



## Strangers No More

By Eileen Schieber, CPPS

As the days grow colder, so too does the environment of fear surrounding the issue of immigration in our nation. It is difficult to say whether the place where I live reflects the atmosphere of the country, but I suspect it comes close to mirroring it.

Each day brings new problems for immigrants, persons who are viewed as strangers among us.

As a people we live daily with issues of security and the sense of unease they leave with us. War, breakdown of relations with long time allies, public expressions of hate for our country, an escalating number of dead whom we grieve, and fear of economic difficulties permeate our days. There is too much to deal with mentally and emotionally. When this happens to a people it is very easy to focus on someone or something that is a vent for our frustrations and our fears. I believe that has happened with the issue of immigration. It seems to be something that many persons think we can do something concrete to address and fix. While there is no agreement on what would “fix” the situation, the many opinions expressed are vehement and polarizing. While we are a nation of immigrants, founded on their work and faith, we now want to be ever more vigilant as to which “tired, poor, and yearning to be free” we admit. A spirit of isolationism is taking root in our body politic, which seems to stem not from a desire to go it alone, but from a need to “have it our own way or not at all” and a tendency to wield the power of domination.

In this atmosphere it is difficult to bridge the gap, to reconcile the differences, to stand with others in solidarity. I struggle with this daily. In the parishes in which I work there has been a

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last category. The most resentful are often the immigrants of other lands who proudly proclaim their legal status or citizenship and their own contribution to society. How is it possible to address the neediness arising from the ire and resentment of those who oppose the immigrants already here and the needs of those same immigrants to achieve the hopes for which they came: survival and the ability to work and support their family?

### **A Matter of Survival**

Some of the items in my schedule each weekday include interpretation in the various clinics, service agencies, hospital, and doctors' offices. While parish members resent the Hispanic families who live here, there is a strong commitment to pro-life issues. Sometimes I try to explain to parish members about our pro-life support to the approximate 25 Hispanic women I accompany to the obstetric clinic. This is a double-edged sword, as the response often is that "they" come here just so their children can be citizens. I have never met a Hispanic family who came here for that reason. In some of the border towns women do cross the border to have their babies in the hospital and may do so for that reason, but it does not factor in to the consciousness of the persons who came here.

The persons who come north are usually young and just starting their families. They are far from the support of their own parents and extended families. They reach out to the Church Community to provide the emotional support they need as well as assistance with interpretation or other services we can provide to them. They come to survive, not merely to enhance their lives.

resentment of the local Hispanics, which is the immigrant population that impacts us. While the Hispanics here are citizens, legal residents, people here with legal permission to work, and persons who entered illegally and are working under an assumed identity, persons here tend to lump them entirely under the

One mother of 5 children has been here for fifteen years with her husband. He has worked hard to support them and some of their extended family in Mexico. Celia lives in fear because they did not enter legally and have a mixed family of children, some born in the United States and some born in Mexico. She tells me if they are discovered and returned to Mexico they will be living on the street and begging for their children's food. They tried before to find work in Mexico but were unable to find anything.

Another woman, Juana, has been here 15 years and the father of the family has been here 18 years. On Monday they are returning to Mexico on order of Immigration. Their 4 children were born in the U.S. and know no other culture. When they tried to return to Mexico a couple of years ago all four children got hepatitis and other serious medical problems because they have no immunity to common bacteria and viruses found there. They have little hope of finding work in Mexico.

In the past, the search to survive led many people to our shores. They simply arrived and were processed through Ellis Island and, if there were no impediments, were free to seek their "fortune." Presently descendants of those same immigrants are trying to preserve that "fortune", and one way to do that is to deny the same freedom of entry to the present day starving and desperate people.

It is estimated that the Hispanic population pour \$4,000,000 into the economy of our small city. The majority pay taxes, contrary to popular belief, and are faithful members of the workforce. It has never been proven that they take jobs away from local people, although the myth persists. Last week I went with a Hispanic man to apply for work at the Tyson Factory. The Anglo in line in front of us refused the application for Tyson saying that there was no way he would accept "that kind of work."

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The Hispanic man was delighted there was an opening. We can tell people of the economic contributions immigrants make and correct the misconceptions that they do not pay taxes. We can remind them of the millions paid into Social Security each year by the immigrants, some of whom will never receive the benefits.

### **Global Reality**

**I**mmigration in our own nation is only a part of the larger global picture. While no one, including the immigrants I know, denies we have the right to have a secure border, the means of having that eludes us. I believe that is because the border is not the real issue. The real issue is far more basic. It arises out of the fact that, in many ways, the age of nations is past and we exist in a global reality. This shift is reflected in the banding together of nations in the European Union but it is also reflected in the resurgence of old animosities of peoples who occupy or do not occupy land or territory which they regard as “theirs”, and in genocide.

In a time of great transition there is also regression out of fear and desire to maintain the reality that once existed. Nationalism and identification with nationality is precious in the consciousness of the human family and will persist in the global era. The task before us is establishing a movement toward a status of equality among the nationalities and subsets of nationalities that exist, mutual support, open trade, legitimate migration of workers, fair wages, and worker protections among the nations.

