

Then God asked Cain,  
"Where is your brother Abel?"  
He answered, "I do not know.  
Am I my brother's keeper?  
Then God said,  
"What have you done!  
Listen: Your brother's blood  
cries out to me from the soil."

Genesis 4, 9-10

## The Human Face of Immigration

By  
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*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off  
Have become near by the blood of Christ.  
For he is our peace,  
He who made both one and broke down  
the dividing wall of enmity...  
Ephesians 2, 13-14*

**H**ow does one begin to get a handle on the issue of immigration? Is it a political issue? Is it a moral issue? Is it a human issue? That depends on who is speaking or listening. From our point of view, the answer is *yes* to all the questions. However, if one listens only to the media, one would think it is but one *political* issue among other *political* issues. The moral aspects are seldom seen. The human aspects are swept under the rug. It is difficult for us as a nation to include any kind of ethical and moral perspective regarding our political policies because to some people that would violate the separation of church and state.



However, as people of faith, we are called to use our ethical and moral guidelines to assist us in arriving at solutions for these political issues. In 2000, Pope John Paul II spoke these words on World Migration Day:

*The Church hears the suffering cry of all who are uprooted from their own land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home anywhere. She senses the anguish of those without rights, without any security, at the mercy of every kind of exploitation, and she supports them in their unhappiness.*

How many millions of people that the pope describes are living among us today! Many times they are not *known* to be *illegal* or *undocumented* because, believe it or not, that doesn't show. They look like and act like anyone else around us. They may speak differently, depending on where we are, but they are human beings just like us.

In 2003, The Catholic Bishops of the United States and Mexico issued a pastoral letter, *Strangers No Longer*, in which they outlined some of the principles that must be kept in mind in the whole discussion about immigration.

- ***Immigrants to any country are our brothers and sisters.*** *This principle is fundamental: we are all members of the one human family, with rights and obligations.*
- ***Even in the harsh stories of migration, God is present.*** *The biblical tradition offers several stories of God's presence in the midst of migration that serve to instruct us today: Abraham moves in response to God's call; the Israelites leave Egypt under the guidance of God; and the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph move to Egypt at the warning of an angel.*
- ***All persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland.*** *The bishops remind us this includes economic, social and political opportunities enabling all to live a full life through the use of their God-given gifts.*

- ***All persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.*** *All the goods of the earth belong to all people. When people cannot find the means to support their families in their homeland, they have a right to find work elsewhere.*
- ***Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.*** *This right would cease when such control is merely to acquire additional wealth. The more powerful the nation, the greater the obligation to accommodate migration flows.*
- ***Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.*** *The global community has an obligation to protect those who flee wars and persecution. Migrants have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration and to have their claims considered by a competent authority.*
- ***The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected.*** *All people possess inherent human dignity that must be respected. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.*

### **Obstacles Immigrants Face**

**A** local lawyer who works primarily with criminal cases but also helps those seeking citizenship or work permits so as to remain working in the United States told us recently, "Our system is difficult and complicated" and is not family- or people-friendly in its approach. Due to the quota system, those who applied for a visa in 1992 are now the ones being processed. She went on to say that the more common obstacles for immigrants to overcome, especially from Mexico, include stereotyping, racial remarks, and understanding the North American culture. It is easier for immigrants coming to the bigger cities

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rather than rural communities because they can find a greater sense of home due to the number of immigrants present.

Another immigration counselor who works with the Church stated: "The most common obstacle faced by immigrants is the language barrier. Many never attended one day of school in their own country." Couple this with the fear of being discovered and deported, how is a person going to take the necessary classes to become proficient in English? Courses are offered, through churches and Catholic Charities, organizations that do not ask about national origin or legal status, but how does one get to the classes without a license? Any misstep on the street, whether the fault of the immigrant or not, would result in deportation, whether that person has children who are U.S. citizens or not. How does one get a license without a Social Security card? There may be nine little numbers on the Social Security card, but not having

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those little numbers is a major obstacle to any kind of a life in the United States.

"We have no program to help the illegal alien," the same counselor said. "An employer can get legal status for the illegal, but why should they if they (the employees) work hard and get paid whatever the employer wishes?"

