

Immigration reform is critical today

BY BISHOP HOWARD J. HUBBARD

This year, our Diocese of Albany is one of many in the country seeking to educate our members about the need for comprehensive immigration reform, and to encourage our people to advocate with the President and Congress in addressing this urgent issue.

The Church's concern about the migration of people has its foundation in the Scriptures; this phenomenon is a common thread throughout the Old and New Testament.

In Exodus, for example, we read of the Israelites, who flee the oppression of Egypt and wander in the wilderness for 40 years, until God leads them to a new home, Israel.

In the New Testament, exile and homelessness mark the life of Christ, as well. In Matthew, the child Jesus and the Holy Family flee as refugees to Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod.

As an adult, Jesus is an itinerant preacher who travels throughout Galilee and Judea to spread his message. He tells us: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head."

Christ's example

There is no coincidence here; Christ lived as a migrant and a refugee for a reason: in order to live with His people in solidarity and to provide an example to all generations, even to this day.

So, in Catholic teaching, we see in the face of the immigrant, the refugee and the asylum seeker, the face of Christ. Called by our Lord to respond to the stranger, as a Catholic community we have no choice but to open wide the borders of our hearts and our Church to all who are on the move.

As the body of Christ on earth, the Church by her mission must reflect the teachings and example of Jesus, the migrant. It is part of who we are. It is our identity, and service to the migrant, who is Christ, is an expression of our faith and a duty which we cannot forsake.

In his visit to the United States in April 2008, our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, reaffirmed the role that the Church has in this regard when he called upon the U.S. bishops to continue to welcome immigrants: "Brother bishops, I want to encourage you and your communities to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks these days, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrows and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home."

Our mandate

As a Catholic community, then, we have both a Gospel and papal mandate to address the legal, social, economic and pastoral needs of our immigrant sisters and brothers.

This is what we have been seeking to do in our Diocese of Albany with our Hispanic Outreach Services — sponsored by Catholic Charities — in Albany, Amsterdam, Schenectady and Troy; with our Hispanic Apostolate at Holy Family parish in Albany, St. Mary's in Amsterdam, St. Mary's in Crescent, St. Anthony's in Schenectady, St. Patrick's and St. Anthony's in Troy and St. Joseph's in Stuyvesant Falls/ Stottville; and with our diocesan

immigration legal services and our refugee resettlement program.

These services to our present immigrants and refugees mirror the pastoral, spiritual, social, educational and cultural outreach which our Diocese provided to previous generations of German, Polish, French Canadian, Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Slavic, Korean, Filipino and Vietnamese immigrants.

In addition to these direct pastoral, spiritual, social and legal services, we as a Church in the United States are committed to comprehensive immigration reform. Our immigration laws ultimately must be judged by how they impact the basic dignity and God-given rights of the human person.

In his recent encyclical, "Caritas In Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), Pope Benedict XVI speaks to this point: "Every migrant is a human person who as such possesses fundamental inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance."

Campaign aims

To meet this challenge, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic organizations nationwide have formed the Catholic Campaign for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (www.justiceforimmigrants.org), which supports the following:

- a path to citizenship for the 10-12 million undocumented people in the U.S.;
- reform of our employment-based immigration system, so that migrant workers can enter the United States and work in a safe, regulated and humane manner;
- reform of the family-based immigration system, so that waiting times or backlogs to reunite families are significantly reduced;
- restoration of due process protections for immigrants; and
- policies to address the root causes of migration, such as economic development in poor countries.

As chairperson for the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, I have a particular concern to ensure that the last of these goals is addressed in any immigration reform.

Migration is closely linked to economic, social and political realities that influence the decision, and often the necessity, for people to migrate. Currently, close to 200 million people live outside their country of birth worldwide. Although this number includes refugees, asylum seekers and others, economic migrants make up the largest proportion.

These economic migrants — who could often be described as economically displaced people — have few other options to remain in their country and meet the basic needs of their families.

Disparity grows

The expansion of globalization, characterized by interdependent economic and social relations, has created levels of wealth barely imagined in the past. However, the benefits have not been evenly distributed and often have deepened the inequalities between and within countries.

In the context of globalization, goods and capital cross borders with increasing ease, but workers are unable to move to where job opportunities exist or to where their jobs may have moved. At the same time, many wealthier countries are experiencing declining birth rates and aging populations that would lead to a labor shortage were it not for immigrant workers.

Currently, restrictive migration policies throughout the world that do not reflect the changes brought about by globalization have resulted in few avenues for legal or safe migration. Instead, many migrants experience abuse and exploitation as they travel in dangerous conditions.

They are subjected to extortion and physical and sexual violence, and die of exposure, dehydration or drowning. Many migrants have little access to protection, legal representation or basic service.

Consider these

Hence, policies that address the root cause of migration must include the following principles:

1. People have the right to find opportunities within their own homeland: They have the right not to migrate. This principle emphasizes that all people have the right to find in their own countries the economic, political and social opportunities to live in dignity and not be compelled to migrate.
2. People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families where conditions do not exist to meet their basic needs. Unfortunately, U.S. immigration laws and policies have become outdated and even harmful to some immigrants and asylum seekers.

As already noted, between 10 and 12 million people in the U.S. live on the margins of our society for lack of proper immigration documentation. Immigrants who are legal permanent residents in the U.S. who want to reunite with close family members must often wait 10 or more years for visas for their relatives.

Enforcement strategies employed along our southern border have resulted in thousands of deaths and have not resulted in a decrease in migration flows. Asylum seekers who flee persecution in their home countries and look for safe haven in the U.S. instead find themselves detained as criminals.

Immigration reform in the United States, then, should include a path to permanent residency which is achievable and family unification which allows immediate family members to join workers.

3. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders. The Church does not promote an "open border" immigration policy, but rather policies that ensure safe, legal and orderly immigration and address the needs of both migrant families and impacted communities.
4. The human dignity and human rights of all migrants should be respected. Regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity and human rights that should be respected. Enforcement and border control practices should respect the human dignity of migrants.

In sum, the Church must work to reduce the need for people to migrate and to protect those people who have little choice but to do so. Our long-term goal is equitable and sustainable development for all peoples, so that migration is driven by choice, not by desperation.

Help to reform

Integral human development in poor nations should be our goal, not a border fence.

Based on the experience of Catholic organizations in many countries, the flow of migrants will continue as long as social factors compel people to leave their homes in search of work or safety. We must address both the factors that create global poverty and marginalization, and work for comprehensive immigration reform.

I invite all of us who, except for our Native Americans, are descendents of immigrants or immigrants ourselves, to join in advocating for humane, compassionate and just immigration reform and in seeking to reduce the global poverty that underlies the present migration pattern.

Please join the Church's postcard campaign to urge members of Congress to pass immigration reform this year.

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