

**Immigration in 21st-Century America:
Its Root Causes and the Obligations of Catholic Social Teaching**

Address to a Special Meeting of Latin America Bishops on Immigration

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Greetings, my brothers! It is so very good to be with you on this most important occasion!

As I was thinking about our meeting, I found myself reflecting on the feast we will celebrate tomorrow. The beautiful feast of Our Lord's Presentation in the Temple.

Tradition tells us that the Presentation marked a brief moment of calm and joy for the Holy Family. After this, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were driven into exile, forced to emigrate by the murderous paranoia of the tyrant King Herod.

Brothers, as we know, the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt has great symbolic importance in salvation history.

But the earliest commentators on the Scriptures also saw other lessons to be learned from this story. Namely, that if we believe in Christ, we will have enemies. And that as believers we will face trials, sufferings, and even persecution for the sake of the Gospel.

And for many decades, the Popes have held up the Holy Family in exile as a sign of Christ's solidarity with all refugees, displaced persons, and immigrants—in every time and in every place. In his exile in Egypt, the infant Jesus shares in the fears and worries of all who are forced by violence and need to rise and flee their homelands seeking a better life in a new land that is not their own.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI has said: "In this misfortune experienced by the family of Nazareth . . . we can catch a glimpse of the painful condition in which all migrants live . . . the hardships and humiliations, the deprivation and fragility of millions and millions of migrants" (Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2007, para. 1).

So I know my brothers, that we're very close to the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ as we meet to seek new ways to help the millions and millions of migrants in our hemisphere. For: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:35, 40).

I know also that we find ourselves facing new trials and enemies as we seek to proclaim our Lord's love for our migrant brothers and sisters. I'm thinking particularly of the situation in my country where we've seen a wave of new laws against immigration and foreigners.

Although federal immigration reform was killed in the U.S. Congress after a bitter debate, more than 240 new laws were passed in 46 of our 50 states last year ("Immigration and the Bishops," *First Things*, Feb. 2008, p. 14).

Many of these new laws are harsh and punitive. I'm very sad to say that many reflect deep fears, prejudices and, yes, strong racism against Latino immigrants.

How should we proceed in this hostile political climate? Things will only get worse in the States because this is an election year. Already we see presidential and Congressional candidates competing to prove who is the "toughest," who is going to crack down the hardest on the immigrants. So what are we to do? How do we go forward?

I want to suggest to you today that we need to get back to some basics.

First, we need to be clear in understanding the reasons why so many people are migrating in our hemisphere. Second, we need to better understand the clear points of the doctrine of the Church. And finally, we need to consider some new ways to proclaim the Church's teaching and to encourage our lay people to seek laws, public policies, and corporate practices that reflect the Church's doctrine.

These are the three things I would like to talk with you about today.

The root causes of immigration

First, the reasons for immigration.

As we know, the fact of widespread migration is one of the chief signs of our times. It is not simply limited to the United States and the Americas. It is a global phenomenon. According to the United Nations, there are more than 200 million migrants and refugees worldwide.

In general, the reasons for migration are both political and economic. In our hemisphere, the issue is mostly economic. People are not so much fleeing tyranny or persecution as they are seeking work and a better future for their families.

The widespread immigration we see is closely related to the processes of economic globalization and internationalization.

Globalization has changed the way businesses operate and the way people work. Owners of businesses no longer make their products locally for domestic markets. Now their production facilities are located all over the world. The markets for their products are

likewise international. Even small farmers and small businesses now find they are competing in a worldwide market.

These new realities of global production and competition, along with the globalization of money and capital, have led to radical changes in the labor market.

Workers no longer compete for jobs only with their fellow countrymen. Now workers in my country are competing for jobs with workers in your countries and other countries around the world. The wages and benefits your business owners pay their workers now have a direct influence on the wages and benefits paid to workers in this country.

Globalization has expanded opportunities for businesses and for workers. But it has also created many problems. One problem is that while we have developed laws and policies to govern the flow of capital and money, we have no standards for the movement of laborers.

For instance, the North American Free Trade Agreement eliminated tariffs and many restrictions on trade and business in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. But it didn't include a treaty concerning the mobility of persons.

Money, capital, and other resources now flow more freely among our three nations. But human beings—the men and women who do the work—cannot. In the new economy, there are many safeguards for businesses and financial institutions but very few for workers.

