

Immigration and the Gospel

“Who is my neighbor?”

The issues surrounding immigration in this country are complex and evoke great emotion and rhetoric on both sides. Questions of border control, amnesty, terrorism, protection of national interests, economy, jobs, welfare, taxes, language, culture, racism, religion and those who are *legal* or *illegal* arise.

Is a country obliged to open its borders to others? Does not a country have a right and obligation to protect its own interests - to preserve its way of life? Will a continual flood of *Third World* immigrants impoverish the resources of our country and destroy our way of life? What should we do with the 12 million illegal immigrants already in the United States?

And then there are questions that arise within the Church. Should we have separate services in Spanish? Build separate churches? How do we handle those who are here illegally? If we welcome illegal aliens into our faith communities are we encouraging lawlessness? Is the Church for or against immigration reform? What is the balance between compassion and prudence? What is socially just?

In the midst of these questions, let us ask what our Faith has to offer us in terms of general principles that should guide us. In doing so, we turn to Scripture and the Teaching of our Church to try to determine what we can all agree on in light of the Gospel – in other words, what is *non negotiable*.

Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, *for I was a stranger and you welcomed me...* when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee? Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. Mt 25: 34,35,40

There are many areas that good Catholics can disagree on. We can disagree on the best way to implement the general principles of the Gospel. But there are some things that we may not disagree on and still call ourselves Christian. For example, determining the most effective way to care for the poor is a different question than whether or not we *should* care for the poor. We may disagree on the best way to care for the poor, but all Christians must agree that the Gospel commands us to care for the poor. Let's begin with what we can all agree on...

What can we learn from the Bible?

First, before God, we are all “strangers and sojourners” in this land (Lev 25:23). The earth belongs to God and “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Heb 13:14). God allows us to dwell on this earth as we await our home in heaven, but he requires that we treat others with justice and charity, for they are our brothers and sisters who look forward to the same heavenly home as we. Since we ourselves are foreigners on this earth, we should not oppress or do wrong to foreigners (Jer. 7:3-7; 22:3). If we open our home to others, God will open his home to us.

A man asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with a parable about a man who fell into desperate need. At the end of the parable, Jesus asked the man, “Which proved neighbor to the man in need?” The man answered, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” Lk 10:29-37

God commanded the Israelites to be kind to strangers in their land for they too had known what it was like to be strangers in the land of Egypt (Ex 22:21; Ex 23:9). Thus, they were commanded to share the plenty of their harvest with foreigners (Lev 19:9; 23:22), much as the native Indians did with the first American settlers.

The Israelites were even commanded to share their *inheritance* with those aliens who resided among them (Ezek 47:21-23). There was to be *one law* that applied *equally* to the Israelites and the strangers who lived among them (Ex 12:49). They were to love the foreigners as themselves, remembering that they too had once been foreigners (Lev 19:34).

In the New Testament we are exhorted to “show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2).

We are also told that *all people*, from whatever origin, when they become part of the Church through Baptism, are “no longer strangers and sojourners, but... *fellow citizens* with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:18-19).

“By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – (Americans or not, poor or rich, First World or Third World) and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (1Cor 12:13) In the Church, there is no longer any meaningful distinction based on nationality for “the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him” (Rom 10:12. Also Gal. 3:27,28).

“Here there cannot be Greek and Jew... barbarian, Scyth'ian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all.” (Col 3:11)

What Does the Catholic Church Teach?

~ *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*~

“The catechetical tradition... recalls that there are ‘*sins that cry to heaven*’” These include *sins of oppression* that prompt “the cry of the people oppressed... the cry of the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan, injustice to the wage earner.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, 1867)

Therefore, “more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the *foreigner* in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him.

Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible, may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens.” (CCC 2241)

“In the modern world, where there are still grave inequalities between rich countries and poor countries, and where advances in communication quickly reduce distances, the immigration of people looking for a better life is on the increase. These people come from less privileged areas of the earth and their arrival in developed countries is often perceived as a threat to the high levels of well-being achieved thanks to decades of economic growth.” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CDSC)*, 2005, par. 297.)

“*Institutions in host countries must keep careful watch to prevent the spread of the temptation to exploit foreign laborers, denying them the same rights enjoyed by nationals, rights that are to be guaranteed to all without discrimination.* Regulating immigration according to criteria of equity and balance is one of the indispensable conditions for ensuring that immigrants are integrated into society with the guarantees required by recognition of their human dignity. Immigrants are to be received as persons and helped, together with their families, to become a part of societal life. In this context, the *right of reuniting families* should be *respected and promoted*. At the same time, conditions that foster increased work opportunities in people’s place of origin are to be promoted as much as possible.” (CDSC 298.)

In Summary

1) People have a right to work to provide for their families and also to immigrate “in search of a better life when

poverty, hunger, unemployment, unrest, and similar factors greatly hinder human flourishing.”¹

2) Nations have a right to protect their borders against the threat of terrorism and to reasonably regulate/limit immigration for the common good (national order, security...), but not merely for *inconvenience* or out of selfish concern. Also, nations do not have a God-given right to block all immigration.

3) Prosperous nations have an obligation, to the extent they are able, to receive foreigners who seek security or livelihood that they cannot find in their own country.

4) We should encourage the upholding of law and order in the immigration process, but we also have the obligation to insure that our laws are just and not oppressive of any group – especially those who may have nowhere else to turn.

Jesus spoke harsh words of final judgment for those who do not welcome the foreigner and the poor:

‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels for I was a stranger and you did not welcome me...’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see thee... a stranger... and did not minister to thee?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Mt 25:41,43-46

5) Immigrants in their turn have an obligation to gratefully contribute to the society they enter and obey their laws, as long as these laws do not seek to deprive them of God-given rights and human dignity.

6) Within the context of insuring and upholding just laws, we need to foster the reunification of families and eliminate any discrimination and exploitation in the workplace that may exist with regard to foreigners.

7) The obligation of charity (especially for Christians) goes farther than the *rights* of justice and, in the end, we will be judged before God on our fulfillment of *both* justice *and* charity. The obligation of charity also regards those with whom we may *disagree* on these issues and requires *respect* and *civility* in any debates.

8) As Catholics, we have an obligation to care for the spiritual welfare of our immigrant brothers and sisters in Christ and make room for them at the Lord’s Table.

¹ Michael A. Scaperlanda, professor of law, “The Ethics of Immigration: An Exchange,” *First Things*, May 2008, No. 183, 44.

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