



Committee on Migration

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The Catholic Church and Immigration Reform Georgetown University November 3, 2009

His Eminence Theodore Cardinal McCarrick Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, D.C.

I am pleased to be here tonight as part of the Woodstock Theological Center forum. I congratulate the co-sponsors of this event, for both their dedication to the Church's mission in this area and for the skill in which they articulate and promote the Catholic message. I often say that without the commitment of our priests, religious, and laity, the Church's voice on the vital issues of our time would not reach all who should hear it.

The issue of immigration is of extreme interest and concern to the Catholic Church, both institutionally and in the public sphere. Unlike any other social phenomenon, it impacts the life and nature of the global and local Church and shapes us as a faith community. Because of it, we are a Church rich in diversity, yet unique in our common belief that all peoples are one under our Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Tonight I would like to outline for you the basis for Catholic involvement in and attention to the migration of peoples and explain how the Church engages this global phenomenon here in the United States of America.

We first look to the Gospels as a foundation, where the migration of peoples is a common thread throughout both the Old and New Testament. In Exodus, we see the flight of the Israelites, who flee the oppression of Egypt and wander in the wilderness for forty years, until the Lord leads them to a new home, Israel. This experience leads to the Lord's admonishment to the Israelites in Leviticus: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34). There is no equivocation in that statement.

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 threat of Herod. As an adult, Jesus is an itinerant preacher who travels throughout Galilee and Judea to spread his message: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His Head." (Mt 8-20) As the Lord came to share humanity with us in everything but sin, so, too, he came to share our experiences and challenges, including the migrant experience.

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, to provide example to all generations, even to this day, and to give witness to the Kingdom of God. This becomes clear later in the Gospel of Matthew, where our Lord teaches us that to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, we must welcome the stranger: “... For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mt. 25-25) Just as you did this to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt 25-39, 40)

So, in Catholic teaching, in the face of the immigrant, refugee, asylum-seeker, or trafficking victim, we see the face of Christ. We may not recognize Him at first, but He is there, just as the two disciples who met the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus only knew it was the Lord “in the breaking of the bread.”

The parable of the Good Samaritan also is instructive about welcoming the stranger, even if that person is not like us, or does not have a certain standing in the community. In the Gospel of Luke, the lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with the story of the Jewish traveler, beaten up and left by the side of the road, who is aided by a Samaritan. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, who were despised foreigners. However, the Good Samaritan is the only one in the Lord’s parable to stop and assist the Jewish traveler. In assisting a fellow human being, cultural, national, and religious differences were not an issue to the Good Samaritan. Nor should they be to us.

In his World Migration Day message in 1996, His Holiness John Paul II relates this parable to the issue of migration: “For her part, the Church, like the Good Samaritan, feels it her duty to be close to the illegal immigrant and refugee, contemporary icon of the despoiled traveler, beaten and abandoned on the side of the road to Jericho.”

Called by our Lord to respond to the stranger, as a Catholic community we really have no choice but to open the doors of the church wide to all who are on the move. As the body of Christ on earth, in her mission the Church must reflect the teachings and example of Christ the migrant. It is part of who we are, our identity, and service to the migrant, who is Christ, an expression of our faith and a duty which we cannot forsake.

In a recent homily, His Eminence Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia states this well: “The work of organizing, advocacy, and Catholic moral teaching expressed in social justice is our response to the voice of Jesus. When we hunger for righteousness and thirst for truth in this way, Jesus Himself is our guest.”

How do we, as a Catholic community, respond to the truth of Christ the migrant and the call of our Lord to welcome the stranger? We manifest this truth and respond to His call in all aspects of our ministry—pastoral care, social services, education, and advocacy---and accomplish it by the participation of all in the Catholic community---clergy, religious, and the laity. As a global institution, this obligation transcends national boundaries and national interests, and thus places the Church as a defender of immigrants and refugees around the world.

In his visit to the United States in April of last year, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the role of the U.S. Church 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 today, to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrow and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home.”

As a Catholic community in this country, we work hard to support immigrants and to “help them flourish in their new home,” as the Holy Father states. In the pastoral realm, we provide pastoral care to 54 ethnic communities, which do not include the Hispanic community. More than 80 percent of dioceses have diocesan staff coordinating Hispanic/Latino ministry. We also provide pastoral assistance to other communities on the move, including migrant farm workers, seafarers, and travelers.

