

Who is my Neighbor? A Reflection on Immigration and Catholic Social Teaching

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is prompted to tell the story of the Good Samaritan by the question, "And who is my neighbor?" My first reaction to this question is to feel some resentment toward the questioner. I wonder, "what was this man thinking?" Was he being a wise guy or did he really not know that Jesus would undoubtedly tell him that everyone is his neighbor. But then I realize that 2000 years later, with all of Jesus's lessons laid out before us, we often still don't get it. We still seem to think that there are people who deserve our help and there are those that don't. Newcomers, or immigrants, are often thought of as belonging to the category of those that don't deserve our help. After all, they come to our country, take our jobs, and use our tax dollars for their support. Or do they?

Come to our country? Well, yes, that is true in one sense. Immigrants leave one area of God's planet and travel to another, to the area we happen to call home. But the notion that this somehow violates us tends to ring a bit hollow when given a bit of thought. First of all, we must ask, what did we do to deserve to be born in the richest nation on earth, and what did another do to be born into poverty in another country? The only honest answer we can give is, "nothing." God has blessed us with abundance unknown to most of the planet. Isn't it a bit unreasonable and unfair for us to resent others for desiring to share in just a fraction of this blessing? Imagine trying to justify such a position to Jesus. I don't think he'd buy it, do you? And I haven't even yet mentioned the fact that just about every United States born citizen is a descendent of an immigrant. We are them. They are us.

Take our jobs? The Catholic Church will continue to support the rights and dignity of our domestic workforce, but this support is not mutually exclusive from a goal of humane immigration policy. Many, if not most, immigrants work jobs that nonimmigrants do not want. Many immigrants are recruited by businesses in the U.S. that have had trouble filling certain jobs. According to Muzaffar A. Chishti, a senior analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, a research and advocacy group in Washington, "There are large pockets of the labor market where it is now agreed by most people that American workers are unavailable, unwilling or untrained to do the job." (from Eduardo Porter, "When a Job Calls and No One Answers," New York Times, May 9, 2004).

Use our tax dollars for their support? Many, if not most, immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in social services. While undocumented immigrants are unable to get a social security number or driver's license, they are issued tax identification numbers and have income taxes withheld from their pay. "It turns out that over time, immigrants are net contributors to federal budgets, because immigrants do not request social assistance in the form of Medicare or Social Security services" (from Andrew M. Yuengert, "The Stranger who Sojourns with

You: Toward a Moral Immigration Policy", POLICY FORUM, Winter 2004, N. 6).

So am I suggesting we simply allow any and all to come to our country at any time, for any reason, no questions asked? Of course not. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recognizes a country's right to regulate its borders and to control immigration. But the Bishops state that a country must consider two other important principles while designing and enforcing their immigration policy: 1) that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families and 2) that every country must regulate its border with justice and mercy, seeking the common good.

The native does not have superior rights over the immigrant. Before God all are equal; the earth was given by God to all. When a person cannot achieve a meaningful life in his or her own land, that person has the right to move (from "A Guide to Understanding Catholic Social Teaching on Immigration and the Movement of Peoples, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops).

The current mood in Congress is for "enforcement only" legislation that fails to deal comprehensively with a broken immigration policy. A bill recently passed by the House of Representatives, if enacted as law, would actually make it illegal for a church to provide humanitarian aid to an undocumented immigrant. As American citizens and Catholic Christians, we must open our hearts to the fact that the immigrant is our brother or sister in Christ, and then support and encourage public policy and private actions that are consistent with this fact. Please learn more by visiting www.justiceforimmigrants.org, or by contacting the Social Action Office at 330-744-8451.

*"Who is my neighbor? The neighbor is every human being, without exception. It is not necessary to ask one's nationality, or to which social or religious group one belongs. If someone is in need, I must help."
(John Paul II)*

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