



Welcoming Christ Among Us

By Al Ebach, CPPS

*As we welcome the stranger into our midst,
we welcome Christ Himself,
for in the face of the migrant, immigrant, and refugee,
we must see the face of Christ.*

Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope

A few months ago as I blessed the house of a single mother and her three children, I asked her some questions about her employment and her children. As she related her story, I sensed some fear in her eyes and in her voice. As I pressed the issue she shared that she feared losing her job of seventeen years because of the immigration restrictions being discussed by the legislators.

All of her children were born in the United States, but she feared that if she did not have her work permit renewed, she might be separated from her children because of the possibility of a prison term and deportation. Her husband had left her for another woman so this was a tremendous weight she had to bear on her own. Her children are too young to understand the severity of the situation. Having grown up in the United States the children did not desire leaving a country they have known all their lives.

This is one of many stories I encounter on the West Side of Kansas City. Many people have been working in the United

People would not leave their homelands and their families if they did not have political, economic, or sometimes, religious pressures or persecutions.

States for a number of years and now face the possibility of deportation. It makes little sense to call people illegal that have contributed to a society for as many years as some people have. There are people who have

worked at becoming citizens but have run into numerous roadblocks. Consequently there are many people who have been in the United States for twenty years or more and still are not documented. One of the fallacies about immigration is that people are not interested in becoming naturalized citizens.

Another fallacy is that people think migrants want to come to the United States because it is the land of enchantment. People would not leave their homelands and their families if they did not have political, economic, or sometimes, religious pressures or persecutions. For the most part, people leave their places of origin because they have completely exhausted their options. First generation people would definitely return to their homelands if the opportunity presented itself.

Motivation: Desperation

If people were not desperate about their living situations, why would they risk their lives to cross a vast ocean or an arid desert? In the summer of 2005 I had the opportunity to live near the border of Mexico, in a small community in New Mexico. I stayed with a friend who is in the funeral business. In six weeks there were nine people who were brought to the funeral home who died while crossing the desert in search of an opportunity to provide for the well being of their families in Mexico. These nine are a small percentage of the many who die on a daily basis while crossing the desert.

One of my friend's employees risked crossing the desert seventeen years ago with two small children and an infant. It was interesting to listen to her story, and how she still longs to go back to Mexico to see her family. During my stay in New Mexico I had the opportunity to go to Mexico to meet her parents and some of her brothers and sisters. She, along with people all over the world, migrated out of desperation. Some people have built

productive lives while others have ended in refugee camps. During my stay on the Mexican border I observed hundreds of people waiting for the right opportunity to cross over. People who are desperate will continue to find ways to cross the border.

Almost two years ago when I was in Vietnam I was invited to speak with migrants from Central Vietnam. They had many questions about migrants in the United States, asking whether migrants in the United States would return to their homelands if they had the opportunity. Being ignorant about migration at the time, I shared that people who come to the United States do not want to return to their homelands because of their terrible conditions. The Vietnamese migrants informed me that if they had the resources to return they would go back to their communities because they missed their friends and relatives. They informed me that they migrated because they had to provide for their families. After I returned to Sacred Heart-Guadalupe Parish and became more informed I realized that most migrants would definitely return to their homelands if the opportunity presented itself. Many migrants fear that once they leave they risk never seeing their families or homelands again.

Remembering our Stories

This past year I was invited to assist in giving workshops in various deaneries of the Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese.

The workshops were basically to educate people of parishes about immigration, and we were hoping the participants would take the information to their parishes to assist in the education of others in their parish communities. In order for me to be a presenter I had to educate myself on the topic. I read many articles, watched videos and participated in marches to protest legislation proposed on the national level. The more I studied and got involved the

more I realized that what was shared by immigrants at these information workshops paralleled my own story.

As people heard my story of my ancestors, which is already a hundred years removed, they realized that times really have not changed that much. Even after a hundred years, people were having similar experiences.

As people heard my story of my ancestors, which is already a hundred years removed, they realized that times really have not changed that much. Even after a hundred years, people were having similar experiences. The difference is that now there is proposed legislation to keep migrants out, whereas, when my ancestors arrived everyone was invited to enter because they were needed to provide workers to replace men who were serving in the war.

