

Welcoming immigrants: New challenge for today's Catholics

By Msgr. Lewis F. Gaetano, D. Min.

I am a baby boomer, the grandson of an Italian immigrant and the great-grandson of Welsh immigrants. My Italian grandfather, alone and without possessions, came to this country at the age of 12. He spoke no English, but like so many others shared a hope that enabled him to venture across the Atlantic seeking to discover a way of life in this land of promise. The current wave of newcomers is not unlike the first.

My concern is that while the Church is informing the politics of the United States as to the demands of justice in reference to immigration, the Church itself is being challenged to become, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, a reminder of what the world and the church have forgotten.

The Church's Presence

Who was there to welcome that young boy who would be my grandfather and the countless others of that great wave of humanity? Sometimes family, sometimes a friend who had come over earlier; but always present was the Church. Most urban communities and every ethnic neighborhood, with its parish church and school, provided a focal point and important link for the newcomers, in which the language and traditions of each nationality was affirmed in a yet-to-be realized homeland.

The Church was a presence, a real presence, and it was within this community that each newcomer had the opportunity of being educated and helped in being assimilated as citizens in this new homeland. The cultural and social revolutions of the second half of the twentieth century have broadened our awareness and understanding of the human person since those days. Concurrently, the Second Vatican Council challenged the Church's engagement and dialogue with the world.

We look back on the theology and "lived behaviors" of the Church and its understanding of the human person as to rights and equality as archaic, especially in reference to the role of women and children. But for that time and place, the immigrant Church struggled within its own environment to help the newcomer understand a distinctive role as a citizen of heaven and a citizen of this new earth.

It was not an easy task for the immigrant newcomer, the Church, or the nation. That challenge tested the very core of what it meant to be human. Yet everything that was human echoed within the heart of the immigrant Church.

New Wave of Immigration

We are faced as a nation with a new immigration challenge that unquestionably affects the newcomers who have, or are attempting to, cross the southern border of the United States. This condition also presents a unique and unparalleled challenge for the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. The Church is being challenged to become a potent and real presence within our country for the immigrant newcomer and to be a "sign and instrument" having real implications within the life of the Roman Catholic Community.

A unifying vision of the Church as the living reality of God's presence and love made visible in the relationships and the lived experience of God's people emerged during the Second Vatican Council. Although not necessarily articulated in theological categories, this experience represents the newcomers' lived reality of family and relationships within their own culture. It is not easily replicated in the experience of the inner city or within the urban population centers. This community of life and persons is often an isolated reality in the experience of the Hispanic/Latino communities and their experience of church.

In many places, inner city or urban parish schools and churches have closed. The flourishing Catholic communities have moved from the city into the suburban areas, leaving behind empty churches and schools that once served the first wave of newcomers. Stark economic realities limit choices. The cost becomes too high to maintain the buildings and property, as well as salaries for teachers and administrators, pastors and staffs.

Tuition costs often prohibit today's newcomer from choosing Catholic elementary, secondary and college level education, and Catholic schools in the more comfortable neighborhoods of suburbia cannot afford to fill their seats with non-paying students. If and when scholarships are offered they are limited and well-intentioned tokens. Besides, the daily journey from the neighborhood of the newcomer to the suburban neighborhood is a long distance. One need only ask a descendent of a first wave immigrant and they will tell you what a long journey it has been to suburbia.

The Catholic Experience

My grandparents' and many of my parents' generation, who were educated within the Catholic system of schools, have now died. This first wave of immigrant newcomers and their children were educated in the neighborhood parish school and high school, while working and paying taxes to help build the public school system. There was no drain on the United States economy because there was no public assistance given to the parochial school. Yet those educated within the Catholic schools helped to provide the groundwork for the most powerful economic system in the world.

The contribution of the Catholic School system to the economy, to the growth of this country, to the sense of community, to the integration of the principles and values of the United States, were formed in the immigrant Catholic schools, beginning in the early 1900 and continuing into the 1960s. Economic growth and prosperity in the United States, particularly after the Second World War, owes much to the dreams and hopes of the first wave of immigrant newcomers, who struggled to provide a better life for their children and children's children.

We, the baby-boomers and our children, have acquired benefits and an entitlement that the immigrants who came to Ellis Island would never have imagined. All of this was accomplished in classrooms throughout this country. I can still remember 60 students in a classroom learning the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. It was the Church's commitment that enabled the non-English speaking immigrant and their children and grandchildren to become assimilated into the culture of the United States. It was this unsophisticated yet genuine formation by the Church that enabled the Catholic community in the United States to achieve not only a population of more than 60 million, but a level of unprecedented prosperity. Yes, the hopes and dreams of the first wave of immigrants have generally been realized. What now are we going to do now for this new "second wave" of immigrants coming across the southern border into the United States?

