



"When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt." (Lv. 19: 33-34)

## CELEBRATING INDEPENDENCE DAY AND OUR IMMIGRANT HERITAGE

In both the Old Testament and the New, migration is a central theme that helps to create a moral framework that Christians can reflect on and use when dealing with immigration and their encounter with the stranger. These reflections can provide insights as to how Christians are to engage the question of migration in the contemporary world.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the book of Genesis, Abraham was called forth by God and sent out to a new land. In response, he, his wife Sarah and his brother's son Lot gathered their possessions together and migrated to Canaan (Gen. 12:1-5). In old age, both Sara and Abraham had an opportunity to show great generosity to the Lord, who came to them in the guise of three strangers (Gen: 18:1-10). This welcome posture provides an early and paradigmatic example as to how God's people are to welcome strangers in their midst. Eventually, Abraham's descendents were led into slavery in Egypt and were bound for many years,

until God raised up Moses, who led them into the desert and freed them from the captivity of the Pharaoh. In response to their time in captivity, the commandments regarding the treatment of strangers became incorporated into the Old Testament. This is clearly evident in the the quote from Leviticus above. Just as concern and fair treatment of the stranger was central to the Jewish experience, it also became foundational for the Christian one.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT

Following the Birth of Jesus, the Holy Family was forced to flee their homeland under threat of violence from King Herod, and took refuge in Egypt. Pope Pius XII highlighted this event in his Apostolic Constitution, *Exsul Familia*. Here he proclaimed that the Holy Family is an archetype for all refugee families. In their pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer*, the Catholic bishops of the United States expanded on this insight and noted that "from this account the Holy Family has become a figure with

whom Christian migrants and refugees throughout the ages can identify, giving them hope and courage in hard times.”

How we as believers reach out to the migrant communities among us bears directly on the framework that has developed in the moral tradition of the Church and in the very pages of Scripture. We are obligated as believers to welcome the stranger and provide protection to the needy and the vulnerable.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, IMMIGRATION, AND AMERICA

For this reason, the Catholic Church in the United States has for decades reached out her hand to provide comfort and support to migrants who make their way to America. From the waves of Irish and German immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by those from Eastern Europe, the Church has made an effort to provide pastoral care and protection to these new Americans. Sadly, many of these new immigrants did not find a welcoming, non-Catholic American culture. Even today, nativist sentiment runs strong and deep in American life. It is thus incumbent on Catholics to continue to live out their moral obligation to welcome the stranger, and for non-Catholics to voice opposition to nativist sentiment that still exists in parts of America today. We believers and non-believers alike are called on to affirm elements of the American political tradition that stand as a beacon to the poor and the downtrodden.

## AMERICA AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

While nativism has at times plagued the American experience with migrants, there is an alternative tradition that has stressed an openness to immigrant communities and emphasis on the equality of all men and women, regardless of their national origin. In his letter to newly arrived Irish, George Washington declared that “The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent, and the respectable Strange, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions.” America is a land of opportunity and immigration, rather than a dead weight, is a source of strength that has helped this great country to flourish.

In contrast to the racial stereotyping and discrimination that has often served as an undercurrent to nativist sentiment, the Declaration of Independence counters with a theme of equality, liberty, and human dignity. It is on July 4th that we celebrate *this* tradition, and it is during this period of celebration that we all ought to celebrate those values as well as our core Catholic values that teach us to love thy neighbor and respect the inherent dignity of all people.



Copyright © 2011, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright holder.  
Photo Credits:  
Jaci Braga

*“We hold these truths to be self evident, That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...”*

*-Declaration of Independence*