

Notes on a Catholic Perspective on Immigration

8:00 AM St. Mary's Cathedral

4.16.06

I am taking the title of this talk very literally so I mostly want to reflect on a Catholic *perspective* on immigration because I think the perspective is what is missing in the oftentimes very polarizing debates that quickly degenerate into arguments about “conflicting rights” or a “common good” that are reduced to discussions about what comes to be seen as simply legal or national security issues, rather than viewing border issues from the perspective of human needs. I will touch in passing on some basic tenets of Catholic Social Teaching and of particular points of concern with regard to current pending legislation on immigration. But my main focus is that part of the Catholic tradition which supplies the “perspective” from which we view the complex issues around immigration, especially from the South into the United States. Bear in mind that where you stand determines what you see and what you hear is dependent on whom you listen to.

First and foremost, we all realize that the Catholic perspective is rooted in Scripture:

“When strangers sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The resident aliens who sojourn with you shall be to you as the native born, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God” [Lev. 19: 33f]. Bill O’Neill in his article on the Ethics of Migration policy reminds us that after the imperative to worship the one God, no command is more frequently repeated in the Hebrew bible than the reminder to care for the stranger or resident alien in our midst.

Early in Matthew’s gospel we have the story of the family of Jesus fleeing into Egypt. In the Catholic tradition, Joseph, Mary and Jesus in flight for fear of persecution and death are the “archetype” [*Exul Familia*] of every refugee family forced to leave their own country and living in exile – far away from family, friends and their own culture – for fear of persecution and death.

The Good Samaritan is a story that further illustrates our responsibility to the stranger and alien among us.

The Catholic Church reflects this central theme of scripture in its repeated affirmations that we are all “one body in Christ.” When we celebrate Eucharist – one bread, one cup – we anticipate a world where all are welcomed at the same table, all fed the same food, all treated with equal dignity.

One post-Vatican II expression of our identity as a Church is “Pilgrim People” – people on the move, migrants. This self-definition heightens the realization that as Daniel Goody notes:

Before God, we all live in the same country, we live on the same side of the fence. In reality, death is the ultimate border, the journey of faith is the ultimate migration, and God is the ultimate Promised Land. Christ teaches us that we will be able to cross over this final border to the extent that we have been able to cross over the smaller borders in this life and see our interconnectedness to each other.

The Catholic perspective is one of radical interconnectedness as human beings [Sunday's gospel of "vine and branches"] which further reinforced and expressed by more-than-metaphors such as the "body of Christ", "temple of living stones", "one Spirit and God of all"; all of these images underscore that the human story is NOT an anthology of individual narratives, but one huge swelling chorus that blends many voices into one.

The Catholic perspective is one of compassionate solidarity with the vulnerable and the weak. From that perspective, then, we may apply the principles that reflect the Church's ongoing efforts to read the "signs of the times" – one of which is the massive immigration that characterizes the contemporary world. What does that say to us about who we are and what God asks of us?

I don't think anyone captures the "Catholic perspective" on immigration or any other issue more succinctly or more poignantly than Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement:

All this can be proved, if proof is needed, by the doctrines of the Church. We can talk about Christ's Mystical Body, about the vine and the branches, about the 'Communion of Saints.' But Christ Himself has proved it for us, and no one has to go further than that. For he said that a glass of water given to a beggar was given to him. He made heaven hinge on the way we act toward Him in His disguise of commonplace, frail, ordinary humanity.

Did you give Me food when I was hungry?

Did you give Me to drink when I was thirsty?

Did you give Me clothes when MY own were all rags?

Did you come to see Me when I was sick, or in prison or in trouble?

And to those who say, aghast, that they never had the chance to do such a thing, that they lived two thousand years too late, He will say again that they had the chance of knowing all their lives, that if these things are done for the very least of His people they were done to Him.

For a Christian, the goad of duty is not needed – always prodding one to perform this or that good deed. It is not a duty to help Christ, it is a privilege. .. " We do so not simply for the sake of humanity. "Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ...but because they are Christ, asking us to find room for Him now, exactly as he did at the first Christmas.

