

HOMILY
ECUMENICAL ADVOCACY DAYS WORSHIP SERVICE

April 23, 2018

I come today to offer you this reflection from the perspective of a pastor whose life-long ministry has taken him to work on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border and thirty-five years as a bishop along that border. I also bring the wisdom of a Church who has a long-standing tradition of protecting and defending immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. I commend you all for the advocacy work in which you are involved. The common ground of immigrants and refugees that brings you together is sacred ground, and what you do is truly God's work on earth.

Since arriving here, I have witnessed African Americans advocating for Guatemalan refugees, Filipinos for Palestinians, Panamanians for Somali, American Christian Churches advocating for Muslims from the Middle East and Fijians for Mexican immigrants. This tells me loud and clear: **THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND!**

I will begin with the story of two men and how their lives intersected. First there is Franco Tuccio, a carpenter, who lives on the island of Lampedusa, located in the Mediterranean Sea halfway between Sicily and North Africa. The island is eight miles long and is inhabited by 6,000 people. The other man is Pope Francis. The story is how providence brought them together.

The island of Lampedusa is often the site where boats filled with refugees from Africa capsize or are shipwrecked. Hundreds of people drown in the surrounding sea and their bodies float to the shore of Lampedusa. The residents of the island often have to bring the bodies ashore for proper burial. Many hundreds of bodies are never recovered. In 2016 almost 5,000 migrants lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean, which is more than three times the number who drowned when the Titanic sank in 1912.

At one point, Franco Tuccio became so saddened and frustrated at the tragedy that he his townspeople were witnessing that he could not even work. But then, on May 8, 2011, something happened that brought him a ray of light. The people of Lampedusa received word early in the morning that a ship carrying refugees was about to crash on their shore. A group of people went to their rescue, including Franco. They rescued 528 migrants. Franco gathered a few pieces of leftover wood from wrecked ships and took these to his shop.

Franco is a man of spiritual depth and theological insight. He started to see parallels between the people who died on the boats and the stories of Jesus and his disciples crossing stormy seas. Fr. Daniel Groody, C.S.C., theologian at the University of Notre Dame, went to Lampedusa to interview Franco. From the driftwood Franco started to make crosses. He told Fr. Groody, "I saw (in each cross) the life of a person, which brought me to tears. And with each cross I created I felt

like I helped restore their dignity, like I helped save the life of a person.” Fr. Groody adds that those who had been no-bodies had become some-bodies.

In the summer of 2013, an overcrowded boat of migrants capsized in the middle of the Mediterranean. Those migrants had hoped to find shelter and protection on European shores, where they could live with dignity and in peace. Eight of them survived by clinging to fishing nets of a Tunisian boat. They pleaded for help, but when the fishermen saw the migrants, they cut them loose and the eight drowned. Some 316 Somali migrants died that day. Volunteers at Lampedusa pulled more than one hundred corpses from the ocean. Hundreds more were never recovered.

Recently elected pope, Francis heard this story and expressed the desire to go to Lampedusa to make, “a gesture of closeness” and “to challenge the conscience of the world.” Even though he was told by his Vatican advisors that he should not go at this time, that he should wait a few months in order that proper arrangements be worked out, he made his own reservations on Alitalia and in a few days he was there.

He celebrated the Eucharist on an altar and an ambo constructed by Franco from the remnants of shipwrecked wood. He used a wooden chalice fashioned also by Franco.

What was the message of Francis at Lampedusa? This is what he said, “The culture of comfort, which makes us think only of ourselves, makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, an empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference... Has any one of us wept for these persons who were on the (refugee) boat? For the young mothers carrying their babies? For these men who were looking for a means of supporting their families? We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion – ‘suffering with’ others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep.”

There are other areas in the world where people forced to move because of persecution, poverty, violence or climate change, and face perilous journeys and where many encounter death. One of these areas is the desert terrain along the U.S./Mexico border, the area where I live. For several years another celebration of the Eucharist, like the one at Lampedusa, has been taking place along the Mexico/New Mexico border at a place called Anapra, on the outskirts of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas. This Mass, like the one at Lampedusa, is held to raise awareness to the dangerous drama of crossing the border and to pray for those thousands who have died over the years and continue to die each year. The Mass is concelebrated with bishops and priests saying Mass on either side of the border with altars abutting each other against the border fence. When I have presided

and preached at this Mass, I have asked forgiveness to the people on the other side for our unfair laws and inhumane treatment of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

I was appointed to the United States Commission of International Religious Freedom by the U.S. Congress in 2003 and served until 2007. The Commission was asked by Congress to do a thorough study of expedited removal of asylum seekers. We visited all major ports of entry, detention centers and met with immigration judges and lawyers. Among the many negative things we learned is how badly asylum seekers, those fleeing persecution due to political and religious reasons, are treated, not as refugees, but as criminals, and incarcerated in often inhumane institutions. This not worthy of us as a nation of immigrants!