Globalization has exposed—and in some cases made worse—the economic inequalities and injustices that exist within and between nations. These inequalities, the poverty in which so many of our people live, are the root causes of immigration. People leave their homes and their families because they are desperate. Because in their home countries they can't provide the necessities of life for themselves and their families.

This will remain the case so long as there are exist economic disparities and inequalities in our hemisphere. To put it very simply: As long as workers can earn more in one hour in the U.S. than they can earn in a day or a week in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, they will continue to migrate to this country.

Another factor that needs to be considered is this: Again, because of the changed global economy, immigrants in most cases are performing work that otherwise would not be done because either there aren't enough local workers or because no local workers are unwilling to do these jobs.

As bishops, my brothers, we are called to be pastors of souls, not experts in the global economy. But we are called to find ways to apply the principles of the Church's social doctrine to these urgent social realities.

The Right to Immigration

The points of the Church's doctrine are clear.

The right to immigrate is among the most basic human rights. This is the clear teaching of the *Catechism*. This teaching is rooted in the sacred Scriptures and is reflected in a deep and growing body of papal and Vatican teachings.

I want to quote a letter that Pope Pius XII wrote to the U.S. bishops on Christmas Eve in 1948. It was a period of great turbulence and upheaval caused by communism and totalitarianism in Europe. And the Holy Father wrote:

You know . . . with what anxiety we have followed those who have been forced by revolutions in their own countries, or by unemployment or hunger, to leave their homes and live in foreign lands.

The natural law itself . . . urges that ways of migration be opened to these people. For the Creator of the universe made all good things primarily for the good of all.

Since land everywhere offers the possibility of supporting a large number of people, the sovereignty of the State, although it must be respected, cannot be exaggerated to the point that access to this land is . . . denied to needy and decent people from other nations, provided of course, that the public wealth . . . does not forbid this.

(quoted in *Exsul Familia Nazarethana*, Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XII, Aug. 1, 1952)

My brothers: Pope Pius' words should give us confidence as we struggle to defend our people's right to seek work and a better life in this time of a globalized economy. And these words are an excellent summary of Church teaching.

The natural law, the law of our Creator, means that all people have a right to migrate. Why? Because our Father in heaven has made the good things of this world to be shared by all men and women—not just a privileged few.

That means that if a person can't find the necessities of life for his family, he has the right to leave his country and to seek these things in some other country.

Now, it's true that this right to immigration is not absolute. Church teaching does allow governments to regulate immigration "according to criteria of equity and balance" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 298). As guardians of the common good, governments must consider the impact of immigration on their control of their borders, their domestic economies, and their national security.

But the state's rights cannot be exercised in such a way as to violate the fundamental rights and dignity of persons. No country can deny this basic human right out of exaggerated fears for national security or selfish concerns about threats to domestic jobs or standards of living.

The presumption of Catholic teaching is that more prosperous countries must be welcoming to immigrants who come to their lands seeking protection and support for their livelihood. In fact, the *Catechism* states that, as a “natural right” immigration imposes important obligations upon nations—especially wealthier nations:

The 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.

(*Catechism*, no. 2241)

Governments and public authorities have a duty to “protect” foreign workers from exploitation. This is spelled out in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The *Compendium* says that foreign workers must enjoy the “same rights enjoyed by nationals, rights that are to be guaranteed to all without discrimination.”

The *Compendium* also explains something very important. It says:

Immigrants are to be received as persons and helped, together with their families, to become a part of societal life. . . . *The right of reuniting families should be respected and promoted.*

(*Compendium*, nos. 297–298)

The *Compendium* underlines that last point. It is crucial for immigration policy to keep families together and to work to reunite families that have become separated by immigration.

What we must do

Ok, my brothers. These are the teachings of the Church. It is clear that this teaching flows from the heart of Christ. And it is clear that the right to immigration ranks among the most basic human rights. It is closely connected with the right to life. Why? Because immigration has to do with peoples' rights to share in the goods they need to secure their livelihoods.

The question then becomes: what are we to do as leaders of the Church in America? How are we to proclaim the Gospel in the face of what has become a political crisis in the United States and a moral tragedy in the lives of so many of our people?

Here I want to make some general suggestions.

