

“FOR I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME”

**Keynote Address
Archdiocese of Hartford
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I will begin with the story that unfolded last week at our Pastoral Center. I will call them José, María, and their two baby sons. They arrived at our doors seeking help to get to their destination in Albuquerque, about 200 miles from Las Cruces. We found that they needed some emergency help, so my staff right away brought them warm clothing, food and someone even provided a stroller for the younger baby.

The couple could not have been much older than twenty and had come, like so many thousands, across the border illegally. I have no idea how they got across a heavily-guarded border with two young children. After hearing their story we decided they should really go back home, because traveling north, attempting to avoid the Border Patrol and with hardly any money, and with two small children, was simply too dangerous. I don't know if we convinced them.

From this case we can see how difficult it can be to welcome the stranger in our time and in our place along the Mexican-American border.

Today our borders and ports of entry are driven by the fear of terrorism. It is not a good time for strangers. Strangers are feared, mistrusted and are more often than before, treated as if they were guilty before they prove their innocence. I travel quite a bit and go through the now familiar airport security gates. I have gotten to dread them. Even with my Roman collar, I am not forgiven the thorough screening including removing my shoes. I no longer wear a medal around my neck and try to remember not to wear suspenders. As a person of a darker complexion, I guess they think I am going to blow up a plane. (The story of Bishop Tagle.)

One of the clearest and strongest mandate in the teachings of Jesus is found towards the end of the gospel of Matthew: “For I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (v.35). What makes this verse and those following so compelling is that Jesus identifies concretely with the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, the naked and the sick. This is not the only time in Scripture that a divine person makes of himself a stranger.

The beginnings of the story of our faith begins with God appearing as, not one but *three* strangers, to our father in faith, Abraham and his wife Sarah. They extend a bounteous hospitality to the three strangers: a whole calf and a bushel of wheat. The next day Abraham and Sarah are rewarded with the promise that they will have a son, even in their old age. The stories of strangers who bear God's message and presence occur over and over again in the scriptures.

We recall the story of Joseph of the Old Testament and how he was sold into slavery, wound up a stranger in Egypt and eventually became the savior of his family.

The people of Israel became strangers, also in Egypt, and later, in their journey to freedom crossed the desert as strangers. They are later often reminded of their history as aliens: “For the Lord, your God, is the Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites, accepts no bribes, who executes justice for the orphan and widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you, too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (Dt. 10:17-19). In the detailed laws in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Israelites were mandated to allow aliens to glean the fields after the harvest and to tithe for their benefit (Lv. 19:9 and Dt. 14: 28).

Later in the Old Testament we read of prophets who, as strangers, received hospitality. When hospitality happens in the scriptures, something wonderful happens.

Jesus and Mary, for example, received hospitality at the wedding feast of Cana, and that event points not only to a miracle, but to the beginning of the awesome public ministry of Jesus. It points to the glory that is to come, a glory that is to be share with every believing person.

In the gospel of John, Jesus receives the genuine hospitality of Lazarus and his family. Later that home is to experience the resurrection of Lazarus, a foretaste of the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus himself.

It is in the gospel of John that the thousands who were following Jesus are invited to sit on the grass and be fed in the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, the preview Jesus used to help his disciples begin to understand the Eucharist, as the Bread come down from heaven.

In that same gospel, when Jesus is asked, “Where do you live?,” his answer is “Come and see.” This is the invitation of invitations. This is the ultimate welcome of Jesus: come and know, with your mind and heart, with your whole being, just who I am and who you are, as a child of God and an heir to my glory. Welcome to the incredible and to the transcendent fullness of life to which you are invited to share with me!

For Jesus, for God, we are utterly other...strangers as it were. We are not like God and God is not like us, yet God invites to be part of him. In the very incarnation of Jesus Christ God invites himself into our world in order that he may, by his words and the giving of his total self, invite us to share in his divine life.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus, Mary and Joseph are themselves refugees as they journey to Egypt during the infancy of the Child Jesus (Mt. 2:15). From that account the Holy Family has come to represent the migrants and refugees of all ages and of all places. The figure of the Holy Family is a powerful symbol, one that give courage and hope to all who experience the hardships of alienation and the inhumanity of those who have to leave their native lands and the comfort of their cultures and ways of life.

What we are being called to develop in the Church in our country, is what theologians call “a mysticism of empathy.” What this means to me is the following. First of all, that we be reminded as the Israelites were: that we were once aliens, that either we, our parents, or our grandparents or ancestors, were once strangers in this land, and they experienced both the negative and the positive aspects that newcomers experience when they come here.

