

Is There A Stranger Among Us?

By Dien Truong, CPPS

Writing about the issue of immigration is a very sensitive and painful experience for both those who have settled and those who are new to this country. All face the same difficulties inherent in different cultures, races, politics, religion, and finances. Throughout human history, people have been on the move from one place to another, from one country to another. At one time or another, our ancestors or we were immigrants to this country for various reasons. For most immigrants, it is seeking a more secure and better life for themselves and their loved ones.

I myself became a refugee from the last days of the Vietnam War. As a Missionary of the Precious Blood with my own life experience, I feel compassion for and deeply sympathize with the newcomers to this country. Before finding comfort and security in a “new world,” I first faced the challenges and obstacles that made me feel vulnerable and uncertain. Though I looked forward to the future, I also experienced a profound feeling of loss. I lost everything—country, family, and language. I grieved over what I left behind and worried what was going to happen in the future. It felt like a “tug of war”!

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among those who have settled in a local area and the newcomers who arrive more recently. Immigrants must overcome cross-cultural considerations such as language, food, costumes and customs. There are also generation

gaps that occur in their own family and in the community.

After years of struggle, 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 as I became involved in the Resettlement Program for Southeast Asian Refugee. It was a chance to open my heart and eyes before the suffering of others.

The Refugee Experience

Once the Vietnamese Immigrants had a nickname of “Boat People.” Then they became “asylum seekers” because there were no countries in South Asia that would accept them. A report on CNN captured the grief and suffering of the refugees:

If life in Vietnam was unbearable, life on the South China Sea was even worse. On CBC Radio, Dr. Tuan Tran describes his harrowing escape from Vietnam, an attack by pirates and his miraculous arrival at a Malaysian refugee camp. Refugees faced a host of perils: typhoons, overcrowded and often leaky boats, and a lack of navigational tools, brutal pirates, starvation, dehydration and illness. An estimated half of the boat people perished at sea. That's 500,000 to 600,000 human lives. Thai pirates kidnapped, raped and murdered countless numbers of boat people. Some pirates were professional bandits. Others were poor fishermen. The treasure from one overcrowded refugee boat could be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, as refugees often transferred all their assets into gold before leaving Vietnam. Humanitarian aid

organizations claimed that South Asian governments allowed the piracy to continue as a deterrent to refugees. Passing vessels would sometimes stop to save refugees by bringing them on board. But once the ship arrived with its human cargo in Singapore or some other Asian port, they were often turned away. No South Asian country would accept the refugees, many fearing that the influx was a Chinese or Vietnamese plot to upset the racial balance in Asia. The tragedy of so many people with nowhere to go brought the world's attention to the plight of the boat people.

How can we, with a clear conscience, turn a deaf ear to these suffering refugees? We have all heard the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel. What role shall we take: the chief priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan?

When immigrants arrived in either their “promised land” or begin their sojourn in a strange land, they confront various situations that take time to adjust to and add to their burden and suffering. For example, Peter Tran, a refugee living in Toronto since 1975, talks about adjusting to life in Canada. In an interview with CNN, he reflects on what it is like to go from being a lecturer in Vietnam to a dishwasher in Toronto. “Life in Canada is a big adjustment in many ways: new home, new language, new climate, new food, new culture, new costume, and new kind of job,” he said. “Those over fifty find themselves a burden, unable to find work. The young, so infinitely adaptable, have an easier time.”

Tran advises Canadians on the little things that they can do to help refugees. “The boat people have more difficulty adjusting to Canada than other refugees have in the past,” he said. “The psychological trauma they've endured is a major factor: they suffer the loss of family, possessions, position, self-esteem and respect. Some have been raped. Others have seen

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family members killed. They carry guilt for being the survivors, the ones who got out. However, there are still a great number who remain incomplete, particularly families from Cambodia who lost members under Pol Pot's genocidal regime. And many refugees remain in jobs beneath their skill level. Despite that, thousands still arrive every year. But nowadays, they come through normal immigration channels. Not through refugee camps. Not over the sea."

The Vietnamese Community

While each individual immigrant has his or her own story, they share many experiences in common. Each community has its own cultural and political characteristics, but the first generation of immigrants have to make every effort just to survive, to build community and seek success in their new land.

Typically in the Vietnamese community, I recall that the first wave of Vietnamese who came to America were put into four main refugee camps. I was assigned to stay temporarily in the one in Oceanside, California. When the refugees were allowed out of the camp, most found jobs and homes in the surrounding area; but I chose to resettle in Chicago. The first years were hard. Tony Lam, one of the immigrants, said that he still sheds tears when he remembers the days his wife returned from her factory job producing musical instruments.

