

Reflections from Catholic Social Teaching:

Immigration

I was a stranger and you welcomed me...

The Catholic Church has a rich history of scriptural and social teaching that addresses the question of immigration. Stories of forced migration in the Pentateuch led to the Ten Commandments—a cornerstone of our Catholic faith. In the New Testament, we see the Holy Family as refugees fleeing Herod's wrath and escaping to Egypt. The Gospel of St. Matthew also addresses the plight of the refugee by reminding us to show compassion for immigrants. In the 1952 apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia*, Pope Pius XII reaffirms the commitment of the church to care for pilgrims, aliens, exiles, and migrants. Pope John Paul II's *Ecclesia in America* states that the ultimate solution to the immigration issue is the elimination of global underdevelopment.



Where do immigrants come from?

Immigrants come to the U.S. from all over the world. Foreign born persons make up 11.7% of the U.S. population and number 33.5 million.

How do immigrants contribute to society?

Immigrants contribute to the U.S. in a variety of ways. Immigrants bring with them diverse cultures, foods, and traditions that can enrich U.S. society. Immigrants enter the U.S. labor force, often taking jobs that are unwanted by U.S. citizens and boost the productivity of the economy. As of Dec. 2004, there were approximately 69,300 foreign born members of the U.S. armed forces, with 37.6 percent of these from Latin America and the Caribbean. These foreign born soldiers represent approximately five percent of the total on active duty.

— www.educationforjustice.org

In 2003, the bishops of Mexico and the United States jointly issued the pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. In this letter, the bishops say that U.S. immigration policy should protect the human rights and dignity of immigrants and asylum seekers. The bishops also laid out principles for a just immigration reform proposal, that includes a program to legalize undocumented migrants in the U.S.; a worker program with appropriate worker protections for workers; reform of the family preference system to reduce waiting times for family reunification; and restoration of due process protections for immigrants.

To advance the principles contained in *Strangers No Longer*, the bishops mounted the Justice for Immigrants campaign. This national campaign is designed to unite and mobilize a growing network of Catholic organizations and individuals, as well as others of good faith. In addition, the campaign will seek to dispel myths and misperceptions about immigrants.

www.educationforjustice.org. This passage was excerpted from "Toward Immigration Reform," by Mark Franken, executive director of Migration and Refugee Services at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Catholics Called to the Common Good

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“Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity that should be respected. Often they are subject to punitive laws and harsh treatment from enforcement officers from both receiving and transit countries. Government policies that respect the basic human rights of the undocumented are necessary.”

— The Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States,
Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope, Jan. 22, 2003

Facts on Immigrant Workers in the U.S.

“Don’t mistreat any foreigners who live in your land. Instead treat them as well as you treat citizens and love them as much as you love yourself. Remember, you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19:33,34).

- 11.5 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born totaling 32.5 million immigrants, according to the 2002 population survey.
- Immigrants provide more to the nation’s economy and government services than they take or use, adding about \$10 billion each year to the U.S. economy and paying at least \$133 million in taxes.
- A large proportion of immigrant families (85 percent) are mixed status (at least one parent is a non-citizen and one child is a citizen).
- Immigrant workers working full time are nearly twice as likely to make less than \$20,000/year than native workers (31.1 versus 17.4 percent).

Reflection: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

“We are not unlike the lawyer whose dialogue with Jesus frames the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). When we ask only for simple legal solutions, we effectively exclude the strangers in our midst from the communion table of fellowship in God’s household. We treat them as impediments to our own progress instead of seeing them as opportunities for redeeming and reconciling discipleship.

Even worse, we stereotype them. We use harmful labels—such as illegal aliens—to effectively preclude our ever having to consider them as members of our neighborhoods and congregations. The parable of the Good Samaritan challenges us to understand that violence towards those who are the least powerful among us can take the form of legislative acts or of human indifference and disconnection. Jesus asks that we who would be good disciples be good neighbors—be willing to think and act beyond what has ordinarily been expected. This is the message of the incarnation itself and the meaning behind the message when Jesus tells the lawyer to ‘go and do likewise.’”

— www.educationforjustice.org quoting from <http://gbgm-umc.org/umcor/refugees/goodsamaritan.stm>

Prayer for Our Migrant Sisters and Brothers

**A mother migrates with her children.
They hope to escape poverty.
No one will let them try.
They are turned back at the border.
A family flees to escape war and death.
They leave with nothing.
They will never return.**

**A father entrusts his son to a relative who knows of a job for the boy.
The boy becomes a slave in a factory.**

**A young woman responds to an ad: “Work in a factory! Make money!”
She is made to prostitute her body.**

**A teenager migrates to the city, looking for work.
He performs heavy labor for pennies.
He sleeps with cockroaches.
He almost starves,
but he sends money to his family.**

Today we remember the plight of migrants.

God, they are all your children.
Help us, as Pope Benedict XVI calls us: to understand the causes of migration, to feel solidarity with those who migrate, and to work for safety and justice for those who flee poverty and war. Amen.

*Prayer by Jill Rauh, Center of Concern.
www.educationforjustice.org*

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What is the clear call of our Christian faith in terms of respecting the rights of immigrants?

Why do many people find it such a challenging call?