Work 12-hour days 7 days a week. Can the employee complain to the Labor Workforce? I don't think so; he or she would be on the next bus to their country. We do have a program in which a person does qualify through their education and experiences, but our people are not doctors, engineers, nurses, physical therapists; they come to work on jobs that the U.S. citizen refuses to work."

### **Facing our Fears**

**S**ince September 11, 2001, our nation has lived under the fearful cloud of terrorism and the issue of immigration now falls under this category. As our fear of terrorism heightens, greater attention is placed upon those areas where terrorist might

enter our country. Certainly our borders offer some possibilities. However, there seems to be greater attention given to our southern border than our northern border. Is this decision based on evidence or on some covert form of racism? While we have more people immigrating from the south, there is no evidence that there is a greater chance of terrorism coming from the south than from our northern border.

"We must never forget that many immigrants come to this country in desperate

circumstances," the United States Catholic Bishops wrote in *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* (November 2000). "Some have fled political persecution, war, and economic desperation at home. As Pope John Paul II has noted, 'In many regions of the world today people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate....'"

*Given the desperation so many in our world feel today, any true "solution" to illegal immigration to the U.S. must take into account the root causes of the poverty from which many immigrants are trying to escape.*

How desperate is the situation around the world?

- There are 60 countries in today's world that are poorer than they were thirty years ago.
- A fifth of the world's population (1.2 billion people) live on less than \$1 per day and almost half the world's population, or 2.8 billion people, live on less than \$2 a day.
- A child dies of malnutrition every second. (Is this less of an injustice than abortion?)
- Economic injustice still plagues most of the world, providing a strong impetus for immigrants.



Given the desperation so many in our world feel today, any true "solution" to illegal immigration to the U.S. must take into account the root causes of the poverty from which many immigrants are trying to escape.

When someone is faced with either watching their family starve to death or going to a country where there is a greater possibility of being able to sustain one's family, what choice does this person have? Faced with the reality that it will take more than ten years to get a visa to come "legally," then another path will be chosen. Or, as is the case with some of our parishioners, they have raised a family here, the one parent is a citizen, the children are all citizens, but the other parent isn't. This parent cannot approach the INS for fear of being "deported" and then having to apply for a visa which could take over 10 years to receive. As a parent, which choice would you pursue?

But threats do not come to the undocumented immigrant only from the government. Many undocumented people own homes and cars, but these are in the names of relatives that are here legally. The risk is that, if there is a disagreement, the relative is by law the owner of the property, not the undocumented person. People have been known to turn against their relatives and call the Border Patrol on each other. The undocumented person has no recourse: raise your voice and you get deported.

### **Immigration: A Moral Issue**

**W**e probably don't have to say more to convince people that this is not only a political issue, but a human and moral issue as well. If it is a moral issue, if the laws are unjust, must they be followed? What can be done?

On May 1, 2006 we saw hundreds of thousands of people gather in many cities across the country to protest the present immigration laws. That was one day. Was there any difference on May 2? Did any laws change? More importantly, did any hearts change?

When our Congress talks about immigration reform or when this conversation takes place in coffee houses and bowling alleys around our nation, 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.

The state of Texas has 32% Hispanic population (as of 2000) and yet the two Republican U.S. Senators have voted in favor of "the fence." By the time this article is published, the elections will be over. What that will mean is anyone's guess. But it seems likely that if the control of the Congress remains the same, nothing will change. If one or both houses of Congress change, something might be possible.

For any real change to occur, there must be a change of the heart. With or without documents, immigrants have the same yearnings as U.S. citizens have. They have hopes and dreams; they have families; they have relatives and friends back in their home country and they would love to visit. *Catholic* calls us to openness. *The Blood* calls us to see them as our sisters and brothers. *Justice* calls us to realize that all the goods of the earth belong to all people.



### **For Reflection**

- Are all political issues, moral issues? If so, how does our moral code of conduct impact our behavior and response to the political arena of our nation?
- Do you agree with the 7 principles mentioned in the Bishops Pastoral Letter, *Strangers No Longer*? Do you feel these principles are operative in the present debate on immigration?
- Do you know an "undocumented" person or someone who has a family member who is undocumented? Does personal experience have an impact on how we react to this issue?



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