

## **UNDERSTANDING THE U.S. IMMIGRATION ISSUE AND ITS RELATION TO SPIRITUALITY**

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Christians in the first century were recognized by their love for one another. They demonstrated this in a unique way by their hospitality even to those they did not know. Emperor Julian, who persecuted the Christians during his short reign (361-363 C.E.), could not ignore the fact that the “benevolence” of Christians towards strangers contributed to the spreading of Christianity in the Roman empire. This recognition impelled him to issue an edict to get his people to imitate them. What embarrassed him the most was that these enemies of the state were so generous that they not only supported their own poor but also helped the poor Romans, thus exposing how the Romans themselves did not take care of their poor! (Gomez, 2008 citing Macmullen and Lane).

The tradition of welcoming strangers from other cultures and religions was at the heart and origins of Christianity. It was their so-called “brand” name. To be a Christian was to practice hospitality to the strangers. Today Christians have unfortunately forgotten this original distinguishing mark. If hospitality was so central to the religious identity of the first Christians, it behooves the Christians today to recover and claim their original identity as a people who welcome strangers.

This paper reflects on the U.S. immigration issue presented in The Third Annual Bilingual Immigration Symposium held at the Mexican American Catholic College (MACC), San Antonio, Texas on October 9-10, 2009. Sponsored by the San Juan Diego Project and the MACC, the symposium brought together an array of resource persons who elaborated on the theme: Global Solidarity. The Archbishop of San Antonio, the Most Reverend Jose H. Gomez, shared

the U.S. Catholic Bishops' advocacy for immigration reforms. Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga of the Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, gave the keynote address entitled, "Global Village or Global Pillage?" He highlighted the effects of globalization and its death-dealing elements related to the immigration issue. After the keynote address, workshops on specific topics were conducted simultaneously by resource persons in English and Spanish languages. Participants were free to choose a topic of interest, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Topics offered were: Human Trafficking in the World and in the U.S.A., Current Public Policy on Immigration and Refugees, Immigration from Asia and Africa: Causes and Migrants' Experience Living in the U.S.A., and The Factors Driving Immigration from Latin America. The cardinal celebrated the Eucharist in the evening as a fitting culmination of the day.

This paper tries to present the student's understanding of the immigration issue in the United States of America as gleaned from the talks and materials given in the said symposium. As a religious herself, she tries to reflect on the critical challenges of immigration faced by the Catholic Church. Finally, she tries to relate the immigration issue to spirituality.

### **I. Understanding the U.S. Immigration Issue**

In his keynote address, Cardinal Maradiaga (2009) pointed out that globalization produces a new world anchored on three pillars: 1) technological development, 2) neo-liberal economic system as the only global project, and 3) the expansion of a "one idea system." Globalization has its own logic, systems, and structures. No matter how complicated and esoteric they may sound, the fruits are visible and crystal clear. While technological advances

make people in the other end of the planet connect in seconds there are no real changes important for humanity that have taken place. In fact, globalization has exacerbated the flagrant inequalities in the world and despite the production and wealth, the latter is increasingly concentrated in fewer hands. There are individuals who are richer than nation states combined! Globalization has created a world where the greediness of a few is leaving the majority on the margins of history. Societies that enjoy technological progress are manufacturing and producing exclusion. Rather than being in a global world, we are in a world that continues to be strongly divided between those who can enjoy the opportunities globalization brings, and those who are left on the margin. In effect, only the rich are globalized. Technology protects them and keeps them at a distance from the poor, who are kept subject to and working for them, because the system needs poor people to continue producing cheap misery for the rich. In short, globalization causes the poverty of so many people who, more than ever, want to leave their countries of origin to search for better life and opportunities.

Cardinal Maradiaga (2008) described that migration is not new; it is as old as humanity itself but in modern times it has acquired a magnitude and a variety of forms that characterize a more powerfully relevant phenomenon. He pointed out that among others, the Latin American countries offer a unique migratory landscape where population movements often constitute very large groups of persons belonging to the same family searching for labor markets. Poverty, agrarian depletion, low salaries, lack of future prospects and low standards of living are the most pressing factors. They involve the poor, the unskilled, and those who have little or nothing to lose by abandoning their countries of origin. While globalization has

opened up all frontiers to goods, a host of obstacles hinder the free movement of persons from countries of the South towards those of the North.