The Challenge to be Sacrament

A recent poll shows that 60 percent of the American people believe that illegal immigration hurts the U.S. economy by driving down wages, and 60 percent believe that illegal immigration is a drain on health care and education. Fifty-six percent support a legal temporary worker status for those already in the United States. The Catholic population represented within these statistics is being called to remember. It is also being called to come back to the inner city, to the poor children of our communities, to the new immigrants entering our communities. The Catholic population within the United States needs to remind the world and itself of what it has forgotten.

When teaching courses on the sacraments, I spend much time on the implications of the sacraments; meaning that our understanding of sacraments has real and concrete consequences for our daily lives. Therefore, Baptism says something concrete about how we see the human person and understand the dignity of the human person. It makes transparent what is already true; a human person is created in the image and likeness of God. We come together in community to celebrate that reality. Remembering the words of John Paul II in his first encyclical 'Redemptor Hominis,' in baptism we celebrate and imagine what living with "an attitude of amazement at the dignity of the human person" means for us as Catholic individuals, families, and community. For the first wave of immigrant newcomers, the Church was the "sign and instrument" – the Sacrament – the real presence – for the people within the neighborhood. It made real what was already present, imagining what life could be like if all shared in that vision of life.

The mandate of the Church is to be a "sign and instrument," a real presence in the lives of people. Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote years ago that the most difficult reality to be appropriated following the Second Vatican Council was the sacramental reality of the Church. Making operative what it proclaims and believes is true is not a cheap grace. To fail on this account is to fail the newcomer in the inner city and our urban areas. It is a failure of the Catholic people to respond to those most in need and to make effective the Church's fundamental concern and effort on behalf of the poor. Simply coming together as church for one hour on Sunday can amount to, even in the best of scenarios, mere ritual celebration. The celebration

of the Eucharist is intended to be the starting point, the gathering place in which the formation of community occurs, and it is meant to be the meeting place and fulfillment of all we hope to be as God's community. The dismissal at the end of Mass is not meant to be the ending for the poor, the marginalized, and the immigrant newcomer, but rather a sign of hope for a sustained real presence in the gathering of family and community for the other 167 hours of the week. It is the in-between time where a real void can exist in the lives of the newcomer, a void that the Catholic parish community once filled.

We cannot afford as a Church to be segregated by an economic, geographical and national divide. The great Christian emancipation of Colossians, where there is no longer Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free needs to guide the ultimate liberation of our current situation. If nothing human fails to find an echo in the human heart, then the lives and needs of the newcomer must resonate stridently in the heart of every Catholic. The lived reality of the Catholic people reminds the world of what it has forgotten. We need to remember that as church we are called to sustain, protect, support, and educate the newcomer within the community of faith.

A Challenge to Expand the Boundaries

To merely educate our own, to worship only with our own, to live only with our own, while failing to notice the newcomer standing at the gate is failing to be Catholic. Abandoning the urban and inner city and leaving only the "shell of the Church" is failing to be Catholic. The Church and schools that once housed, educated, assimilated and welcomed the first wave of newcomers at the table of the human family and the table of the Eucharist are now being abandoned. By abandoning the newcomers of God's people we are in danger of becoming a Church without a heart and soul, a mere shell.

The first immigrant Church, even with its lack of sophistication, education and wealth, was able to maintain a sense of family and community. Within this country, the first wave of immigrants have taken their place, and the second wave is now waiting to be welcomed within our acre of God's world, to be educated as citizens of this country, and invited to sit at the common table of the Eucharist which reconciles and bonds us to each other and to Jesus Christ.

The challenge as Church is not to move back into the old neighborhoods, but to expand our boundaries in a different manner. We are being called to share in the stewardship of those who do live in the old neighborhoods, remembering that we are Catholic, and that we cannot allow ourselves to submit to a congregationalism that fails to recognize the widening boundaries that the Body of Christ calls us to recognize.

Our life as a Catholic people is defined by faith in action and our entire mission is the formation and education of the whole person, embracing the whole person. To be Catholic in this world is to be up close and personal sharing a common humanity, a common worship, a common justice, and a common family. Catholic wisdom and tradition can provide the unifying link to a common table. This link will guide us into the future as a Church, allowing us to be a wise community, rejecting a reductionism of merely living in the present moment. By listening to its rich history, the Catholic community can again give newcomers hope for the future.

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