The first point to remember is very important. The Church is not a political party or interest group. It is not the Church's primary task to fight political battles or to be engaged in debates over specific policies. This task belongs to the laity.

Our job as pastors is to help form our peoples' consciences, especially those who work in the business community and in government. This is crucial: We must do a much better job of "social catechesis."

Our lay people must become much better educated in the Church's social teaching—not only on immigration and the global economy but in all areas of business and civil society. And we need to instill in our people a greater sense of their civic duty to work for reforms in a system that denies human dignity to so many.

As the fathers of the Synod for America said, "the Church in America must be a vigilant advocate. . . . Attention must be called to the rights of migrants and their families and to respect for their human dignity, even in cases of non-legal immigration" (*Ecclesia in America*, 65)

In this effort, we must use all the means at our disposal—from the pulpit to parish education programs to our Catholic press and our diocesan websites.

There are two excellent resources that we should be using to educate our people and our civic and political leaders. The first are the resources of the U.S. bishops' "Justice for Immigrants" campaign. The other is "Strangers No Longer," the joint pastoral letter written by the U.S. and Mexican bishops in 2003.

Each of these initiatives represents a thoughtful, authentically Catholic response to the crisis. Each advances numerous concrete proposals based on the principles of Church teaching.

I also encourage you to draw on the fine work of a lay coalition, Mexicans and Americans Thinking Together, or MATT for short. MATT too proposes a full range of policy priorities and initiatives that reflect the spirit of Catholic social teaching. And they have a very helpful website that outlines these initiatives in great detail—www.MATT.org.

Four areas that I believe deserve our priority and attention: First, in your countries. We need to encourage economic reforms and developments throughout Latin America, especially in the poorest countries in the region. We need to find ways to target economic development so that far fewer Latinos will feel compelled to leave their homes to seek jobs and money in other countries. It is especially important that we work to promote small business and agriculture.

Secondly, while we forcefully defend the rights of immigrants, we must also remind them

of their duties under Catholic social teaching. Chief among these duties is the obligation to respect the laws of their new country. As the *Catechism* states:

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.

(*Catechism*, no. 2241)

A third priority: In the United States, we need to work to reunify families separated by immigration. The division of families is a moral tragedy of huge dimensions. Finally, we need to work with government leaders to ensure a path to citizenship for the 12 million men and women who are currently forced by law and a climate of fear to live in the shadows of U.S. society.

These are some practical steps we can take my brothers.

But before I leave you, I want to talk about one more area that deeply concerns me. In the bitter debates of recent years, I have been alarmed by the indifference of so many of our people to Catholic teaching and to the concrete demands of Christian charity.

It is not only the racism, xenophobia, and scapegoating. These are signs of a more troubling reality. Many of our Catholic people no longer see the foreigners sojourning among them as brothers and sisters.

In some ways we are back to the debates of the first evangelization. Then the Church, in the person of brave pastors like Bartolomé de las Casas, had to fight to establish that the indigenous peoples of the New World were truly and fully human, worthy of rights.

To listen to the rhetoric in the U.S. and elsewhere it is as if the immigrant is not a person, but only a thief or a terrorist or a simple work-animal.

Throughout the lands of America, we need repentance and conversion to the Gospel. We need to restore the truth that the love of God and the love of neighbor have been forever joined in the teaching—and in the person—of Jesus Christ.

“As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

Pope Benedict said in *Deus Caritas Est* that with Christ: “Love of God and love of neighbor have become one. In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God” (no. 16).

This is a profound truth. The great missionary saints of our countries knew this truth. It was the basis for their great works of hospitality and charity.

My brothers, we must make this truth known again as part of our new evangelization of America.

Our brothers and sisters need to know that we can't love the God whom we do not see if we do not love our neighbor whom we do see. If we say we love God and yet despise the stranger and immigrant in our midst, we are liars (cf. 1 John 4:20–21).

Brothers, on this vigil of the Presentation, let us rededicate ourselves to Christ's Gospel of love.

Let us commit ourselves to preaching and practice that brings the people of America to a new encounter with Christ. Let us commit ourselves to moving our people from fear and hatred to love and service of Christ in the poor and the stranger.

And let us ask Mary—who shared the hardships and deprivations of every migrant mother, who came to Tepeyac as the Virgin of hope—to give us the courage to welcome our Lord in the stranger, as he has welcomed us (cf. Rom. 15:7).