The keynote address was followed by workshops which gave concrete examples of the situation of immigrants who have no documents in this country. The cases of real people like Marta Ines, Jesus, Isidro, Engracia, and Emiliano from Latin American countries were analyzed and discussed in small groups. These cases described the heart-wrenching experiences of persons and families who migrated to the U.S. without their legal papers. They are stories of separations, abandonment, unjust labor practices, inhuman working conditions, unhygienic living conditions, extreme poverty, and grief.

The issue of immigration in this country zeroes in on how immigrants without documents are being treated. The Most Reverend Jose Gomez, Archbishop of San Antonio, calls it "the greatest civil rights test of our generation." He asserts that the right to migrate is a basic human right. If a person cannot find the necessities of life for his family, he has the right to leave his country and to seek these things in some other country. God has created the good things of this world for all, not just for a privileged few. The immigrant has dignity and human rights by virtue of his/her being a human person. He admonished that the more prosperous a country is, the more generous that country should be in welcoming foreigners. But this is not so in the United States of America. There is so much fear engulfing the nation: fear of another terrorist attack carried out by foreigners, fear that an influx of foreign workers will drive down wages, fear of losing one's job to a foreigner. The Archbishop understands and underscores the fact that the right to immigration is not absolute. The government has a right to regulate immigration, to weigh its impact on national security and economy. Immigrants have to abide

by the law and order of this country. Sadly, however, the Archbishop points out that the immigration laws in this country are clearly vindictive and obviously meant to injure and intimidate. The law is used to scare people, to invade their homes and work-sites, to break up families. Deportations break up families, leave wives without husbands or vice versa, children without parents. A policy that breaks families can only lead to greater sufferings and social problems. Millions of undocumented workers and their families are forced to live without rights at the margins of this great country (Gomez, 2008).

## II. The Challenge of Immigration Issue to the Catholic Church

The Church is asked to put an end to the scandal of injustice and dehumanization of persons by the millions. For this, Cardinal Maradiaga (2009) proposes a sustainable model by humanizing globalization through the **globalization of solidarity**. He explained that solidarity is a concrete expression of the fundamental good of sociability. It comes from the discovery of the interdependencies with our fellow human beings whom we feel inclined to help because they are persons. Solidarity is the contribution to the common good within the social interdependencies according to one's ability and real possibilities. The common good refers to the personal good of each and every member of society. It also indicates the whole series of external elements in social life that contribute to the human growth or development of persons and groups in a community. Solidarity makes it necessary to put oneself in another's place in order to discover his/her needs and try to satisfy them according to the possibilities of each situation. Solidarity encourages giving the greatest possible service to each interdependent group: making efforts to maintain jobs, making investments to create new

jobs, improving the quality of service to clients and users, helping the local community, improving the environment, contributing to social and educational initiatives. The practice of solidarity needs to respect the initiative, creativity and sense of responsibility of others without absorbing or depriving them of what they are capable of doing.

Solidarity is a detonating term that expresses in language the “solid” condition of human reality: we, human beings, form a compact reality, a bloc, and we are governed by the law of empathy and cooperation. The “Golden Rule” of charity constitutes the basic norm: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The foundation of solidarity consists in the reality of ethical empathy: knowing, feeling and taking on the human condition as a whole in which every human being has solidarity with the others. If empathy is the basis of solidarity, sharing is its apex. Solidarity is achieved by seeing to it that all human beings share in the available goods as a whole. These goods have to be divided and shared without excluding anyone in the distribution, without hoarding them at the cost of depriving others, and without discrimination. What is good for one, is meant to be shared. The goods are “of all” and “for all” (Maradiaga, 2009). The globalization of solidarity will enable people to stay in their homeland because their needs as human beings are adequately met and fulfilled.

