

EUCHARIST WITHOUT BORDERS: THE CHURCH'S VISION FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM

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INTRODUCTION

Every year on All Souls Day, November 2, the People of God from the Mexico side of the border and from the United States side, gather at the fence that divides our two countries at Anapra, New Mexico, to celebrate the Eucharist. Priests and bishops from both countries concelebrate a Mass. Two tables are aligned on each side of the fence; although we cannot be exactly together, we can at least see each other and at the sign of peace, we are able to place our palms against the fence and touch. We may be barred from physical unity, but another kind of unity is celebrated, that unity that only Eucharist can achieve:

*“One bread, one body, one Lord of all,
one cup of blessing which we bless.
And we, though many, throughout the earth,
we are one body in this one Lord.”*

Every year the numbers at this Mass grow, certainly because the need to give and receive solidarity becomes more necessary. On the Mexican side, the violence goes on relentlessly; on the U.S. side, there is another kind of violence, the verbal abuse against immigrants and laws that go contrary to human rights and human decency. We know that we on our side have to bear a great deal of responsibility for the violence in Ciudad Juárez and other areas in Mexico, because of the insatiable demand for illegal drugs.

The fence at which the Eucharist without borders is celebrated betrays the many aspects of our common ground:

“the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as (we) were called to the one hope of (our) calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4: 3-5).

This common faith is the strongest element that unites us, that faith which transcends differences in language, race, cultures and political history. It is this oneness which provides hope for those who have no human reason to hope and nowhere else to turn for support. On both sides of the border we feel each other's agony, each other's pain, each other's anguish, each other's sorrow and grief. They, on account of the extreme violence of the drug wars and poverty; we, on account of seemingly unending wars and a government that is becoming increasingly less caring, less compassionate and which makes life ever more difficult for the little people, among whom we count immigrants.

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 and desire to contribute in any way, great or small, to the community that receives them. Many have been active lay leaders back home and bring their experience as evangelizers, catechists, musicians and youth ministers.

THE BORDER

The locale where the Border Mass is celebrated is more or less in the middle of the long stretch between the San Diego/Tijuana area to the Brownsville/Matamoros area. Geographically, the terrain, flora and fauna and climate vary, yet there are some characteristics that are held in common all along the border. It is the people along the border that are of a special kind. They are beautiful because of their deep-seeded faith and toughness of character. Especially along the desert areas, life can be very difficult with extreme heat in the summer and extreme cold in the winter. I have heard that the flora and fauna of the Chihuahuan desert, which extends into the U.S. Southwest from the state of Chihuahua has more variety in its flora and fauna than is found in New England. The Sonoran Desert, which spreads from the northern state of Sonora to the southern part of Arizona is unique because of the beautiful and stalwart Sahuaro cactus.

Some claim that in Texas, Mexico begins with San Antonio and ends in Monterrey. In our area, you could say that the Mexican border begins in Albuquerque and ends in Chihuahua. This area that extends from the southwest U.S. into northern Mexico is referred to by some writers as “Mexamerica.” Before the violence across the border became so intense, there was frequent traveling back and forth by residents of both countries. Now, much of that has ceased.

In point of fact, there has always been a great deal of violence along the border. Moisés Sandoval, renown historian of Hispanics in the Church provides the following interesting facts about the border:

- From 1848-1904 the border was wide open. The traffic then was southbound, caused by great violence after the U. S. conquest against Hispanics.
- Enforcement began in 1904 to keep Chinese from entering. No more than 75 agents worked along the border then.
- The Border Patrol was established in 1924 with a \$1 million budget. In 2002 the budget was 5,000 times higher.

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 for those who desperately need to enter our country do so without proper documentation. The biggest tragedy of what we have now 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 often many years.

In spite of the fact that the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was so heavily supported by churches, institutions of higher learning and other immigration reform advocates, the Act failed narrowly in the Senate after it had passed in the House of Representatives. The DREAM Act, had it passed, would have been a win-win situation for everyone. Our country would have enjoyed the service of talented young people who would have served in the military and who would have contributed to our general welfare as educated and tax-paying American citizens. With the new Congress, chances for the passage of this act appear bleak. We pray for the miracle that hearts and minds will be changed regarding this issue.

THE CHURCH

The U.S. bishops and the teachings of the Catholic Church have consistently respected the right of the sovereign to control its borders, as well as the rule of civil law. However, the Church, along with other members of our democratic society, has the right to work to change laws which are believed to violate basic human dignity, 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. The main reason so many enter our borders illegally is because there are insufficient visas under the current system to come legally. 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. In point of fact an estimated 30 percent 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.

Comprehensive immigration reform, which the U.S. bishops support, would eliminate a chaotic system and protecting the basic dignity, and lives, of our fellow 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” 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.”

The fact 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. 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.

We, as a Catholic community, directly witness the human consequences of a broken system each day, when immigrant families come to pastors and lay ministers for help for someone who has been detained or deported. The best way we can really help these families, and keep them together, is by changing our immigration laws.

The U.S. bishops do not support “open borders,” but support generous, but reasonable, immigration policies that serve the common good.

How do the bishops respond to the allegation that illegal immigration is heavily straining our government and social services?

There are several myths in this area. First of all, 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. In fact, 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.

The comprehensive immigration reform which we advocate would not only provide the undocumented legal status, but also the United States would receive even more income taxes and Social Security payments from immigrants, since they would be required to register with the government and pay their full share.

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.

BISHOPS’ STRATEGIES

Through the U.S.C.C.B. Migration and Refugee Services Office (MRS), the bishops continue what we have done for many years, a strong lobbying effort with Congress and the White House. An example of this was the impressive campaign made at Capitol Hill towards the passage of the DREAM Act.

Every year in January M.R.S. organizes a national observance of National Migration Week.

