fairness and opportunity.

The support of the U.S. bishops for immigration reform is not because the majority of immigrants at this point in our history are Catholic. The Catholic Church heeds Our Lord’s call, “For I was a stranger and you welcomed me” Mt 25: 35. “Welcoming the stranger” means welcoming all children of God, regardless of their ethnicity, national origin, race or religion. This is evident in all of the social-service programs of the Catholic Church, which base their outreach on “need,” not “creed.”

As a global institution, the Catholic Church believes that the most humane and effective long-term solution to irregular immigration is economic development in poorer countries. This would allow people to remain in their native countries and support their families in dignity. This is the Church’s answer to a border wall, which will not prevent irregular migration over the long term. The Church believes that migration should ultimately be driven by choice, not necessity.

Making changes to the legal immigration system will help ease pressure on our border by taking undocumented immigrants out of the enforcement equation, freeing up law enforcement to focus upon those who are here to harm us — drug smugglers, human traffickers, and would-be terrorists — and not those simply looking for a job

WHAT THE U.S. CHURCH IS DOING

That the majority of immigrants are Catholic makes it more real and gives a face to the immigration question for many Catholics. Many immigrants are present in our service programs, health care centers, schools and parishes.

They benefit from Catholic Charities, St. Vincent de Paul Society, and immigration legalization and citizenship services. The largest department at the U.S.C.C.B. is Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) which, together with Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (C.L.I.N.I.C.), work indefatigably processing thousands of migrants and refugees towards legalization. MRS has a long standing program to re-settle refugees in the U.S.

The mission of C.L.I.N.I.C. is to enhance expand delivery of legal services to indigent and low income immigrants principally through diocesan programs. Its network comprises over 196 diocesan and other programs with 290 field offices in 47 states. The network employs about 1200 immigration attorneys and accredited paralegals who serve roughly 600,000 low income immigrants each year.

Last summer 60,000 accompanied and unaccompanied children came to the U.S. border, mainly from Central America, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. There are several reasons why these children and their families desired to leave their homelands. Currently these countries are experiencing widespread violence perpetrated by gangs and drug cartels. Children are forced to participate in drug trafficking and other crimes. These countries are also experiencing lack of economic and educational opportunities for young people.

As these children arrived at our borders they were apprehended by the Border Patrol, and if they had relatives in the U.S. they were given temporary legal passage into the country. This is where the Church came in. Parishes all along the border on the U.S. side welcomed these children, and sometimes their mothers, provided them with showers, warm meals, clothing and the means to contact their relatives in the U.S. Their relatives would in turn send them money or tickets to travel to join them. The local parishes received donations of food, clothing and money to assist these refugees. In most places, the response was most generous.

Earlier this year a group of U.S. bishops went to the U.S.-Mexican border at Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico to celebrate a Mass to give attention to the need for comprehensive immigration reform. I was among the various bishops who celebrated the Eucharist. Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston was the main celebrant. We were reminded of the Pope's visit to Lampedusa by the Cardinal, who said this border was our Lampedusa. The most moving moment was at communion when the bishops reached through the cracks of steel fence to give communion to the people on the Mexican side of the border.

HOSPITALITY

As the history of salvation unfolds in Sacred Scripture, when hospitality is offered wonderful things happen. In fact salvation history begins with the hospitality of Abraham. Abraham and Sarah offered a sumptuous banquet to the three mysterious visitors, whom Abraham recognized as a visit from the Lord. As a result of

that gesture of hospitality, Abraham and Sarah are promised a child and the rest is history, salvation history that is. Thus the promise of God that Abraham was to be the father of the People of God is fulfilled.

In the Gospels, when hospitality is offered, wonderful things also happen. Jesus is either offered hospitality or he offers hospitality. At the wedding feast at Cana, as a result of the hospitality offered to Jesus and his mother, a stunning miracle happens with water changed into choice wine. When the Samaritan woman is offered living water, she becomes the first evangelizer in the Gospel of John.

When Jesus hosts the 5,000 and more on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the five loaves and two fishes are multiplied in order to feed everyone with abundant leftovers for people to take home. When Jesus invites his apostles to the Last Supper, and they accept his invitation, he gives to all believers the gift of the Eucharist. Yes, wonderful things happen when hospitality is offered.

And so it is with immigrants: when our Church and our country receive and welcome immigrants and refugees we are blessed. Already we see this in the U.S. Church. New life, excitement and hope are among the treasures new immigrants, many of them Roman Catholic, are taking the place of the large numbers of those who have left the Church. A significant number of seminarians, young priests and permanent deacons are immigrants or sons of immigrants.

The best way to welcome and offer hospitality in our country is to bring about the indispensable comprehensive immigration reform. We yearn for the day when Yoryet and Jocelyn will be able to embrace their mother and live together again.