The common good we strive to preserve will be preserved only when the common good realized is a more universal reality. Since our Congregations embody a multi-national and global reality in the scope of our members and our works perhaps we have some wisdom to offer in the unfolding of the future reality of the world community.

### **Our Spirituality Informs our Response**

**I**n our spirituality we are formed and sent forth in the conviction that all are included in the saving power of the Blood of Jesus. We recognize the dear neighbor in each face we meet, the blood brother and sister with whom we share life. In this issue of immigration there are many persons who suffer. Those who seek survival for themselves and their families and

those who fear the diminishment that will surely follow if we truly begin to share the wealth of the earth among all of the human family are both suffering.

We are all brought near by the Blood of Christ. Do we dare call upon our society to bring near those who suffer and ask for survival from us, who are the richest nation on earth? Do we dare face with our brothers and sisters the consequences of diminishment and curtail our consumerism to share the world's resources among the peoples of the world? It is a vision of the migrant peoples as the body of Christ crucified upon the cross of the world that we must see if we are to understand fully the phenomenon of world migration today.

Reform of immigration laws permitting legitimate migration of workers with a system of identification and validation that safeguards our security deserves our attention and the hard work it would take to formulate it. It is fairly easy, though outrageously expensive to erect a fence on our southern border. It will probably not solve the problem of illegal entry but it will make some of our politicians look good if we are foolish enough to believe in it. Our spirituality is not one of building walls, but of dissolving enmities in the mercy of which we are all benefactors.

The strain to answer the fears and resentment among us has taken our politicians in dangerous directions. Our own local State Representative worked to pass the House bill that created felons of persons who assisted illegal immigrants. Church membership is universal and transcends the borders of nations. Persons have the right to worship and fellowship within their faith regardless of their race or origins. We do not ask persons at the door who want to worship with us or request our aid what their legal status might be. Under the tenets of our faith, we live out our life of service in being faithful to the law of charity and the expression of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

These are the ways we have of bringing the fruits of the blood of Christ to our world. If our Representatives have passed a law that makes the legitimate practice of the tenets of our faith a felony, how is that not persecution of religion? If a State makes it criminal for a person to live out legitimate expressions of their faith how is that not repression of religion? This controversy is truly leading us into dangerous ground.

## Confronting Racism

**M**y last reflection on the issue of immigration has to do with racism as a component for the current agenda on immigration in our country. Millions of Indians lived on this continent 13,000 years before anyone else arrived. The first people who landed on our shores were Spanish with Ponce de León in 1513 (Columbus landed in the Bahamas). The Spanish were the first to reach the Appalachians, the Mississippi, the Great Plains, and the Grand Canyon. The immigrants in our town are the descendents of these Indians and the Spanish. Even the Pilgrims are late arrivals in the light of their heritage.

The face of the United States is growing ever darker. La Morena (the dark one) is a complementary title given to some beautiful women in the Hispanic culture. The United States grows ever more similar to "La Morena". We are now conscious that at some point in our evolution white Anglo Saxon persons will be in the minority. I believe this is threatening to us, consciously or unconsciously, and drives the need to exclude persons from legitimate entry into the country. I recommend a thoughtful opinion piece in the *New York Times* on July 9, 2006 by Tony Horwitz elaborating on this phenomenon.

In our individual lives we are called to solidarity with the family of Christ established in his Blood that encompasses all persons. In our parishes we are called to be inclusive and welcoming, bringing the Good News to the poor. In our Congregations we are called to be faithful to the promise of the Precious Blood, which is that we are all sons and daughters of God, with equal dignity and right of survival and respect. There are no strangers.

In the light of these calls we are stretched and challenged to deal with the controversies surrounding the question of immigration with mercy and compassion for all. We need to find the words to bridge the gaps, to heal the wounds, to reconcile the differences. The poem on the following page by Julia Cameron reminds me of Veronica, who wiped the blood from the face of Jesus with her veil and gave his image to the world. May we do the same.



## Words for It

**I wish I could take language  
And fold it like cool, moist rags,  
I would lay words on your forehead,  
I would wrap words on your wrists.  
"There, there" my words would say,  
Or something better.**

**I would ask them to murmur,  
"Hush, and Shh, shhh, it's all right,"  
I would ask them to hold you all night.**

**I wish I could take language  
And daub and soothe and cool  
Where fever blisters and burns,  
Where fever turns yourself against you.**

**I wish I could take language  
And heal the wounds that were the wounds  
You have no names for.**

**-Julia Cameron**

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**For Reflection**

- How does the concern for national security affect you in your attitudes towards and interactions with immigrants?
- Have you ever had the experience of being in the minority in a situation? What did that evoke in you? Can you see what a white Anglo Saxon minority will look like?
- Reconciliation requires establishing a connection. How can connections of trust and understanding be established between migrant peoples and the people of the nations they enter? How does our kinship in the Blood of Christ foster this?
- How can we welcome the stranger and adjust our lives so that a more equitable world order may emerge? What must we leave behind or surrender in order to enter a new age of global solidarity?



*Sister Eileen Schieber is a member of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of O'Fallon, Missouri. She works in Hispanic Ministry with her partner, Fr. Jim Betzen, C.P.P.S., in Sacred Heart and St. Patrick Parishes in Sedalia, Missouri. She has been involved in many common projects among the Congregations of the Precious Blood over the years.*