In the area of service, we are the largest non-profit, private provider of health-care, education, and social services to immigrants, refugees, trafficking victims, and other persons on the move, regardless of their status. We employ the largest resettlement network of refugees in the nation, resettling more than 22,000 refugees this year alone and are the largest non-profit provider of services to victims of trafficking. We also deploy the largest team of legal support network to immigrants in the country through the Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC). I do not tell you these things to boast—although as Catholics we should be proud of these efforts---but to educate, because many Catholics are unaware of the Church’s service to newcomers.

However, we too frequently must support immigrants in their “sorrow and trials,” because of a broken immigration system and a toxic political atmosphere which has prevented humane reform of this system. This situation impacts our ministries to immigrants and the life of the Church. Just as we welcome the migrant in our parishes, schools, hospitals, and service programs—indeed because of that privilege---we also must serve and defend the migrant in the public square.

As pastors, educators, social service providers, and advocates, the members of the Catholic community are painfully aware of the plight of immigrants in the United States. We are approached for legal, pastoral, social and emotional assistance on a daily basis. Sadly, we witness families being separated, migrant workers being exploited, and families mourning the death of loved ones who die on their journey to the United States. As witnesses to this dark reality in our country, we are compelled to change the law and to offer public policy solutions which are humane and place the welfare of migrants and their families first, not last.

What exactly is the reality we witness? It is a reality marked by the separation of families by enforcement raids, the detention of over 30,000 immigrants a day, and the death of 5,000 migrants in the American desert since 1998. It is a reality marked by the exploitation of migrants in the workplace and at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers, and by constant fear in immigrant communities.

Seeking to correct these injustices, in 2003 the Mexican bishops and the U.S. bishops issued a pastoral letter entitled “*Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*,” which called for humane and comprehensive reform of both U.S. and Mexican immigration laws. In 2005, the U.S. Catholic bishops launched the *Justice for Immigrants* campaign, designed to educate Catholics about the human reality of migration and to garner support for reform. Through these initiatives, the U.S. bishops, joined by priests, religious, and members of the laity, have made substantial progress in educating Catholics around the country about immigration and the need for reform. However, much more needs to be done to get the message out. I encourage you to join the effort.

On October 8th, I brought our Catholic message before the U.S. Senate, where I testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Immigration on the need for comprehensive immigration reform. In my testimony, I pointed to the extensive experience of the Catholic community in this country with immigrants, refugees, and other newcomers, and offered recommendations for changes in the current immigration system. I stated that we must change our laws so as to bring the undocumented out of the shadows, provide safe passage to those who want to come to work or to join their families in our country, and address the economic inequities which compel persons to leave their homes in search of employment.

I also emphasized that, while it was appropriate that our elected officials address how immigration impacts our economy, security, and other national interests, they must not do so at the cost of the basic rights and dignity of the human person: “From this unique [Catholic] perspective, Mr. Chairman, and while acknowledging its vast complexities, we look at immigration through a simple lens. Our immigration laws ultimately must be judged by how they impact the basic dignity and God-given rights of the human person.”

In his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, 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.”(*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 62)

This is a principle and message, simple but powerful, that the Church and her members can deliver effectively. It is those here tonight and Catholics throughout the nation who will be able to convince our public officials to heed this principle and to enact humane immigration reform. That is why the Woodstock forum tonight is so important, so that we as a Catholic community can learn about this issue and work together to change the laws which impact our brothers and sisters in Christ.

As the Catholic bishops of Mexico and the United States stated in *Strangers No Longer*: “We judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us” (no. 6).

In closing, I would like to encourage you to continue your efforts to help immigrants and others who come to our land. If you are new to this mission, I pray that this forum tonight will inspire you to get involved, whether it be on a service, advocacy, or pastoral level. As we offer these works of solidarity, however small, the Lord Jesus sees them and sends the Holy Spirit to help us, so that our work helps unify all His people.

In the end, by opening the door to the stranger, we are opening the door to Christ in our lives.

The Lord is the one who says in the Book of Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20).

God bless you.