

# **Strangers No Longer Together on the Journey of Hope**

**A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration  
Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States  
2003**

## **Introduction**

The increased migration from the Americas is part of the worldwide phenomenon of globalization which brings both promises and challenges.

Contrary to the vision of the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, many who seek to migrate are suffering and dying. Also, human rights are often abused, families separated and racist and xenophobic attitudes remain.

The bishops seek to awaken their people to the mysterious presence of the crucified and risen Lord in the person of the migrant and to renew in them the values of the Kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus.

People on all sides of the migration issue have problems:

- devastated families who have lost loved ones who died in the effort to sustain life for their families.
- women and children left alone while the head of the house seeks to provide them with the necessities of life.
- landowners and enforcement personnel who seek to protect the common good while respecting the human rights of immigrants.
- religious and social service workers who attempt to respond to the needs of migrants.
- elected officials who must deal with the legal and humanitarian issues.

We, the community of faith, are judged by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us.

We must seek to implement the principles of Catholic social teachings and offer a moral framework for embracing, rather than rejecting the reality of migration.

Our church communities must find pastoral and legal ways to welcome our brothers and sisters in faith.

## **Chapter 1 - The American immigrant legacy.**

We are a nation of immigrants. Many fled injustice seeking liberty, others came to

escape devastating poverty, others, the slaves, came by force. Our ancestors faced many of the same problems now faced by the new wave of immigrants.

## **Chapter 2 - Lessons from Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching**

Immigration in the light of the Word of God and Catholic Social Teaching can help us understand the causes of immigration and provide light to solve the many problems which it presents to us.

Old Testament -- The ancient Israelites identified with the aliens because of their experiences as aliens. In Genesis Ch. 12, Abraham's experience of God put him on the road from Ur as an immigrant (alien), first to Canaan and then to Egypt., to escape famine. Later, in welcoming three strangers (manifestations of God) he found that Sarah would finally bear a son and continue his line, which would be the nation of Israel.

When the Israelites were later enslaved in Egypt, their liberation led them to make commandments regarding the "strangers" or "aliens" among them. For example Deut. 10:17-19:

For the Lord, your God, is the ...Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites, accepts no bribes, who executes justice for the orphan and widow, and befriends the alien, feeding and clothing him. So you, too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.

Further, when speaking of tithing in Deut. 14:28-29:

At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns; ...and the alien and the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

This same kind of command is expressed in Lev. 19:9-10 and also in 19:34 which reads:

The alien who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your God.

New Testament -- In the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew paints Jesus, Mary and Joseph as refugees from the wrath of Herod and migrating to Egypt. Later, in Matthew Chapter 25, Jesus teaches that he is present in all those who hunger, thirst, are naked or in prison. And Jesus makes it clear that the Kingdom of Heaven is for those who respond to those in need: "Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" Mt. 25:40.

Jesus then promises to send the Holy Spirit to unite all people into one family of God.

Catholic Social Teaching -- Catholic social teachings, especially from papal encyclicals, have long defended the right to migrate in order for people to exercise their God-given human rights - the right to life. Pope John XXIII in his encyclical “Pacem in Terris” taught that the idea of “the right to life” included adequate food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care and necessary social services. In the same encyclical he said:

Every human being has the right to freedom of movement and of residence within the confines of his own country; and, when there are just reasons for it, the right to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there.

Catholic social teachings also identify the causes of migration to be: poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, armed conflicts. Ideally, these conditions should be addressed in their own countries so that they need not migrate. However, Pope Pius XII, in his apostolic constitution *Exsul Familia*, teaches that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, they have the right to migrate.

Pope John Paul II, in his letter *Ecclesia in America*, sees global underdevelopment as the cause of much legal and illegal immigration. He reiterates the rights of migrants and their families and the respect for human dignity “even in cases of non-legal immigration”.

In *Strangers No Longer*, the bishops of the U.S. and Mexico see five principles emerging from Catholic social teaching which can guide the Church’s view on migration issues:

1. **Persons have the right to find opportunities in their homeland** - people have a right to find work and work that provides a just, living wage is a basic human need.
2. **Persons have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families** - the goods of the earth belong to all peoples. When life sustaining employment cannot be found in their country of origin, people have the right to migrate and nations should provide ways to accommodate this right.
3. **Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders** - while granting this right of control, such control is rejected when it is exerted merely for the purpose of acquiring additional wealth.
4. **Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection** -- those who flee persecution have a right to claim refugee status without incarceration.
5. **The human dignity and human rights of undocumented migrants should be respected** - regardless of their legal status, migrants, like all human beings, possess inherent human dignity and that dignity should be respected.

