



Conversion, Communion & Solidarity

By Lucy Meissen, CPPS

Has anything changed in the last 3500 years? The Israelites migrated into Egypt, settled, and from a mere seventy-two persons grew into a populous group. Egyptians who did not know Israel's history, began to feel uneasy and suspicious about the foreigners, who tended to keep to themselves with their own customs, religion and ways of doing things. To paraphrase the first chapter of Exodus about the Egyptians' reaction to the presence of the Israelites, "These people have too many babies, they are lazy and if we are not careful they will take over the government (*cf.* Ex. 1, 1-10)."

Has anything changed? Today the government of the United States of America is looking at the ethnicity of our population and realizes that there are millions of people of Hispanic heritage in the country. And what are they implying about "those" people? *They have too many children, they are lazy and if we don't do something soon they may take over the country.* Like the Pharaoh of a former time, our government proposes to set limits and boundaries against the foreigners, to build walls and establish tighter border control. It legalized abortion and pushes contraception education to facilitate the reduction of the birth rate. Some propose the deportation of all the undocumented. Working conditions are harsh, living wages are meager, and separation of families a non-issue.

Migrant or Citizen: Looking at statistics

Not every person from another country is undocumented and illegal. Many families of Mexican heritage have lived in the territory of the United States long before the migration of people from Europe. Others have been citizens of the United States since the Gadsden Purchase in 1854. They speak fluent English and struggle to maintain the Spanish language. They are farmers and professionals in all fields of work, and seek to be integrated into the dominant culture while maintaining their native customs and traditions that preserve their heritage and identity.

There are many guest workers living here, some with their families, others whose families remain in their native country. These workers are engaged in every level of our economy from highly skilled professionals (doctors, professors, economists) to the migrant workers who contribute to the construction, production and processing of the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, and the houses in which we live. While 10,000 guest worker visas are granted to Mexican people every year, it is estimated that over 300,000 Hispanic people come into the United States during that same year. Census data indicates that there are 41.9 millions Hispanics living in this country. The U.S. Bishops estimate there are 65 million Hispanics living within the

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U.S. borders. Panic reports say there are 11.5 to 12 million undocumented Latinos living and working here.

According to 2005 data provided by the Pew Research Center, the median age of Hispanics in the U.S. is 27—considerable lower than 40, the median age for whites. Half of native-born Hispanics are currently 17 years old or younger, half of foreign-born Hispanics are 35 or younger.

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When we realize the number of people coming north from Mexico, Central and South America into the United States, we encounter the question of the migration of peoples. To give guidance concerning this issue the Bishops of Mexico and the United States issued a joint document in January 2003, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. The Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) summarized the five principles of this document in their July 2006 *Resolution to Action*:

- Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.
- Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.

The New Evangelization: Encountering the Spirit

From the viewpoint of spirituality, we are aware that knowing the external facts and figures is important but does not change the system. We must, unlike the Egyptians in the story of Exodus, know our history. It is only through a process of entering the inner world that we will come to that place in our hearts that will make a difference in how we respect one another. Only when we open ourselves to the power of the Spirit can we find our connectedness with one another, with the triune God and all creation.

At the turn of the century, Pope John Paul II called a special synod for the Americas. He chose to title the summary document *Ecclesia in America*, using a singular noun America, to call our attention to our need for solidarity among the many different

societies that live in this vast land. Here is the call to mission that he names "a new evangelization":

"The encounter with the living Jesus Christ" is "the path to conversion, communion and solidarity (no. 7)." Such an encounter ... leads to a daily vision of the risen Lord, present and active in the world, especially in the poor, in the stranger, and in the migrant and refugee. These immigrants, new to our shores, call us out of our unawareness to a conversion of mind and heart through which we are able to offer a genuine and suitable welcome, to share together as brothers and sisters at the same table, and to work side by side to improve the quality of life for society's marginalized members. In so doing, we work to bring all the children of God into a fuller communion, the communion willed by God, begun in time and destined for completion in the fullness of the Kingdom (*Ecclesia in America*, 33).