This also means, not only offering material and other emergency needs by way of charity, but allowing and inviting them, in the most engaging and sincere manner, to share their gifts. They bring not only their emptiness and strangeness, but in their strangeness they bring their gifts of faith and love, their experiences of family and faithful endurance, the richness of their traditions and their heritage of grace. If we do not do this, we will lose out on a great opportunity to strengthen the witness of our Church, a Church so much in need of credibility in these times of crisis. Newcomers also need to hear the grateful words of “thank you.” Gratitude given and gratitude received are indispensable in healthy human relations.

It is and will always be true: the greatest gift we can give to others is not our gifts, but the gift of helping them discover their own gifts and joyfully receive them! Yes, in their otherness, in their strangeness, in their difference, they have much to offer. Isn't that what evangelization means? Evangelization is not to be taken as the audacity of one groups of people bringing Christ to another group, as if Christ were not there in the first place. Rather evangelization is the happy meeting of two or more people and sharing their experience of the Lord. In this way evangelization is not a one way street, but the coming together of your

Christ and my Christ, in order to enrich and elevate our original limited faith experience. Welcoming the stranger or the newcomer is really welcoming Christ into our lives.

The mysticism of empathy also means establishing bonds of communion and solidarity. These concepts imply sharing, mutuality and complementarity. To be avoided are condescension and patronizing attitudes. We come to the table as equals, and none are superior nor inferior to each other. Of course if people need our help, we are to give it, but always with the attitude of sisters and brothers, as, in the words of Scripture, “strangers no longer.” We as Church have quite a challenge before us in such dehumanizing attitudes towards newcomers as cultural superiority, indifference and racism. The evangelization of our day implies a process of conversion that will lead us to see strangers, not as suspected aliens, terrorists, or economic threats, but rather, as people like us, endowed by our Creator with dignity and rights and whose faces also reflect the face of God. We can be deceived by accents, for example.

Neither must we expect the newcomer to become totally like us. When people arrive in our midst the inclination is to insist that they leave their otherness and become one of us. We want them to dress, talk, act, pray, sing, dance and eat as we do. By necessity newcomers have to adapt in some ways; for example, they have to learn English somewhere along the way if they are going to succeed or even survive, just as we would have to learn some other language were we to move to a non-English-speaking country. It is precisely because they are different that we have something to learn from them.

We, in the Diocese of Las Cruces, do not have it all together when it comes to welcoming the stranger. We are learning on the journey. We are limited in resources, whether financial and personnel. The challenges are overwhelming. But thanks to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Migration and Refugee Services, the Catholic Extension Society, the Knights of Columbus and private Catholic foundations, we are able to respond in many ways.

In the Doña County, where the city of Las Cruces is located, there are about 45 *colonias*. *Colonias* are unincorporated communities within 150 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border that lack potable water systems, sewage, safe and sanitary housing and streets. They are made up of small clusters of dilapidated houses, often third and fourth hand recreational vehicles which were never meant to be permanent homes, without any infrastructure. If you want to see the Third World without leaving the United States, come to our border area!

Most of the inhabitants of these *colonias* are legalized or legalizable, in other words, they qualify for their legal status. They are, in a way, the overflow of those from the border or interior areas of Mexico into the U.S. Most have come as a result of economic hardships caused by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). One of the problems is the importation into Mexico of subsidized farm products from the U.S. Items such as corn, sugar, rice, fruit, chickens and hogs have flooded the market and Mexican farmers are not able to sell their products. So they quit farming and try their luck in the U.S. (e.g., apples).

But some people come for the life style in the U.S. Women enjoy the newly-found freedom to study, work and succeed in ways they could not back home. Families like the farm, ranch and dairy work they find here. Those who have the ambition and courage to migrate are hard-working and have a healthy work ethic. I believe that the overwhelming majority do not come over to enjoy our welfare systems.

Religiously they are usually Roman Catholic. The first generation is especially attracted to the Catholic Church they find here, especially if Spanish is used and if they are welcomed. Yet we all know that Pentecostal churches are anxious to have them join their congregations and in this, they are succeeding. We are losing an alarming number of Hispanics to these usually charismatic congregations. Let me emphasize the positive—they are bringing the spiritual treasures of their Catholic traditions (e.g., seminarians, priests, and sisters).

Pope John Paul II calls us to welcome everyone. In his message of World Migration Day of 1995 he wrote these challenging words:

“In the Church no one is a stranger, and the Church is not foreign to anyone, anywhere. As a sacrament of unity and thus a sign and a binding force for the whole human race, the Churches the place where illegal immigrants are also recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters. It is the tasks of the various Dioceses actively to ensure that these people, who are obliged to live outside the safety net of civil society, may find a sense of brotherhood in the Christian community. Solidarity means taking responsibility for those in trouble.”

The Church has a proud tradition of responding to those in trouble. All over the world, our Church puts faith into action by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, educating the young, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger, and working for greater justice and peace. The Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education, health care, and human services in our nation. We do our part in helping people help themselves. Our Catholic schools are among the best anti-poverty programs, offering first-rate education, skills and discipline. We welcome refugees and help resettle refugees fleeing conflict and repression. Through the Catholic Relief Services we offer relief and development in more than eighty countries.