Since 1994 approximately 7,000 persons have died along our border (according to the Inter-governmental Organization [IOM]) in the field of migration. In 2016, there were 399 border deaths and in 2017 there were 412; most die of dehydration and hyperthermia. It is estimated that 40% are never identified.

It is reported by the Border Patrol that unauthorized immigration is at its lowest level since 1972. The only increase in arrivals are unaccompanied children fleeing gang violence and drug cartels in Central America. More Mexicans have been

leaving our country in recent years than arriving at our border. When unaccompanied children arrive at our borders, the churches along the border assist them with safe and clean shelter, clothing, hot meals and communications with relatives and other sponsors to whom our government release them.

All along the both sides of the border, the churches are directly involved in assisting migrants in every way they can. There are places, such as the Kino Project in Nogales, Mexico, and the Columban Center for migrants in Ciudad Juárez, where meals are served every day. Annunciation House in El Paso has been a place of refuge or sanctuary for over thirty years. Dioceses in the U.S. offer legal immigration services and churches offer citizenship and English language classes.

Migrants coming from Central America often board a freight train called “*La Bestia*” that runs from the southern border of Mexico to the north. Migrants cling to tank and freight cars and when they go to sleep, they often fall under the wheels of the train and lose limbs or are killed. All along the route there are people from the various churches who provide water and food for those people on the train. The churches in Mexico also have *albergues* or shelters for those going through.

Back to the desert: when unauthorized migrants set out to enter into the U.S., they are often dropped off by smugglers in the desert eighty miles from the pick-up location inside the U.S. They will need two gallons of water each day and it will take

them approximately ten days to walk; this means they will need 130 pounds of water to carry. It's a miracle that some actually make a successful journey.

When Pope Francis visited Ciudad Juárez in 2016, he too said a Mass along the border. In his homily he stated “The human tragedy that is forced migration is a global phenomenon today. This crisis which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with names, stories, families. They are the brothers and sisters of those expelled by poverty and violence, by drug trafficking and criminal organizations. Being faced with so many legal vacuums, they get caught up in a web that ensnares and always destroys the poorest. Not only do they suffer poverty but they must also endure all these forms of violence. Injustice is radicalized in the young; they are “cannon fodder”, persecuted and threatened when they try to flee the spiral of violence and the hell of drugs. And what can we say about the many women whose lives have been unjustly robbed?”

Just a few days ago, Pope Francis issued a statement, an “Apostolic Exhortation,” in which he said the most stunning words regarding immigrants and refugees. The document is *Gaudete et Exultate (Rejoice and Be Glad)*. I quote, “Our defense of the innocent unborn needs to be clear, firm and passionate. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged...the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery and every form of rejection

“We often hear that the situation of migrants is a lesser issue. Some Catholics consider it a secondary issue compared to the ‘grave’ bio-ethical issues for a Christian, the only proper attitude is to stand in the shoes of those brother and sisters of ours who risk their lives to offer a future for their children. Can we not realize that this is exactly what Jesus demands of us, when he tells us that in welcoming the stranger, we welcome him? ‘When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress him...you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’”

There are some who criticize Church people, like you and me, who speak out on social justice issues, resorting to the principle of separation of church and state. We often hear people say “the church has no business in politics”. In point of fact the First Amendment guarantees the free exercise and free speech of religious institutions in public life. Separation of Church and state was never intended to silence religion from participation in public discourse concerning issues related to humanitarian and social justice issues. We have spoken in the past, we are speaking now, and we will continue to speak!

On April 3rd of this year , the White House announced plans to deploy the National Guard to the US-Mexico border to check what they argued was a growing threat of undocumented immigrants, illicit drugs, and crime from Central America.

These plans came in the wake of President Trump's expressed concerns about a so called "caravan" of migrants from Honduras who were making their way through Mexico and his claim that the United States was saddled with weak immigration laws. The impression the American people were given was that we are being invaded!

On April 6th, the border bishops of the United States and Mexico issued a joint statement expressing deep concern regarding the planned deployment of the National Guard. Although recognizing the right of states to control their borders and the importance of the rule of law, the continued militarization of the border undermines the well-being of local communities in the region.