Conversion: Movement of the Spirit

Thelma Hall, R.C. in her book, *Too Deep for Words*, describes Jesus' experience of the Spirit at the time of his baptism as a profound conversion. In that moment of vision and revelation, the Spirit, the voice from above, grasped his whole being around and surrounding him as in an embrace saying, "You are my beloved." Jesus grew up in a loving, hardworking family. He learned the Hebrew Scriptures, he knew the psalms and the prophecies about the messiah, and he was familiar with Isaiah and Jeremiah. In this baptismal moment he has a new realization of the Spirit power of Love, the total acceptance by his Father. Jesus took to the desert to try to make sense of it all. So life changing was this experience and his acceptance of it that his family and friends did not recognize him when he came back to them.

Mother Theresa Weber reminds us, "You are precious." How profoundly do I allow the Spirit of the living God to grasp my inner spirit? Am I willing to let that Spirit change me as I enter daily the mission of the church? Do I allow desert time in my life for the Spirit to work and make sense of this call of love? As I reflect on the life changing call of the Spirit, I am better able to

embrace the unconditional Love of God for me. I am better able to embrace the preciousness of the people who come into my life.

Our spirituality as people of the Precious Blood is rooted in the Church's liturgical celebration of the Paschal Mystery. What are some of the implications of a liturgical spirituality, for immigration and welcoming the stranger? What do we learn and promise through our celebration of the Eucharist and Sacraments, our daily liturgy of the hours and our devotions to the Blood of Christ?

The first act of liturgy is one of hospitality, welcoming not only those who come to the church but everyone who comes into our lives. In this attitude of worship, we open the doors of our hearts to people of every race, culture and way of life. When we come to the doors of the church, we carry with us the poor, the homeless, the orphan and widow who seek shelter and asylum.

Through the "Lord, have mercy, *Senor, ten piedad*," we open ourselves to the gracious mercy of God to transform our self-centered ways of living into self-giving, other-loving community.

The Art of Active Listening

Listening to the word of God, entering into the great story of salvation, we learn how essential it is to listen to the life story of others. Gradually we begin to recognize how all our stories are joined together.

Sister of Mercy Kathleen Erickson founded an intercultural center for women in the border town of Anthony, New Mexico. After ten years she turned the leadership over to the women themselves and took a year sabbatical. Returning to this area she now does spiritual counseling with immigrant women who are being held in detention on the US/Mexican border waiting to be either deported or given papers allowing them to stay in the United States. Recently she wrote of her experience:

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Oh, my. So many women who begin the trek north have no idea that if they are caught by border patrol, they will be put in handcuffs and chains, strip-searched and given prison uniforms, and put in a detention center. They are in shock. And sometimes they are the lucky one. They have seen their companions die in the desert, or been kicked and beaten. ... [or enslaved in human trafficking]...

Undocumented detainees not only have the obvious problems with immigration status, they, too, struggle with family problems, loneliness, abandonment and physical illness. As human beings they try to make sense of the desperate situation of their lives. ...Some cannot stop crying.

*It is in this tiny room, during these sessions, I realize the importance of the privileged doing everything we can to change the consciousness of this world. By this I mean we must recognize on the external level that the way the world is "put together" by we humans does not work for far too many of us. I also mean that on the spiritual or internal level, we have to plumb the depths of our belief in the unity of all things, the Mystical Body, the oneness of us all. A more contemplative spirit will help us find our oneness and explore what it truly means. We will seek creative ways to break down barriers, remove borders, and live as one. (Kathleen Erickson RSM, October 2006, *Agua Viva*, a publication of the Diocese of Las Cruces.)*

It is through the art of active listening that Sr. Kathleen is able to be with these women and listen to their stories in a stance of what Father Timothy Coday, CPPS describes as walking "Bega Kwa Bega, shoulder to shoulder" with others (*Wine Cellar*, Summer 2006.) In the listening we learn to connect the stories, theirs and mine to the Big Story.

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The Mystical Body of Christ

Inspired with the stories, we move to bring our gifts of time, talent and treasure to the altar. In praise and thanksgiving, we remember and with bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus. Deepening our awareness of our oneness in the

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Lord, the Mystical Body of Christ, we are profoundly united to our brothers and sisters who live in poverty, who are homeless, who seek life, freedom and a sustainable means of livelihood, who come through our borders as immigrants. This is the real meaning of the Eucharistic Prayer, the community becoming Christ for one another. Jesus gave us the bread and wine as a means for us to see that it is the ordinary food and drink of our lives that must be consecrated in order to feed the world.