But from such beginnings, the Vietnamese community in the United States grew by leaps and bounds. Now, even though the community's per capita income is still 40% lower than the national rate, its average household income is almost the same—an indication of the strength of the family unit.

The community has also started to demand a voice in politics. One of its first efforts was to campaign to commission signs in the neighborhood bearing the name of Little Saigon, which are now visible on all major highways in Orange County, California. Phung Minh Tien, one of the campaigners, said the name was officially recognized by the state of California in 1988. From local council to state assembly, the community has started to be represented.

Compared with other Asian immigrants, the Vietnamese community is highly politicized, according to Do Qui Toan, a local journalist. "Whereas the older generations demonstrate against the government in Vietnam, demanding freedom for the homeland," he explained, "the younger generations prefer to join mainstream politics and have a voice on taxation or health insurance policy."

The Vietnamese community's growing economic strength also means that many Vietnamese in the US are now courted by the nation they left behind. But often they find it hard to reconcile themselves with their homeland. Political ideology and personal memories of the war make it difficult for them to see Vietnam in a positive light. As Andy Dzung, a local architect pointed out, "We must find a way to accommodate ourselves, now that the US and Vietnam have established both diplomatic and trade relationships, for otherwise we cannot take advantage of this new development."

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Underneath the face of prosperity, the Vietnamese community in the United States suffers from deep psychological and social problems. Healing the rift with the place from which the refugees come might be able to assuage the pain and bring some measure of conciliation. "We did not come here the way other migrants came," said social worker Phung Minh Tien. "They came to paradise to realize their personal dreams. We were like trees uprooted and planted in a foreign land. Yet those trees have now recovered and are growing. The first 30 years were devoted to survival, but nobody knows what the next 30 years will bring."

Biblical Foundation and Vision

The Biblical tradition lays the foundation and informs the Church's concern for immigrants. In the Hebrew Scriptures, our ancestors in faith experienced their Exodus from slavery, the Babylonian Exile and the Diaspora. In the Book

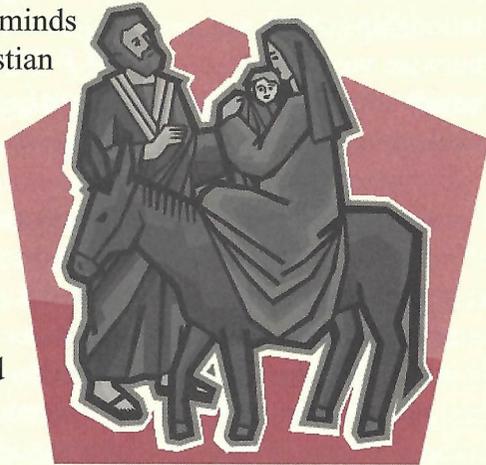
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of Genesis, the covenant God made with Abraham related to the right of seeking new opportunity in new lands (Gen 12:1). In Exodus, Moses' covenant upheld the rights of migrants: "You and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, are to go up from here to the land...(Ex. 33:1)." God's Word to the ancient Israelites, of course, are also meant for modern immigrants and for us as well.

In the New Testament, Jesus had to flee his own land for Egypt (Mt 2:13-15). As the Pontifical Instruction, The Love of Christ Towards Migrants reminds us, "In the foreigner a Christian

sees not simply a neighbor, but the face of Christ Himself." Even though we don't have much information about Jesus' early life in Egypt, this experience of being a refugee probably influenced his special empathy for the stranger as related in Matthew's Gospel, "I was a

stranger and you welcomed me (Mt 25:35)." The Pontifical Instruction also reminds us that Mary "gave birth to her Son away from home ... and was compelled to flee to Egypt (Lk 2:1-7)" and so stands a "living symbol of the woman migrant."



Each year as we read the gospel passage of the flight into Egypt, I read my own life story and feel the exile of the Holy Family. They tasted the bitterness and suffering of the life of immigrants. Even though I now pretend to live on the surface of prosperity, secure and sufficient, God continues to invite me to recall my uncertain journey and my struggle to adapt and survive from my painful beginnings. But the more I remember my early struggles and embrace my many blessings, the more I accept newcomers not as strangers but as my sisters and brothers with an understanding mind and compassionate heart.



For Reflection

- Through your faith and life experience, how can you recognize the face of Christ among strangers, namely, the immigrant?
- In what ways does your baptismal call and the blessings of your life influence your attitude toward immigrants?
- What are the issues surrounding immigration in your local area?
- How can you, your parish, or your local community become an advocate for newcomers and immigrants?



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