I would like to share with you a very important document that will be voted on soon by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. The document, “A Place at the Table,” has to do with a re-commitment on the part of the church to overcome poverty. We bishops feel that attention is centered on the threat of terrorism and the possibility of war. We fear that the causes in favor of the poor could be ignored. This document is an initiative to bring together Catholic teaching and experience in a renewed commitment to overcome poverty at home and abroad as a religious duty and moral imperative.

We recognize that many people have struggled. They may have jobs or farms but lack the income, health care, and other benefits to raise a family in dignity. They are working hard but not getting ahead. Their security is subject to investment decisions, market trends, world commodity prices, and other economic forces beyond their control.

In the document we point out that the Catholic church continues to be the largest non-governmental provider of education, health care, and human services. We help families and communities fight hunger and homelessness, overcome poverty and dependency, build houses, resist crime and seek greater justice. Our Catholic schools are among the best anti-poverty programs; they offer first-rate education, skills and discipline throughout our nation. We welcome immigrants and re-settle thousands of refugees fleeing conflict and repression. We offer emergency assistance and development in more than 80 countries through the Catholic Relief Services.

We say in our statement that we want to assure that everyone has a place at the table. The table we envision rests on these four institutions, our legs:

- **Families.** Every day, parents throughout the world make sacrifices for their children. Public policy and our other institutions must reward, encourage and support parents, including single parents, who make wise decisions for their children. Their hard work, their loving discipline, and their time and presence with their families are a gift, not only to their children but to our society and to our common good. They are also significant investments in avoiding or escaping poverty.
- **Community and religious institutions.** The second leg is what community organizations and faith-based institutions, including parishes and church organizations, do in areas such as social ministry, Catholic schools, Catholic charities, and projects funded by the Catholic Campaign for

Human Development. These can confront structures of injustice and build community, and they can demand accountability from public officials. Faith is a religious commitment; it is also a community resource. On the toughest problems, in the toughest, most desperate neighborhoods and villages, religious and community institutions are present and making a difference.

- **The marketplace, including business, commerce, and labor.** The private sector must be not only an engine of growth and productivity, but also a reflection of our values and priorities, an contributor to the common good. The labor movement must help the poorest workers have a voice and a place at the table where wages and working conditions are set. A key measure of the marketplace is whether it provides decent work and wages for people, especially those on the margins of economic life.
- **Government.** In the Catholic tradition, the government has a positive role because of its responsibility to serve the common good, provide a safety net for those left behind, and help overcome discrimination and ensure equal opportunity for all. The government must act when other institutions fall short in defending the weak and protecting human life and human rights.

All four legs of this table are essential; a table will fall when even one of these legs is missing. The Catholic way is to recognize the essential role and the complementary responsibilities of families, communities, the market, and government to work together to overcome poverty and advance human dignity.

At a time when our nation seeks to respond to terror and possibly pursue war, there is an urgent necessity that we invest in hope and recommit ourselves to share fairly the burdens and opportunities that come from God. The insistence of Pope Paul VI that, “if you want peace, work for justice,” is still wise counsel.

Several years ago, on Christmas Eve, I was called to our local hospital to visit a dying woman. After seeing her, I was rushing back to my home because a friend had promised he would bring me a Christmas gift. As I crossed a freeway bridge, I noticed a couple hobbling along the side of the freeway. The man was hanging on to the arm of his partner, a woman who seemed to be much younger. I passed them saying to myself, “I’ve got to get home.” Right away, however, my conscience made me do a U-turn and stopped to see if they needed a ride. They did, but they were not going to Las Cruces but rather to a town named Berino, about 20 miles south of Las Cruces. As I drove them they told me that the man had been taken by ambulance to the hospital the night before and had been released that morning. They had no ride home and had no idea how far it was to their town. I asked if they were going to hitchhike, and they said, “No, we are going to walk.”

They directed me to their street and asked me to stop in front of a nice looking home, and I remarked to them that they lived in a very nice home. They said, “No, we live in the back.” I walked with them and found that they were living in a third- or fourth-hand one-room recreational vehicle that was not meant to be used as a permanent home. There was barely enough room for a bed and a tiny stove and their few, meager belongings. I gave them all the money I had which was \$25 and told them I would return on Christmas with food and other things. I went home and there on my door was the eagerly-awaited gift. It was a check for \$25. The next day some friends and I took them food, money, and a Christmas flower. I again noticed how much older the man was than his wife. I looked at her and said, “You must really love your husband to care for him so much,” and she shouted at the top of her voice, “I just love my husband!” This incident, as you can imagine, made my Christmas, because love is what Jesus Christ is all about and his coming is a reminder that love lived out and made visible is to make God present in our world. And that is what it is all about.