The public act of receiving Holy Communion solidifies our promise to be food for the poor, to be shelter for the homeless, to be powerhouses of prayer for the lonely, the abandoned, and all who are in need. In receiving the Eucharist, we pledge our daily efforts to live in solidarity with all peoples, carrying the downtrodden, the hungry and the needy in our hearts, allowing the spirit to reshape who we are and for what we stand. We are the Body and Blood of Christ. This highly personal and intimate moment of receiving Christ in our human body is at the same time a profoundly public witness of our willingness to be Christ's continuing presence in the world.

The closing act of liturgy is the Rite of Sending. With Eucharist we are blessed and sent into the world to do what we can to make a difference. It is in our attitude of mission, of being sent, that we live the fullness of communion. It is this attitude of mission that sustains Eileen and Joyce in becoming *co-madres* with migrant workers in Missouri, that sustains our missionary brothers and sisters in Central and South America, Africa and Asia, that sustains our motherhouse sisters and brothers, our retired members who spend hours in prayer and sacrifice for those in active ministry.

Solidarity: A Matter for Conciliation

Communion can only happen if we seek to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in need. In *Ecclesia en America*, Pope John Paul II describes solidarity as the fruit of communion. The work of solidarity is “the promotion of peace with a view to achieving real justice (56).” To achieve this peace through justice each of us needs to understand the hurts and resentments, the fears and the needs of people on all sides of the border. For example, those who help at the Women’s Intercultural Center realize that not just the migrant women but the local women as well need to be heard. The resentment of the locals can only be healed as they welcome and are welcomed by the migrant women.

Our Lady of Guadalupe serves as a model and guide as we struggle to live in solidarity with neighbors who migrate to our land. Carlos, one of my co-workers, recalls how instrumental Our Lady was to his adjustment as a migrant teen. “When I saw her in the church in El Paso,” he said, “I felt that Our Lady of Guadalupe had migrated here before we did. Everything would be OK because she was here in the United States with us”

As patroness, not just of Mexico but of the United States as well, she is the link for many Hispanic. How enriching to know the story of her appearance and messages to San Juan Diego. The more I know her, the more I become aware of the beauty and dignity of her people. As Mary has done for many other cultures and nations of the world, she appears as one of the people, someone who is poor, with their color of skin, with their native features and speaks in their native language. What better example of solidarity than that given by the Mother of God?

Solidarity means listening to the poor, the orphaned, the widow and the migrant. It also means listening to our youth and providing them with education and opportunities to be not only productive as a work force but to be leaders in their communities. As Father Bill Delaney wrote in *The Wine Cellar* (Summer 2006), “One of our goals right now is to work for a just, comprehensive immigration reform, which will allow undocumented persons and their families to come out of the shadows and live in dignity.” To make this happen we must voice our concern and dissatisfaction with a congress that proposes walls, deportation, punitive measures and enforcement laws as a way to “control” immigration.

Conclusion

Immigration issues will be with us for a long time because the migration of people has been a constant factor of life from its very beginning. Floods, draughts, war, pestilence, crowded populations all play a role in the movement not just of people but of animals as well. The human spirit seeks first to survive, and then to prosper. The human spirit is resilient and even in the midst of poverty and oppression, finds a source of joy and consolation. The human person, endowed with spirit and life, knows wherein lies its true home. Whether documented or alien, citizen or detainee, being at home is the deepest longing of the human heart. As people dedicated to the Precious Blood of Jesus we seek to enter into the heart and mind of Jesus, open our hearts to his love, learn to love as he loves—totally, unconditionally, completely. Then and only then will we write a new and different story for the migrating people of the world.

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For Reflection

- **Conversion:** Anthony Gittins CSSp in his address on Religious Life says, “A dangerous assumption for religious is that we are actually people of the Spirit.” While holding the immigrant in your heart, ask the question: “What does *the Spirit* want?”
- **Communion:** What helps to foster a God centered and sacramental view of the universe so that I can embrace the earth, creation and all peoples as precious, united in the Blood of Christ poured out for all?
- **Solidarity:** In what ways can I promote cooperation and a just structure which requires equitable use of the earth’s resources, that embraces the rights of people to migrate and welcome the strangers among us?



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“Doing research for this article,” Sister Lucy writes, “I have become overwhelmed by the many studies and articles, documents, statements and research that are available on the topic of immigration. The Pew Research Center provides many statistics and interesting analysis. Both the Web site for the Vatican (www.Zenit.org) and The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.usccb.org) have a myriad of statements and documents published over the last 50 years.