In the light of injustice and dehumanization of persons prevalent in the reality of immigration in this hemisphere, the U.S. bishops advocate for immigration reforms, namely:

1. Bring the undocumented population in this country out of the shadows and give them a chance, over time, to achieve permanent residency and citizenship;
2. Preserve family unity by strengthening family-based immigration;

3. Create legal avenues for migration so that migrant workers in the country are able to enter the country legally and in a safe and orderly fashion;
4. Give immigrants their day in court by restoring due process protection removed in 1996 legislation; and
5. Work with neighboring countries and the international community to address the root causes of migration, so that immigrants and their families ultimately can remain in their home countries and support their families in dignity (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Media Relations, 2009).

The immigration reforms the bishops advocate are realistic, reasonable, and based on moral principles. The Church has a prophetic role to exercise: to denounce the indignities committed to persons and to announce the good news of salvation to all by Jesus. She is called to be a voice for the voiceless. She tries to listen to people, to become more sensitive to their fears, to be calm about presenting facts, to be compassionate, and to have a very reasoned and comprehensive approach to reforms. Furthermore, she has an important role in promoting hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation. She must work so that justice and mercy, not anger and resentment, are the motives behind the response to the immigration issue (Gomez, 2008).

### **III. Immigration and Spirituality**

The student did not have prior knowledge on the immigration issue in this country, hence, the new information she absorbed from the speakers is greatly appreciated and valued. She has come to realize the magnitude of the situation while taking a Spirituality course. If

spirituality is understood as a “pursuit of wholeness” (Garcia, 2000 citing Rowan Williams) then spirituality and the immigration issue are intrinsically linked. According to Daniel Groody, in the last twenty-five years the number of people on the move has doubled from 100 million to 200 million people. This is roughly the equivalent of the population of Brazil, the fifth largest country in the world. Many migrants are forcibly uprooted: approximately 30 to 40 million are undocumented, 24 million are internally displaced, and almost 10 million are refugees. The statistics presents a powerful link between immigration and spirituality. One can only imagine the dysfunction and disintegration happening in the family, the basic structure of any society, in need of wholeness, reconciliation, and healing. Much has been written about the social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of immigration, but surprisingly very little has been written from a theological perspective (Groody, <http://ncronline.org>).

From the call of Abraham to the Exodus from Egypt, and Israel’s wanderings in the desert, and later, in the experience of the Exile, the reality of migration has always been a part of our salvation history. The tradition of hospitality to strangers can be traced as far back to Abraham (Genesis 18). Abraham invited the three strangers who stood nearby in the entrance of his tent and showed them hospitality. They turned out to be angels of God! They told him the good news that the following year, Sarah, Abraham’s wife who was advanced in years, will finally have a son. The fulfillment of God’s promise of an heir was delivered to Abraham by strangers!

As Christians we believe that God became man in the person of Jesus who dwelt among us (Jn. 1). He came from heaven, left God, his father, and was born of the Virgin Mary. He went about doing good, was persecuted and crucified, but on the third day, he rose from the dead, and returned to heaven (Credo). This movement from heaven to earth makes Jesus an immigrant himself. The Prologue of John tells us that “the world did not know him, his own people did not accept him, but to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God” (Jn. 1). Genesis 18 and John 1 are very clear in saying that the acceptance of the stranger is acceptance of God himself and his promise. In the stranger, we encounter the living God. In the stranger, we experience the fulfillment of God’s promise.

Towards the end of his ministry, Jesus himself speaks: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25:31-46). The stranger among us who is hungry, thirsty, naked, ill, and in prison is JESUS himself. This alone should make us think and act accordingly in the face of a stranger. Our relationship with this stranger is akin to our relationship with God, with Jesus. For me, this is the most powerful and compelling reason why a Christian should get involved in the immigration issue. This relationship with the stranger is the incarnation of our relationship with God. As Christians we are all called to become disciples of Jesus, to become his intimate friends. Love for God, love for the person he created in his own image and likeness, is the only compelling reason we can have to deal with the immigration conflict in God’s perspective. Only with God’s love can the

human being overcome irrational fear, hatred, individualism, and greed. This implies a conversion of heart, a turning away from our small self-centered selves towards God. From this realization, I am more disposed to look at the immigration issue with an open mind and heart, to understand it, and respond to the issue as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

**Sources:**

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