As I related about my ancestors leaving Germany to go to Russia, and then migrating to the United States, the workshop participants could not believe that I too, after all those years, experienced a language barrier, humiliation, and discrimination. I

*People who legitimately need protection
from the threats of violence or war,
or who need employment to feed themselves and their children,
should be invited to live in peace and with dignity.*

thought I had put the whole experience behind me, but the more people commented about the situation the more things surfaced. For example, in college I had a professor tell me that I had better get rid of my accent if I wanted to preach. This criticism frightened me and I worked really hard to make sure I sounded like everyone else. Today I would have to ask what everyone else sounds like. Even after sixty-some years there was still obvious discrimination.

When I entered graduate school I shared this situation with my homiletics professor. He was appalled. He encouraged me to work on keeping my accent because in his experience he felt that accents seemed to invite peoples' attention. Now when I hear someone say that people who want to live in the United States should learn English, I have these little flashbacks. I realized later that the professor who asked me to lose my accent was probably second generation from Ireland. How quickly people seem to forget their stories and their histories!

Catholic Social Teaching & Immigration Legislation

There are many aspects of the immigration legislation that need to be addressed but most importantly people have to educate themselves. We need to continue to attend workshops, discussions, and information sessions, to not only be educated, but to rid ourselves of personal biases and judgments. Yes, all the information can be overwhelming, but if one has a computer it is as simple as typing in the word "immigration" and from the information provided choose points of interest. I am more involved with immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, so I have gleaned much of my information from the pastoral letter of the U.S./Mexican bishops, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (2003). This pastoral letter frames the Church's position on migration and immigration, and invites people to understand the rights of those who migrate.

This pastoral letter calls people to respond to the Catholic Social Teachings. These teachings are very clear about the responsibilities of church, state, communities and individuals. Again, people need to educate themselves to get familiarized with the teachings of the Catholic Church. At the workshops we tried to educate people about immigration but we were amazed how many of the participants had never heard of the Catholic Social Teachings, and many, who had heard them for the first time, had a true conversion regarding their responsibilities as Catholics.

For the most part, our country had an open door policy for many years. But for various reasons, primarily fear of terrorists and threats to job security, our nation has put restrictions on immigration. While all nations should have the right to place restrictions on immigration, the Immigration Reform Bill should be open to invite people to stay who have been model citizens for a number of years and be able to remain in the country they have served. People who legitimately need protection from the threats of violence or war, or who need employment to feed themselves and their children, should be invited to live in peace and with dignity.

It has always been the tradition of the Catholic Church, to protect the rights of all people. Catholic Social Teaching bears out the support the church will provide for all of God's people. Bishops throughout the nation are expressing concerns about the political rhetoric that seems to deny basic human rights. Bishop

Robert Finn wrote in the diocesan newspaper, "This principle of justice is part and parcel of our Catholic tradition, and affirms that, regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity which should be respected by other individuals and the policies of government (April 14, 2006, *The Catholic Key*)."

The Parish Resource Kit from the Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform, *Justice for Immigrants: A Journey of Hope*, reflects the call and the challenge of immigration: "As we welcome the stranger into our midst, we welcome Christ Himself, for in the face of the migrant, immigrant, and refugee, we must see the face of Christ. In the Gospel of Luke, this is made clear in the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-15), as they become witnesses to the Truth by welcoming the stranger who is Christ."



For Reflection

- ❑ What are some prejudices or misconceptions I have had about migrants?
- ❑ With the present political climate regarding immigration, what can I do to influence politicians to make laws that protect the rights of all human beings?
- ❑ In my understanding of scripture and Catholic Social Teachings, how can I exhibit Gospel values toward migrants or immigrants and encourage others to do the same?
- ❑ Share some personal experiences about immigration, either in your own family background, or regarding people you have associated with in your community or church.



Precious Blood Missionary Al Ebach is on the leadership team for the Kansas City Province. Ordained in 1974, he is director of formation, living at the formation house in Kansas City, MO, while also serving as pastor at Sacred Heart-Guadalupe Parish on Kansas City's West Side.