This Chapter is concluded with this observation:

The Church recognizes the right of a sovereign state to control its borders

in furtherance of the common good. It also recognizes the right of human persons to migrate so that they can realize their God-given rights. These teachings complement each other. While the sovereign state may impose reasonable limits on immigration, the common good is not served when the basic human rights of the individual are violated.

### **Chapter 3 - Pastoral Challenges and Responses**

Catholic concerns for immigrants include pastoral as well as public policy issues. First pastors must work to convert the hearts of American Catholics to see Jesus as present in all persons. They must work to overcome attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference and racism, so that clergy and laity may learn to accept immigrants not a threats to our personal interests, but as persons with dignity and rights.

This hoped for conversion of mind and heart leads to a communion expressed hospitality and a welcoming attitude toward immigrants. Catholic clergy and lay people must work to protect the human rights of immigrants, provide shelter, advocacy and other social service needs.

Dioceses need to work together to provide a sacramental presence for migrants at times and in places where migrants have access. Consideration should be given to providing priests to accompany immigrants and give them spiritual support. The bishops should initiate a study to focus on:

- the needs of migrants on their journey and at the point of arrival.
- the dioceses most in need of priests, religious and lay leaders.
- the possibility of seminaries in Mexico to prepare priests for service in the U.S.
- the assignment of religious communities to accompany migrants.
- investigating ways for immigrants to take up or continue their role as lay leaders

### **Chapter 4 - Public Policy Challenges and Responses**

Public policy should consider not only the *symptoms* of the migration phenomena, but also its *causes*. The bishops' policy recommendations address the root causes of migration, legal avenues for migration and humane law enforcement.

1. **Root Causes** - Mexico and the U.S. should work together to implement economic policies that create living-wage jobs in Mexico so that migration is by choice and not by necessity.

#### **2. Create Legal Avenues For Migration -**

-- Focus on public policies that promote family-based immigration. Current U. S. per-country limits on visas for family members of U. S. permanent residents from Mexico should be expanded. Currently, spouses and children are forced to wait as much as eight years to obtain visas to visit their loved ones. These policies encourage illegal migration.

-- Legislation must address the fact that only 5.5 million of the 10.5 million Mexican-born persons reside legally. A broad legalization program would benefit both countries by preserving family unity, stabilizing the U. S. labor market and contributing to the U.S. economy.

-- The U. S. needs Mexican laborers for a healthy economy and thus should provide workable ways for workers to obtain permanent legal status and also temporary work visas. Jobs should be available that provide a living wage and appropriate benefits and labor protections.

The current temporary-work program that allows some 30,000 workers entry to the U. S. is marked by a lack of enforcement of worker protections and by insufficient wages and benefits to support a family. A properly constructed worker program would reduce the need and costs of massive border enforcement and the demand for unscrupulous smugglers.

-- While accepting the right of a country to protect its borders, the Catholic Church does not accept some of the policies and tactics that the U. S. has employed to enforce this protection. Law enforcement personnel have difficult jobs, but certain policies have attacked the human dignity of immigrants and promoted excessive force and violence on both sides. Force should be employed only when absolutely necessary.

The treatment of minors is shameful and must be stopped. Minors are held in miserable detention facilities without the option to contact an attorney, guardian or relative or to file for asylum.

Mexican immigration policies are unclear, inconsistent and marked by corruption. Mexican border police often demand bribes and if these demands are not met, workers are beaten. Fear of the police drives migrants to isolated areas where they are prey to bandits who often rob and kill them. Border enforcement should be left to federal authorities on both sides of the border, not local police.

-- Enforcement policies have not stopped illegal immigration, but have resulted in the death of some 2,000 Mexicans. Immigrant smuggling has also increased with dire consequences for many Mexicans seeking work opportunities.

-- The 1996, the Congress passed the U. S. Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. It has limited the due process rights for migrants. It should be changed to respect these due process rights. Migrants seeking a living for their families should not be treated as common criminals.

-- The asylum policies of the U. S. and Mexico need to be changed. Those fleeing persecution in nations like China, India, Iran and Iraq often have valid claims for protection, but are likely to be swept up in anti-smuggling initiatives in Central America and Mexico and sent back to their persecutors without proper screening.

Along the U. S. Mexican border, the U. S. employs a policy known as *expedited removal* in which migrants are routinely detained and deported without a hearing before an immigration judge. This policy involves great injustices and violates the spirit of international law and commitments made by both our countries.

The bishops of Mexico and the U. S. restate a long-held position that asylum seekers and refugees should have access to qualified adjudicators who will objectively consider their pleas and implement due process consistent with international law.

--The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks have highlighted the need for security to combat terrorist attacks. However, reducing legal immigration between Mexico and the U. S. does not serve to make the U. S. or Mexico more secure.

The bishops urge both nations to cooperate in this area, but not to enact joint policies that undermine human rights, reduce legal immigration or deny asylum seekers opportunities for protection.