

Archbishop John C. Wester Hosts a Symposium on Immigration: Crossing Borders

By Archbishop John C. Wester, *People of God*, March 2016

Recently, as I stood at the podium at the Archdiocesan Symposium on Immigration, I saw a sea of faces reflecting a look of compassion, the look of hope, the look of love. I saw people who understand the reality of so many immigrants presently in our country who have escaped dire dangers. In some cases, just to save their lives.

I came away encouraged and inspired for that “look” our faithful are putting on our church and our local communities. Over 400 of us had the opportunity to engage the dialogue in a polite and kind manner in lieu of the volatile emotional discourse often seen. Together we were able to discuss the immigration issue facing our country and bring to the fore questions and themes so we can assist our country in finding solutions based on the church’s teaching.

During Pope Francis’ historic February 2016 visit to Mexico, he spoke from his heart about the poorest of the poor, our immigrant brothers and sisters. The pope and our church are in a unique position to speak on the question of immigration. Scripture is filled with references on how we are to react and respond to the stranger in our midst. We know that the Lord Himself, together with Mary and Joseph, were forced immigrants. The Magisterium of the Catholic Church through papal encyclicals and bishops’ conferences has been addressing this very issue for decades. Immigration is a moral and human issue.

My hope is that people will listen to what the church is saying about immigration, thus advancing our cause of comprehensive immigration reform. We know many will not agree and yet it is so important that we continue to **build bridges and not walls** so we can sustain our nation’s welcome and integrate people into our society. We must bring people out of the shadows and live up to our reputation as a country that welcomes people from all shores.

What does the church teach and say about immigration? Pope Francis gives us our first point: put the human being first. He doesn’t deny realities. The law is important, we need the law. It defends us and supports us as it protects our human life, dignity and freedom. But it is important to know it is the law that serves us and not the other way around. As Jesus said, the Sabbath was made for us and not us for the Sabbath. Thus, the church’s priority is always the people, the children of God. The church puts the human face on the immigrant. The church speaks with respect and the church helps us in our dialog and debate in our country to make sure that respect is foremost; thus, avoiding using terms like *illegals*, *swarms and waves*, words that conjure up fear by denoting hardened criminals, health-destroying insects or devastating floods. The church reminds us if we lose sight of the immigrant’s humanity, we risk losing sight of our own humanity. **Jesus Christ calls us to welcome the stranger in our midst. It is a Gospel mandate, not a suggestion.**

It is important to note that an emphasis on the person does not in any way mean that the church disregards the law of the land. Pope Pius XII in his 1952 encyclical *Exul Familia Nazarethena* wrote to the bishops of the United States that national sovereignty must be respected. Throughout our church’s history, our teachings are clear. Sovereign nations have a right and obligation to protect their citizens and to defend their borders. However, Pope Pius XII also teaches that this right of states is not an absolute right. In other words, those countries that have the proper resources and

capacities are morally obligated to help people who are fleeing a variety of ills in the hope of a better life.

Pope John Paul XXIII in his 1968 encyclical *Pacem en Terris* also cites that nation states have an obligation for the universal common good requiring them to welcome newcomers. When there are just reasons in favor of it, every human being must be permitted to immigrate to other countries to take up residency.

Our *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also states that rich nations have a higher obligation than poorer ones to take in immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. And our own 2003 pastoral letter by the United States Conference of Bishops, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*, represents these same themes.

Pope Francis echoed these same thoughts when speaking of the horrible crisis taking place every day in Syria. He said the present wave of migration seems to be undermining the foundations of that humanistic spirit which Europe has always loved and defended. The pope spoke against what he called a globalization of indifference that can ignore the 60 million people who are displaced throughout the world. Indeed, the church has long taught that a very important part of a sound migration policy should include not only enforcement policies but also due process protections that safeguard human dignity, human rights and human life. In addition, the enforcement elements of migration policies must be targeted, proportional and humane, thus providing for a balanced immigration policy.

Furthermore, enforcement-only policies do not work as has been borne in the last few decades. Our immigration detention system has grown more than five-fold between 1994 and 2013. In this time, we have tripled the number of detention beds, augmented the number of border patrols and built fences – all of which cost billions of dollars. Despite these facts, the number of persons detained annually increased from 85,000 persons in 1995 to over 440,000 persons in 2013. In fact, more persons passed through the U.S. Immigration Detention System each year than through the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

With all this in mind, what does the church propose as essential in any comprehensive immigration reform in our country?

Family unity. The church upholds the dignity, worth and sacredness of the family. The family is a very important gift from God; it reflects the very image of God. Families should not be fragmented by a broken immigration system. Raids can cause deep fear and mistrust; they simply do not work. The church teaches that we need to restore due process protections for our immigrants. We need to do away with the three- and 10-year barriers for reentry. Some family members wait as long as 20 years or more to be reunited with their families.

We also need to restore judicial discretion in immigration proceedings. This would allow judges to once again use their proper authority to help keep families together, particularly when they know they are not dealing with criminals, flight risks, etc. We should try to eliminate the one-year asylum filing deadline and ensure that asylum seekers are given a proper hearing. Sadly, many of our immigrants would qualify for asylum status if they had a hearing, but quite often they are not given that opportunity, and that is against the law. It is especially tragic that women and children are sometimes forced to have legal hearings without proper legal representation.

The church also calls for a path to citizenship for those who are undocumented. To me, this is a matter of justice. On the one hand, we put out a “help wanted” sign but on the other hand, we post a “no trespassing” sign for all to see. We use the needed immigrant labor and yet do not give them the basic human protection and opportunity they deserve. It is important for us to be just to those who are doing so much for us.

Provide many more temporary visas. Many immigrants do not want to stay here. They want to work and then go back to their country. An increase in visas would allow these workers to come and go safely while enabling our border agents to focus on the criminal element.

We must also eliminate or ameliorate the root causes of forced migration. The pope has underscored the need to foster increased cooperation between our countries, particularly the United States, Mexico and Central America. He reminds us we must recognize our responsibility. Our U.S. government estimates \$12-15 billion in cash passes into the hands of Mexican drug and human traffickers per year. Our Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that the drug cartels receive \$23 billion a year in illicit drug revenue. These figures do not include wire transfers. It's no wonder there is such violence and lack of regard for human life when there are such large sums of money involved. We must address these problems that exacerbate border tension. Working on eliminating third world debt is yet another such problem that needs addressing.

Pope Francis has given us a clear message saying, “Our world is facing a refugee crisis of a magnitude not seen since the Second World War. This presents us with great challenges and many hard decisions...To respond in a way which is always humane, just and fraternal. We need to avoid a common temptation nowadays: to discard whatever proves troublesome. Let us remember the Golden Rule: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (Mt 7:12).” Or as the Holy Father said in his speech to the joint houses of Congress last fall, “...if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us.”

The Catholic church has a lot to say about migration, but you and I are the ones who have to say it. We are the voice of the immigrant. It is my prayer that we will be judged well by way of our immigrants, our brothers and sisters in Christ.