



By Joseph Nassal, CPPS

Like a Good Neighbor

"Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations."
Walt Whitman

How did you celebrate "National Good Neighbor Day?" Did you know there was such a day? It is celebrated every year on the fourth Sunday in September. This year it was September 24. Good Neighbor Day began in 1971 when a woman named Becky Mattson in Montana wrote a letter to her Senator, Mike Mansfield. He enthusiastically endorsed the idea and three U.S. Presidents—Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter—all wrote presidential proclamations to rally folks to observe National Good Neighbor Day. I don't know if it is significant, but notice no president since Jimmy Carter has endorsed the notion of setting aside a day to be a good neighbor.

Maybe they've been too busy planning wars and building fences. The Congress commemorated Good Neighbor Day by passing legislation called the "Security Fence Act" that mandates a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border. President George Bush signed the bill less than three weeks before the mid-term elections. In a poll taken at about the same time, 53% of the people polled indicated that immigration was one of the top three issues that would influence for whom they would vote.

In the same poll, 68% of those likely to vote said the immigration levels in the United States were too high while only two percent indicated they were too low. It is estimated there are 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States.

According to the poll, 64% indicated their support for the repatriation (either voluntary or involuntary) of illegal immigrants.

How far we have come from the "Good Neighbor" policy toward Central and Latin American initiated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt when, instead of the military interventions of previous administrations against certain countries in Latin America, Roosevelt tried to enkindle a spirit of solidarity with our neighbors to the south. "In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor," Roosevelt said in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1933. "The neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others—the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors."

Jesus was certainly a proponent of such a good neighbor policy. In the famous story from Luke's gospel about the Good Samaritan (10, 25-37), he spells out for an inquisitive lawyer the definition of a good neighbor: the one who treats the other with mercy and compassion. The power of this familiar parable is found in Jesus advising that we take down the privacy fences around our hearts and reach out to all, even those we find most difficult to love. Jesus is clear: we are responsible for and accountable to one another.

Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan takes us beyond the limits of country, color or creed. In Jesus' neighborhood, all are welcome and all find a place. Jesus' definition of neighbor does not depend on cultural background or political ideology or theology or ecclesiology.

But we live in a world where it is "us" against "them." Certainly in the last five years with the war on terrorism, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the continuing violence in the Middle East, the battle lines seem to be drawn more clearly than ever. Unfortunately, certain groups, ethnic or otherwise, are lumped into the "them" and so we tend to demonize what we fear. Whether it is the color of their skin, their ethnic origin, the content of their creed, their

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sexual orientation or gender, their political affiliation or ideology, people in one camp may say of another, "He's one of them."

There is always a "them." Whenever lines are drawn in the sand—or around the altar or

at the border in the form of a 700-mile fence—there is division and not communion. Such a position is contrary to the kingdom of God. As Thomas Keating writes, "In the kingdom of God, communion is more important than worship. Worship is hypocrisy and a pious sham if we have not first passed through the gate of reconciliation."

This issue of *The Wine Cellar* opens these gates of reconciliation taking its key from Ephesians 2 where Paul reminds us, "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ. It is he who is our peace, and who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart (2, 13-14)." Precious Blood Fathers Mark Miller and Joe Uecker unlock these gates of reconciliation by putting a human face on the issue of immigration. "When our Congress talks about immigration reform," they write, "immigrants are still primarily seen as 'those people' who are breaking the laws and taking jobs away from our own citizens. But all immigrants have names, they have a family history, they have hopes and dreams like all people; they are human beings seeking a place to raise a family and improve their own lives." Inspired by Paul's inclusive vision of the spirituality of the blood of Christ, Mark and Joe outline several principles from Catholic Social Teaching that focus our attention on why this is a moral issue.

Precious Blood Sister Lucy Meissen ministers in the Diocese of Las Cruces, New Mexico. She traces the immigration issue from the ancient stories in Scripture to modern statistical data, identifying three keys to unlock the gates of reconciliation: conversion, communion, and solidarity. "From the viewpoint of spirituality," Sister Lucy writes, "we are aware that knowing the external facts and figures is important but does not change the system. 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."

Drawing upon his own experience as a refugee from Vietnam, Precious Blood Father Dien Truong reflects how the struggles and hardships he endured have shaped his response to this issue of immigration today. "After years of struggle," he writes, "I realized that my sense of helplessness in this 'strange land' only increased if I did not accept others as my friends and adapt a new culture as my own. This is my motivation in serving those who are immigrants today."

Remembering our own stories is central in understanding the issues surrounding immigration, according to Precious Blood Father Al Ebach who encounters many people in his Ministry on the West Side of Kansas City "who have been working in the United States for a number of years and now face the possibility of deportation." Al reflects how Catholic Social Teaching informs the current political debate about immigration and challenges all to become engaged in the process reminding how the Church's tradition call us "to protect the rights of all people."

Precious Blood Sister Eileen Schieber who works in Hispanic Ministry in Sedalia, Missouri anchors this issue of *The Wine Cellar* reminding us, "Our spirituality is not one of building walls, but of dissolving enmities in the mercy of which we are all benefactors." Sister Eileen reflects on some of the stories of struggle that visit her on a daily basis in her local community while acknowledging immigration must be addressed as a global reality.

As St. Paul reminds us later in that second chapter of Ephesians, because we are brought near through the blood of Christ, "This means that you are strangers and aliens no longer (Eph. 2, 19)." Embracing this truth, this edition of *The Wine Cellar* seeks to contribute to the dialogue about one of the most pressing human and moral issues of our day. "In our spirituality we are formed and sent forth in the conviction that all are included in the saving power of the Blood of Jesus," Sister Eileen writes. "We recognize the dear neighbor in each face we meet, the blood brother and sister with whom we share life."