"Seeking refuge from persecution and violence in search of a peaceful life for oneself and one's family is not a crime. Our faith calls us to respond with compassion to those who suffer, and to live in a spirit of solidarity with all human beings."

In point of fact, at the border, we are already over-militarized.

Of course we leaders in the Church are concerned about the not so beautiful wall that the current administration wishes to construct, but at this time we are most

concerned about the deportation of family members. These deportations are causing the separation of families, separating parents from each other and parents from their children. We are seeing this phenomenon all too frequently in our communities. Never before have so many in our country lived under the shadow of fear. We can do better than this in this nation of immigrants.

We are able to integrate refugees and immigrants. We've done it many times before. I recall when we received Hungarian refugees, fleeing the communist regime. I recall the thousands of Cubans that have been welcomed into the U.S. and continue to be welcomed. I recall the numerous boat people from Southeast Asia who were settled here, many with the help of our churches.

Giving us great hope, is the promulgation of two Global Compacts on immigrants and refugees to be issued next September by the United Nations. All nations are being asked to sign on to them. The Vatican is cooperating fully with this project. Unfortunately the United States has decided not to be a part of this.

I was honored to attend a meeting at the Vatican last June, when the Compacts were discussed by advocates of the Church for immigrants and refugees. I was happy to learn that some countries are exemplary in their response to those who desire to migrate into their lands, such as Canada, Germany, Italy, Uganda, Jordan and

Lebanon, among others. About one-fourth of those residing in Lebanon today are refugees.

The Vatican has published a set of twenty action points that provide welcome, protection, promotion, and integration of displaced peoples. These twenty points single out the protection and safety of people that have been pushed out of their home countries due to circumstance beyond their control. They also called for fundamental right of all people to seek an education at all levels. One of the major points is that migrants and refugees must never be returned to a country that has been deemed unsafe.

When hospitality is offered, wonderful things happen. Look at what happened when Abraham and Sarah entertained the three strangers. Abraham and Sarah didn't know who they were, they just knew they were hungry and needed a place to spend the night. We know what happened the next day, the three strangers assured their hosts that by next year, they would miraculously, at their late age in life, have a child.

With the gift of Isaac, came the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sands on the seashore. The birth of that son was the beginning of the story of salvation. And it began with that grand gesture of hospitality. Some of our churches are seeing blessing on account of the newly arrived strangers. This is true certainly in the Catholic Church in the United States.

In his interview in Lampedusa with the carpenter Franco Tuccio, Fr. Groody was inspired to create a rich symbolism of the chalice Franco carved out of the driftwood of ships that were wrecked on Lampedusa. Franco told him, “When I was making the stem of the chalice, I used a piece of wood that had a nail in it. I had to remove the nail in order to carve the stem. When I saw the hole, I imagined a hand with a hole in it. Later on, as I put the nail back in the stem, it formed a cross. The symbolism moved me deeply. I realized that the cross which is a symbol of death supported the cup which is a symbol of life.”

Fr. Groody writes that when we celebrate the Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist, the cup proclaims both the crucified Lord and the salvation offered by the risen Christ.

He says it this way, “In his own body, in his own blood, Christ’s passion reveals the way God plunges into the turbulent and stormy waters of the human condition and holds within himself the suffering of the world. Through the resurrection he disclosed that this suffering will not sink us in a final way and that fear and death will not drown all who hope in him. As his body becomes *viaticum*, food for the journey, to those who cling to him in faith, it opens the way to pass through this world to the land where there is no more suffering, no more mourning, and no more tears (Rev. 21:4).

Appropriately, Fr. Groody quotes St. Augustine who made the connection between the saving wood of the cross and our migration to eternal life. In the words of St. Augustine: “there is no means of passage to the fatherland unless born by the wood....He walked in the sea to show that there IS a way in the sea. But you who are not able in any way yourself to walk in the sea, be carried in a ship, be carried by the wood: believe in the crucified One, and you shall arrive there.”

We may be overwhelmed by the terrible human situations around the globe. What can I do? I am so small, so helpless; I have no money nor influence. Think of the hummingbird, the smallest of birds, when it flutters its wings, the whole world feels the breeze!

Don't tire of doing good; keep at it, you WILL make a difference!

I close with a prayer of Flannery O'Connor: “Oh God, my heart is full of me. Rid my heart of me and when it is empty, fill it with you! So that everything I do, everything I think, everything I imagine, will be love, for you are love. And, dear God, please make of my life, a chapter in your book of the salvation of the world!”