The observance began over a quarter century ago by the bishops to provide Catholics an opportunity to take stock of the wide diversity of the Church and the ministries serving them. Materials provided for parishes for the observance are an important educational resource that can be used throughout the year by individuals, families, schools, and parishes to learn about the complex issues surrounding migration.

Following the lead of Pope Benedict XVI, who is focusing on migrant families for his 2011 World Day of Migrants and Refugees message, the bishops have decided to focus on the family as a sub-theme this year. Included in this year's new material is a poster, a prayer card, and a bulletin insert that focuses on the stresses and strains that migration has on families and the affect that economic underdevelopment has in this process. In coordination with The Catholic University of America, a new educational website will focus on the important role that the Catholic Church has played in the area of refugee resettlement for nearly seven decades.

The U.S. Bishops have in place "Justice for Immigrants Campaign." The Campaign's primary objectives are:

- To educate the public about Church teaching on migration and immigrants;
- To create political will for positive immigration reform;
- To enact legislative and administrative reforms based on the principles articulated by the bishops; and
- To organize Catholic networks to assist qualified immigrants obtain the benefits of the reforms.

The updated JFI parish kit explains the USCCB's position on immigration and contains tools for parish organizing. The web site for Justice for Immigrants shares statements from State Catholic Conferences, statements and homilies of bishops on immigration. There have been postcard campaigns to Congress in English and Spanish, as well as bulletin inserts and pulpit announcements calling for comprehensive immigration reform. Parish kits include information as to how to reach out to media, tips for priests' homilies and factsheets challenging harmful myths.

THE EUCHARIST

The Border Mass is just like another other Mass. However, it takes on a special meaning because of the place where it is celebrated and the reason for its celebration. Because it is celebrated on All Souls Day, those who have died along the border are especially remembered. At first, those remembered were the ones who had died crossing the border. Later, the hundreds of disappeared women along the border were commemorated. Now, the deceased due to the drug wars are prominent in the minds of those who attend the Mass.

I will mention those instances in the Mass that have a special significance at the border.

Penitential Rite: Here, what come to mind are unfair immigration laws that are often implemented with disrespect of the dignity of the human person. During the Penitential Rite, we ask for God's forgiveness for the injustices and the violence that occur in our country against immigrants. We also ask God to forgive Mexico, which is also responsible for the violence suffered by Central Americans and others who attempt to reach the American border and enter

the U.S. In the joint letter which the U.S. and Mexican bishops issued several years ago, atrocities against immigrants were mentioned as occurring in both countries.

Liturgy of the Word: It is especially in the preaching of the homily that the opportunity is there for words of encouragement and hope. The Mass takes place practically at the base of Mt. Cristo Rey. At the top of this mountain is a statue of Christ the King, and I sometimes make reference in my homily as to what Christ sees from the cross. From the cross, his eyes gaze on things which sadden him and also things which meet with his approval.

Presentation of gifts: At this moment in the Mass, individuals approach both altars with similar symbolic gifts

- Crosses: Symbolizing the faith that so many share, regardless of what side of the border they are, the faith the strengthens the immigrant throughout his or her trying journey
- Image of Our Lady of Guadalupe: Symbolizing Our Blessed Mother who offers protection to those on the journey and comfort to fragmented families
- Flags: Symbolizing the countries that are both victims and perpetrators of this travesty
- Tennis Shoes: Symbolizing the only mode of transportation so many immigrants have across the harsh, unrelenting elements of the desert
- Food and Water: Symbolizing the basic necessities of the immigrant making the journey
- Backpacks: Symbolizing all the immigrant brings with him or her on their journey, challenging situations driving them from their homes, hope for a new future, and skills and talents to share when they arrive in their new home
- Other Symbols in Response to Current Events:
 - This year the image of Arizona: Symbolizing Arizona's SB 1070, which further divides families and denigrates the immigrant

The Eucharistic Prayer: Because this prayer is addressed to God the Father, we are acknowledging that we are all daughters and sons of God and that we all deserve the respect of our human dignity since we are all made in the image and likeness of God. It is at the consecration that God acts as an immigrant, because he enters into our world as the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of our Lord. We, in turn, migrate into God's realm as we reenact and re-present the death and resurrection of Christ. After the consecration, we pray the *anamnesis*, the prayer to the Holy Spirit for unity among all peoples. This was, after all, the last and deep desire of Jesus on earth:

"Father, that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in me and I am in You" (Jn. 17:21).

"Through Him, with Him, and in Him": At this moment, what runs through my mind is that I am offering Jesus to the Father, and at the same time, I am offering ourselves with Jesus, with all our joys, laughter, achievements, hopes and dreams, but also our sorrows, tears, failures, fears, and frustrations.

Our Father: The Our Father again reminds us that we are all equal children of the one Father. This one Father does not want his children doing violence to one another nor to practice any kind of injustice. He also wants his children to respect and live in peace with each other.

Sign of Peace: The ugly fence that separates us makes it impossible to give one another an embrace, *el abrazo*, so we must be content with just touching with the palms of our hands and smiling because, under the circumstances, this is all we can do, yet the joy of the moment knows no bounds, and nothing can prevent us from sharing the joy of being together.

Communion: We eat of the same Body and drink of the same Blood of Christ. Although there are two tables, we are still consuming the same food and receiving the same gift of divine

life in our hearts. Since the Eucharist celebrates what we are and what we have accomplished, we are also reminded of the challenges yet ahead of us: a world that is in keeping with God's plan. At Eucharist we accept that the authentic human yearnings of the heart happen to coincide with the deepest yearnings of God for his children in the world.

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 Jesus' story as redacted in the Gospels, when hospitality is offered, wonderful things also happen. Jesus either is 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 indispensable, comprehensive immigration reform.

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