The Catholic tradition is one of a universal love that reflects the *partisan* stance that Jesus took in privileging those on the margins of society, whether lepers, notorious sinners, tax collectors or foreigners. There is no doubt where Jesus stood and whom he listened to. We are the ones Jesus charged to "go and do likewise" [Lk. 10:37] Rabbit Abraham Heschel hit the nail on the head when he spoke to a group of theologians at a conference on the future of theology:

It has always seemed puzzling to me,” he said, “how greatly attached to the bible you seem to be, and yet how much like pagans you handle it. The great challenge of those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously, is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and then for us to think with them, instead of just about them [GdNws, 5.1.94].

This summer USF Vice Presidents and Deans spent five days in Tijuana studying border issues. What follows is a paraphrase of a story that we heard over and over again from men and women.

Sometimes my kids come to me and say, ‘Daddy or Mommy, I’m hungry.’ And I don’t have enough money to buy them food. And I can’t tell them I don’t have any money, but I don’t. I can barely put beans, potatoes and tortillas on the table with what I make. I will go anywhere even to another country to get food for my family. I feel awful, but nothing is worse than seeing your hungry child look you in the eyes, knowing you can’t give them enough to eat.

Daniel Groody captures the irony behind immigration to the United States from Mexico [“so far from heaven, so close to the United States”] when he talks about his conversation with a Mexican man whose sole ambition was to come to the United States so that he could provide “bread” for his family. A few miles away, on the US side of the border, Groody recalls meeting a woman on Coronado Island – a chic, upscale, resort area – who was looking for a local bakery where she could purchase a “specialty bread” not available elsewhere. Great poverty just across from the world’s wealthiest nation – so close to the United States.

Why would anyone leave behind family, friends, language, food, culture, neighborhoods? Why would you? POVERTY. We will never resolve the issue of immigration if we do not address its underlying cause, poverty.

These stories are not used to simply tug at your heart, but to illustrate a central issue behind the biblical bias, the so-called “option for the poor”. As Bill O’Neill reminds us, to opt for the poor is not to suspend “justice as fairness” for purely religious reasons, but it is precisely the principle of “equal justice” that requires that the rights of the poor be given preferential recognition. Equal Justice requires preferential recognition for those whose most basic rights are systematically violated. In the balancing of rights, the ethically responsible position tips towards those whose most basic needs are denied and whose recourse to justice is severely restricted at best. This is where the Catholic perspective kicks-in. If you read one book on Immigration, *Devils’ Highway* is the one to read.

The challenge that rises out of the Catholic perspective on immigration is to work and vote to address the structural conditions that insure persons are able to secure their most basic rights. To talk about immigration from the South to the United States without acknowledging that poverty is the driving force behind most decisions to leave one’s country and head North is to fail to acknowledge the underlying causes of the problem. Increased border security without attending to global poverty and the multitude of other issues underlying this issue is shortsighted and ultimately bad policy. Foreign Policy,

economic policy and immigration policy are not discrete issues; they are all interrelated in a delicate ecology that must be attended to in its totality.

Implications of immigration for parish ministry are rather sobering: “lack of welcome” is the number one reason cited by newly arrived immigrants for leaving the Church upon arrival in the United States. Sr. Marie Prefontaine, a former director of ethnic ministry on the East Coast, tells two stories illustrative of the challenge parishes face:

Zoe, a young mother from Zaire:

When my family arrived in the United States, I wanted to find a church where my family could pray and meet fellow Catholics. So, I went to the church to introduce myself. My English was not good. I struggled to explain who I was and why I had come. The priest listened to me through a window in the door. I was hurt to have tried so hard without succeeding. I felt guilty for not being fluent in a language I was expected to master.

Noy Chou, a ninth-grader from Cambodia:

What is it like when you are an outsider? When you wear clothes of your country and others think you are crazy to wear them and you think they are beautiful. You have to live in someone else's country to understand.

I think that one could argue from the Catholic perspective that immigrants are not the problem rather they are the objects of special concern. The problem is poverty and those other cataclysmic events – war, famine, natural disaster – that forcibly dislocate people; or the problem is the appropriate regulation of borders. More unsettling, the problem may well be those of us who are not able to see ourselves in the least of our brothers and sisters and, therefore, unable to construct appropriate humane and compassionate policies.